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The Fifth Newsletter of the Growing Older Programme: Recruitment and Retention of Research Participants

Welcome to the fifth newsletter from the ESRC Growing Older research programme on extending quality life. The Programme consists of 24 projects focussing on a wide range of topics concerning quality in later life. It began in 1999 and is due to end in 2003. Sixteen projects have already finished and the Programme produces a series of 'Findings' documents summarising each one. These are sent automatically to everyone on the mailing list.

It has become clear in the course of the Programme that projects have had different experiences in the recruitment and retention of older participants and that there are potentially useful learning points, positive and negative, which may be particularly helpful to other researchers. Thus, for the purposes of this newsletter, several of the projects were asked to reflect on their experiences in the recruitment and retention of older participants. The result is a very honest, warts and all, series of accounts of some of the difficulties of doing research and the constructive solutions that were developed by this excellent team of researchers. The narratives contain many examples of good practice in recruitment and retention and I hope they will be a helpful resource to other researchers as well as being of general interest to readers.

These accounts demonstrate the commitment of this group of researchers to work closely with older people and carers as research *participants* and signal a broader transition in UK social science research on ageing away from a rigid separation between the researcher and the researched. This change is critical for a variety of reasons and, especially, because it sensitises science to the perspectives of older people and attempts to treat them as partners in the research process. This more participative approach is by no means easy and is usually time consuming but it is essential if older people are to experience research as an inclusive process and if their right to equal citizenship is to be respected. A useful by-product of this approach should be a reduction in the scepticism with which research is sometimes greeted in the field and, therefore, a greater willingness to participate.

Following these articles we continue the regular updates on each project and, for the first time, have included a list of publications. If you have any comments on this newsletter or ideas for a subsequent one please do not hesitate to contact me. ■

Alan Walker
Programme Director

'Relational' research: the recruitment and retention of older participants for qualitative studies

Marie Mills, Peter Coleman, Fionnuala McKiernan and Peter Speck

Recruiting older participants for research purposes can be problematic, especially if the area under investigation is sensitive and likely participants are viewed as vulnerable by 'gate keepers' who control access to such groups. Researchers are becoming more aware of the difficulties of accessing older participants for qualitative studies. Recruitment can be time-consuming, costly and increasingly dependent on researcher interpersonal skills.

Our recent ESRC project examined the role of spiritual beliefs on adjustment to bereavement. A small sample of older spouses were visited three times in the second year of their bereavement.¹ The participants were mainly recruited via GP selection and invitation, although we were also fortunate to have the support of a local funeral director. He was well known to a member of our team and the largest group of our sample came from his contacts. In line with other bereavement studies, 34 per cent agreed to join the investigation. Of the total sample, 79 people were approached and 28 agreed. There were indications that GPs expected most of the referred patients to agree. Those who did agree to take part gave largely altruistic reasons for this decision rather than a desire to please their GP. Those who knew the funeral director said they had joined the study because of the respect and affection they had for him. There is an extensive literature on the characteristics of qualitatively orientated social research, together with descriptions of the interpersonal skills required of the social researcher. However, the importance of the relationship between the investigator and the investigated tends to remain under acknowledged. Jones (1991)² speaks of the complex relationship between researcher and participant and the need for researcher reflexivity about the nature of this relationship. But Marshall (1984)³ also argues that the researcher's personal qualities form a tripartite relationship with the process and outcomes of the research. Qualitative studies are accounts of multi-layered relationships. As has been indicated, this study was no exception.

QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

Moreover, the nature of qualitative longitudinal research can be likened to the therapeutic process. Jones (p.211)² points to the fact that she, together with other researchers, has noted the therapeutic and counselling role of some interviews. However, the entire research process in qualitative longitudinal research can be seen in this light and it is here that counselling principles can inform this work. Counselling contracts are similar to research agreements with participants, and are also subject to stringent ethical requirements. As far as possible the counsellor makes clear what is expected of the client and through client expectations of the counsellor, defines the counselling role. Researcher expectations are also made clear to participants and, as in therapy, the participant is free to withdraw from investigation at any time. Further, similar to psychotherapeutic interventions, the researcher/participant relationship has a beginning, middle and an end. Researchers should be sensitive to the possibility that participants can be anxious at the beginning, and may 'tire' by the middle of the investigation. They may also need to express sadness over the ending of this relationship during the final interview. Finally, it is important to value the contributions made by

participants, and to enable them to be made aware of the considerable usefulness of their contributions in terms of outcome and influence on social policy. Following the conclusion of the Coleman, McKiernan, Mills and Speck study, participants were invited to a buffet lunch and presentation by the project team at the University of Southampton. Transport was arranged and several participants elected to bring family members. As the project was part of the *Growing Older: extending quality of life, ESRC research programme*, we had representation from the ESRC to add their thanks to participants and speak of the importance of their contribution to the programme and to society as a whole. Following the presentation, participants said that they were pleased that their experiences of bereavement would help others in a similar situation. Many also said that taking part in the project had been personally helpful. The event was warm, friendly and informative. This was found to be an enjoyable way to thank those who take part in qualitative research and for the dissemination of outcomes. ■



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Older Widow(er)s: Bereavement and Gender Effects on Lifestyle and Participation - Recruitment and Retention

Georgina M. Hughes, Kate M. Bennett and Philip T. Smith

The overall aim of the project was to examine the lifestyles of men and women widowed in later life, highlighting gender, social participation, wellbeing and emotional response, with a view to promoting more effective adjustment to bereavement and widowhood. We proposed to interview and collect questionnaire data from 40 men and 40 women over the age of 65. Initially an 'expression of interest' form was completed and the participants were then sent further information and asked to give an interview. The interview was semi-structured and designed to elicit detailed information on what the participants had done and how they had felt at four different stages, before and after the death of their spouse. In order to recruit from as wide a base as possible we initially contacted a number of social, community and voluntary organisations involving older people in the Merseyside area and attended gatherings to talk about the aims of our project.

The recruitment of widowed women posed few problems, due in part to their larger numbers, but also in some instances because of a 'snowballing' effect. Some of the women we interviewed told their friends and some suggested other organisations that we might recruit from.

We anticipated that recruitment of men would be more problematic, due to their fewer numbers and restricted access to some male orientated meeting places. We considered carefully where widowed men might be found. Access to some organisations from which we hoped to recruit men was difficult. For example, although some charitable organisations were sympathetic to the project, in practice we were not able to recruit through these approaches. On the other hand we found a number of organisations interested and supportive, particularly trades unions, retired professionals' organisations, pensioners' groups and local retirees' groups. Additionally we found that initial approaches to groups of men tended not to yield good results. We did however manage a 'foot in the door' tactic by asking them to complete a questionnaire for a tandem study which also requested volunteers for other studies. In this way we gained some participants who were

not willing to consent in front of other men. Generally we recruited men individually whereas some women volunteered as a group.

On the whole the contacts we initially made in order to recruit men were also male, for example the wardens of sheltered housing schemes and secretaries of organisations. It was less likely that the initial contact in recruiting women was another woman, despite the snowballing effect previously mentioned. It was not possible for us to contact one particular group of widowed people, although we had interviewed one member previously, because a married male 'gatekeeper' refused to let us publicise our study to them. Similarly we found that the gatekeepers of some culturally based organisations were unwilling or unable to support our study.

The participants were able to withdraw from the project at any time, either before or during the interview. However we found that once the 'interest' form had been returned to us, they were generally willing to take part in the interview. Only one man subsequently did not wish to be interviewed and in this case he had been approached by the warden and

may not have been fully aware of the procedure. Given that the interview was often distressing it may be surprising that more participants did not drop out. It is possible that their commitment demonstrated the value that the participants placed on the interview.

A further point concerns recruitment and interviewer effects. The project team were all women. It seemed that both widowed men and women were willing to discuss sensitive issues with a female interviewer, whereas male interviewers may have elicited different responses. Access to male dominated areas would have been considerably easier for a male member of the team, although recruitment of men by a male interviewer might have been less successful. We were not able to recruit from pubs, bookmakers' shops, or cafes attended by men because the women on the team felt inhibited.

Contact had been made early in the project with a group of widows in a different northern town although it was not possible to visit them until later. This had the effect of pushing the numbers over 40 but by then we had been successful in recruiting additional men too, largely due to the input of a new member on the team. We also agreed to interview widowed people who were younger than our target group if they requested an interview and the final numbers recruited were 46 men and 46 women. ■

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Involving Older People in Research on Lifelong Learning: Lessons for the Future

Alexandra Withnall

Our study has been concerned with understanding how older people themselves define and understand learning and education in later life, the value they place on it and the contexts and discourses that have shaped their perceptions over the life course. We also hoped to understand the basis on which they make choices about learning opportunities post-work and what outcomes different types of learning have for older people in the context of their own lives. In other words, we aimed to discover what role learning might play in older people's perceptions of their quality of life. From the outset, we tried to adopt an inclusive approach by emphasising the role of the 'researched' in the research process in order to gain an insight both into how these choices and outcomes are experienced and the ways in which they are described. We are also trying to incorporate our own identities and perceptions into the research to help us reflect on our interpretations of our findings.

As the project nears completion, it is useful to look back on our experiences of recruiting a wide range of older people and involving them in the processes of the research at different stages.

GETTING SUPPORT

As an integral part of the research, we involved two colleagues from the Pre-retirement Association and the Senior Studies Institute at the University of Strathclyde as paid project consultants. We also secured the practical support of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education's 'Older and Bolder' development officer together with members of the Advisory Group; and exploited our membership of the Association for Education and Ageing together with our own personal contacts. This varied support proved invaluable throughout in making new contacts and, initially, in locating groups of older learners to take part in focus group discussions in different parts of the country. Later, we successfully used the same sources of support to help us find other groups to whom we could send a mailed questionnaire in order to follow up issues raised in the focus groups. We also planned to recruit and train a group of older people as interviewers and the project consultants were very helpful in recruiting willing participants. However, we found that local press publicity and the Growing Older Programme Newsletter

itself also attracted the attention of other older people who contacted us individually offering to take part.

INVOLVING AND RETAINING RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In setting up focus groups in the first phase of the research, we were faced with the issue of negotiating access. Our experience was that this proved most difficult where a younger 'gate-keeper' made the decision on behalf of the older learners as to whether they would wish to take part! Where a group did participate, we sent them a summary of the discussion, invited comments and incorporated these into our final version prior to analysis. In the second phase, different groups of learners were asked to respond to a somewhat lengthy mailed questionnaire and to indicate whether they would be willing to take part in a follow-up interview. We also asked these older learners to nominate someone they knew who was a 'non-learner' and who might also be willing to take part in the same way. This snowball technique proved fairly successful as shown by the final 80 per cent overall response to the questionnaires and general willingness to be interviewed where requested. It also became apparent from the responses that many participants were highly motivated by the actual subject matter of the research. Many expressed delight both that their life experiences

were of interest and that their views about education and learning were being sought. However, this phase of the research did entail considerable prior groundwork and commitment as a few of the groups whose members had originally agreed to complete questionnaires subsequently withdrew and new groups of potential respondents had to be located.

In a later phase of the research, we asked 25 respondents to keep written learning diaries for a 3-month period. To date, 10 have been returned and we are aware that the exercise obviously proved too difficult and/or time-consuming. In future, it may be more appropriate to offer potential diarists the option of tape-recording their experiences or of keeping diaries for a much shorter period of time.

RECRUITING, TRAINING AND RETAINING OLDER INTERVIEWERS

The involvement of a group of older people themselves to carry out semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with their peers was seen as an important aspect of the project. Recruited as described above, interviewers were paid a generous set sum to include travel and were covered for insurance purposes as temporary University employees. We were successful in recruiting eight (of the 10 sought) older people although one unfortunately suffered a spousal bereavement and was subsequently unable to take part.

We prepared and despatched self-study material and detailed instructions for the interviewers as soon as they agreed to participate. Unfortunately, it was not possible to accredit this comparatively brief training in any way but it would certainly be an option in a large-scale project.¹ We supplied the interviewers with the necessary equipment and with the packaging to return their tapes so that inconvenience was hopefully minimised. They were also invited to complete a fieldnote form for each interview describing their feelings as to how the interview went as an aid to discovering emerging themes and patterns. We also plan to incorporate comments from the recently retired lady who transcribed the interview tapes on her experience of listening to the interviews and her reactions to them.

We were pleased with the dedication ►

and care with which our fieldwork team undertook the interviews. However, in some cases there was an unfortunate delay in remunerating them because of the somewhat lengthy procedures involved. With hindsight, we should have made the likely payment date clear to them at the recruitment stage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We feel that the participatory approach we have tried to adopt has added a new

and worthwhile dimension to the processes of the research. Apart from the issues discussed above, we are very aware that the promise of confidentiality has been important at all stages in recruiting and retaining participants and in the collection of data. We have also benefited from access to key individuals and representatives of user groups who have helped us formulate ideas and provided contacts. However, perhaps the main lesson learnt has been the importance of allowing more time in

which to gather feedback from research participants in order to inform and enlighten our own thinking. ■

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Recruiting and Retaining Research Participants: Lessons from Socially Deprived Neighbourhoods

Thomas Scharf

A major achievement of the GO Programme is likely to be its contribution to debates about the ways in which social scientists interact with research participants. In particular, where individual projects have been collecting new empirical data, they will have had to come to terms with a range of important questions concerning the recruitment and retention of older people willing to take part in the research process. This article arises from the study *Older People in Deprived Neighbourhoods: Social Exclusion and Quality of Life in Old Age* based at Keele University. It highlights a series of issues associated with conducting research on (and with) potentially marginalised older people living in some of England's most socially deprived urban neighbourhoods. The article aims to demonstrate how the research group has sought to overcome such problems.

The broad aim of our project has been to examine the nature of social exclusion in later life, with specific reference to the ways in which particular types of urban environment influence older people's everyday lives and the quality of those lives.¹ The research has involved three phases of data collection. First, we conducted a series of discussions with groups of older people living in selected neighbourhoods of three English cities. These discussion groups helped to inform the development of a questionnaire which was used in the second phase of data collection, and involved conducting face-to-face interviews with 600 people aged 60 and over. The third phase saw completion of in-depth

interviews with 90 people who had previously taken part in the survey. Issues about how best to recruit people to take part in our work and to retain them for future participation arose in relation to each phase of data collection.²

DISCUSSION GROUPS

In conducting discussion groups, our aim was to 'talk aloud' with older people about some of the emerging themes of the research project. Seven groups were identified through contacts made by researchers with relevant local agencies and existing local contacts. Discussions were held in each of the study areas and, for the sake of

comparison, in a more affluent part of central England. Where appropriate, separate discussions took place with older people belonging to different ethnic groups. The seven groups ranged from the more formal (a pensioners' forum with an agenda and a structured organisation) to the fully informal (a group of friends meeting in a hired church hall).

Even at this early stage, a series of demands were placed upon the research team. Group organisers and participants needed to be convinced of the merits of the research. There was inevitable resistance to the idea that older people would simply be used as a resource by the research team. Participants and group organisers were keen that the research would be fed back to them and that their voices would ultimately be heard by key decision-makers. Such requests are reasonable and reflect in part the marginal role played by older people in influencing decisions relating to the regeneration of England's deprived urban communities. The desire to respond to these demands reflects not only the commitment of the research team to conduct its work in a way that allows older people to engage with the research process and its outcomes, but also the wider aims of the GO Programme as a whole. Subsequent steps taken to meet these demands have involved the distribution of newsletters that explain how our research is progressing, whilst also highlighting initial findings. We have also endeavoured to maintain informal contact with the groups of older people in between requests for support with our research. In the latter stages of our research, more formal feedback to the groups will take place. ►

RECRUITING A SAMPLE

Accessing a random sample of older people represents an increasingly difficult task for social gerontologists. In the past, the preferred route was often to negotiate access to people of the required age via the patient records held by General Practitioners. However, the medically oriented local research ethics committees charged with ensuring the legitimate use of patient data have increasingly been using their power either to deny social scientists access altogether or to make access conditional upon agreeing to major changes to the scientific conduct of their research.³ While securing access to GP patient records was successful in two of our chosen study areas, this ultimately proved impossible in the third. Rather than adopt different sampling strategies in each location, an alternative approach was required. The option of knocking on doors and undertaking a census of selected streets within the study areas had already been rejected on the grounds of resource limitations, potential risks to the safety of fieldworkers, and the likelihood of failure (many people taking part in discussion groups had told us that they were unlikely to open their front door to strangers). In the end we drew upon an innovative classificatory method used by a commercial company (CACI Ltd) to place people into a series of narrow age bands according to their first names. When applied to electoral registers, this approach (known by the acronym MONICA) is able to generate a random list of names and addresses of people likely to match specific age requirements.⁴ In simple terms, our sample included all of the Ethels and Stanleys that lived in the chosen study areas, ignoring the modish Kylies and Jasons and the timeless Elizabeths and Johns. The fact that, following extensive piloting, this approach ultimately led to the completion of a survey of 600 people in the required age group provides an initial indication of its utility.

The success of this major fieldwork stage can also be attributed to other strategies used to recruit research participants. For example, great care was taken over initial letters of invitation (all personally addressed and signed) and the preparation of an accessible information sheet. Members

of the research group were available to answer questions that older people or their relatives might have about the nature of the proposed research. Fieldwork was undertaken by trained interviewers belonging to a commercial survey organisation (Marketing Sciences) that had previous experience of conducting work in similar types of area. On completion of the interviews, a leave behind thank you letter was accompanied by an information sheet highlighting a welfare advice service operated by Help the Aged. All respondents who agreed to divulge their names and addresses to the research group as a precursor to taking part in a follow-up interview were sent a copy of the next project newsletter.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Whilst serving to keep people informed about the research, the newsletter had the additional advantage of reminding people that they might be called upon to participate in the final stage of fieldwork. This phase of work was undertaken by members of the research group. Although the recruitment task was made more straightforward by the fact that research participants had previously indicated their willingness to take part in a second interview, it still proved necessary to convince people of the potential benefits of taking part. In this respect, we were helped by the development of a close link between the project and Help the Aged. With initial evidence from the survey pointing to high rates of poverty and intense social disadvantage experienced by many older people in the study areas, the research group entered into a formal collaboration with the charity. Help the Aged will be publishing 'user-friendly' summary reports of the project's key findings in Autumn 2002. These reports will not only be used to influence public policy development, but can also be employed to feed back findings to research participants. Thus, when recruiting people to this final stage of fieldwork, we were not only appealing to participants' altruistic nature, but also demonstrating an active commitment to publicising our research findings as widely as possible.

SUMMARY

In reflecting on our experience during

the different stages of this project, it is evident that the initial commitment to engage with non-academic research users has absorbed a considerable amount of time and effort. However, such engagement has also helped the project team to develop new insights into the day-to-day experiences of older people living in socially deprived neighbourhoods of England. Without having adopted an inclusive strategy of involving participants in elements of the research, it is unlikely that the project would have generated the quantity and quality of data that will allow us to meet our research objectives. ■

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Cherchez Les Hommes! Older Men, Their Social Worlds and Healthy Lifestyles

Kate Davidson, Tom Daly, Sara Arber and Kim Perren

During the final three decades of the 20th century research within the study of ageing identified the 'feminisation' of later life.¹ This not only reflected the numerical superiority of older women but their high visibility in health and welfare provision.² With the exception of the impact of exit from paid employment, less attention has been paid to older men and most particularly in the study of their health and social networks. Research has shown how marriage may exert a health protective effect for men but not for women.³ The significance to the lives of older men of being widowed, divorced or never married has largely been overlooked in sociological investigation. Our research aimed to rectify this apparent neglect. The qualitative part of our research involved conducting observational visits within 30 social organisations which have older men in their membership and interviewing a target of 100 men over the age of 65 who are married (30), widowed (30), divorced (20) or never married (20).

We used a variety of sources to access social organisations. These included the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB), local contacts and the Internet. All were contacted initially by telephone and for those who agreed, followed up with information literature from the GO programme and our specific research project.

Not all responded favourably to the prospect of our visit, sometimes despite an initial visit to a 'gatekeeper' to explain the purpose of the research. We experienced particular difficulty in accessing private sports/leisure clubs, where committees needed to be consulted for permission to visit. On the other hand, the managers of statutory and voluntary clubs specifically for older people were enthusiastic at our interest and encouraged a visit. We examined the contrasting reaction to our request to observe their organisation and concluded that the fundamental difference lay in their perception of the usefulness of any results to them.

Although we were able to recruit several self-selected men from the social organisations contacted, most were successful, middle class and married. We had always intended to minimise the effect of such

homogeneity by recruiting older men from GP lists. In order to do this, we required ethical committee approval from three Local Research Ethics Committees. Space does not permit us to report here, the challenges overcome during this protracted exercise.

Mindful of the problems associated with using GPs as gatekeepers for individual patients, we negotiated access to the lists of two GP Practices and sent out a call for participants to a random sample of men over the age of 65. In the initial stages we had no information about marital status but made a special plea for men who were living alone. Within a relatively short time we were able to complete the quota of interviews with married and widowed men. However, we found it more difficult to recruit the target number of divorced and never married men.

We have learned important lessons from recruiting participants for our project.

❖ Firstly, participants need to feel the research is either relevant to them as individuals, or 'useful' in some way to others. Most of the resistance we encountered was from those who did not think they would 'get any

thing out' of being interviewed, or in the case of gatekeepers, did not think their members/contacts would be interested.

- ❖ Secondly, we found persistence does pay off - especially in gaining access to the social organisations. Some individual men we interviewed gave us access to groups who had originally turned us down, for example, the Freemasons.
- ❖ Thirdly, the sample size of divorced and never married men we had originally proposed was too ambitious, given the timescale for data collection. Although demographic trends reveal the proportion of divorced men over the age of 65 almost doubled between 1989 and 1997 from two per cent to four per cent,⁴ they are still a rare population. In the end, we interviewed 10 divorced and 12 never married men and a total of 85 interviews instead of 100.
- ❖ Finally, we are amazed and delighted that so many people were prepared to take time with us, and tell us about their lives, thoughts, fears and ambitions. We feel very privileged. ■

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Quality of Life of the Healthy Elderly: Residential Setting and Social Comparison Processes

Recruitment and Retention of Participants in the Wandsworth Study

*Gemma Callander, Barbara Kingsley, Graham Beaumont and
Pamela Kenealy*

For this longitudinal study we needed to recruit 192 participants aged 65 or over, living in the Borough of Wandsworth; and to identify people who were living in specific residential categories: living alone for more than 10 years, living alone for less than 10 years, living with a partner, companion or family, living in sheltered accommodation, living in a residential home. As a result, the recruitment strategy had to focus on different areas of the community. Posters and tri-fold leaflets were prepared inviting potential participants to contact us; a response was followed up by a fuller explanatory letter. A further response led to the obtaining of informed consent and enrolment in the study.

It proved sensible to run the interview process alongside the recruitment process as participants could be interviewed shortly after recruitment; experience indicated an optimum period of two-three weeks from recruitment to interview. The concurrent recruitment and interview processes also resulted to a certain extent in 'snowballing' whereby participants offered to pass on information or leaflets to friends and contacts who were also over the age of 65.

Initially, a range of places from which to recruit was identified, and these included day centres, lunch clubs, over-60s events at leisure centres, libraries, pensioners' fora and residential and sheltered homes. Two main strategies for recruitment were then adopted, involving both indirect and direct contact with the public.

Our indirect approach entailed advertising in local papers and on the website of the University of the Third Age (U3A). Having gained permission from the necessary authorities, we were also able to display posters in libraries, day centres and residential homes, and to distribute leaflets individually to residents in sheltered and residential accommodation.

As a direct approach, we set up displays in shopping centres, supermarkets, leisure centres and other public places, and handed out our leaflets. However, we found it was more useful to contact the wardens and those responsible for sheltered accommodation, residential homes and day centres. Most of the wardens were extremely interested in the research, and establishing and maintaining a good relationship with them proved invaluable in the identification of suitable participants.

This initial contact enabled us to visit various centres, and individuals living in residential and sheltered homes, which made the recruitment process more personal and established a relationship with potential participants. These visits involved giving talks to small groups of people to inform them about the research. We found this to be more successful than the indirect method, as it gave people the opportunity to meet us and to ask any questions or voice any concerns that they had about taking part. We also found group dynamics to be very influential at this stage; if one member of a group decided to take part, others often followed. Conversely, if someone decided they did not want to take part,

other members of the group were often more hesitant to do so. Targeting the spokesperson was therefore often highly influential in securing willing participants.

Retaining participants for the duration of a longitudinal study poses its own problems, but we were able to attain an attrition rate of about 20 per cent over two years. We set out to make the experience of being involved in our study as straightforward and pleasant as possible, offering a choice of venues for interview. Participants could either be seen in their own homes or, if they preferred, at the university. For those visiting the university, refreshments were offered, travel expenses paid or a taxi provided. All participants were given the opportunity to take breaks during the interview. We feel that creating an enjoyable and relaxed environment was a key factor in keeping our attrition rate low.

We have also taken trouble to maintain participants' interest in the project by keeping contact with them throughout the years with birthday and Christmas cards, and by producing a newsletter (two-three issues per year) to which participants were encouraged to contribute. Feedback has indicated that this made them feel a part of the project, and gave them an opportunity to share their news and views with other participants. The newsletter was also a useful medium through which to keep participants informed of our progress. We felt that it was important at every stage of the research to let participants know what their commitment involved and how many interviews remained. This meant that at the final stage, participants were still eager to take part, having already completed three interviews and wishing to contribute in the final session.

Comments from participants have indicated that the research assistants were successful in making the interviews interesting, fun, and a positive experience, so that participants have enjoyed contributing to an enterprise which they consider to be of importance and value. ■

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Evaluating the Impact of Reminiscence on Participation and Recruitment to a Research Project

Fiona Wilson, Helen Elford and Kevin McKee

The *Evaluating the Impact of Reminiscence on the Quality of Life of Older People Project* aimed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of reminiscence. This employed a comparison of three interventions - reminiscence (general recall of bygone days), life review (structured evaluation of one's life), and disclosure (expressing emotions about issues linked to life in the present). Older people from care settings were invited to four activity sessions in either group, alone or one-to-one contexts, using writing or talking, and to complete before and after quality of life tools. People were also invited to semi-structured interviews and focus groups in order to explore perceptions around reminiscence.

Recruitment was pragmatic. We randomly sampled from a list of names in each care setting, and then consulted with carers as to whom to approach. Carers were protective and directed us away from people who might for example be too ill, and towards others who might help us. This procedure acknowledged that some older people might find the past distressing or might be undergoing recent bereavement. After all, we were not offering therapy or counselling but an activity.

We were concerned that the consent procedure including permission to archive people's interviews and stories might be off-putting, but hopefully we had a captive audience who would really enjoy our sessions and being part of the study. As Quinne (1998)¹ writes 'locating potential participants is not a problem with a population accessible through an institution'. Like Peter Mandelson however, we were competing with Bingo. Or people were ill, too busy or at the hairdresser's. We felt more like door-to-door salespeople, than researchers. Knocking on people's rooms as they were dressing or having an afternoon nap felt uncomfortable. Sometimes the command 'bugger off' told us this was not an appropriate time. The captive audience was elusive.

The first phase of the study focussed on one-to-one work. Older people talked or wrote about themselves and their lives for one hour a week for four weeks. Recruitment was good. Having someone's undivided attention one hour a week for four weeks was enjoy-

able for most. The idea of contributing one's stories to an archive was positively received despite our initial doubts. Many were also keen to help the people from the University.

The second phase of the study focussed on group work. Numbers began to dwindle. Issues of privacy, confidentiality in groups, amount of effort and commitment required were off-putting. The alone condition, involving people writing about their lives by themselves resulted in even poorer uptake. Only five older people from a large nursing home felt that they were able and willing to participate.

Overall our recruitment was a disappointing 50 per cent. Why had we failed to engage older people to the degree anticipated? We reviewed reasons given for non-participation. These included lack of interest in reminiscence, visual or hearing impairments and dislike of groups and some found reminiscence patronising. Some were happy to come to our activities but not to sign up for a research project, whilst some were happy to be interviewed but not to do the activities.

The study is almost complete and findings are being explored. The data indicates that a number of older people expressed regrets about the past whilst some preferred being alone to being in groups. This suggests that reminiscence, as an activity is not necessarily helpful for all older people, and indicates why recruitment to a one-to-one condition was better than for groups.

Despite recruitment rates, the retention rate was good with over 75 per cent remaining in the study. Many of those who took part seemed to derive purpose and pleasure from the study, with ill health cited as the main reason for attrition. It would seem that those who did not participate either disliked reminiscence activities and socialising or had a distrust of research (or both).

The question here is whether older people specifically disliked reminiscence type activities, or whether they disliked the idea of being studied. If older people are wary of being researched or see it as an invasion of self, then why do it? Our findings indicate that participants involved in any form of activity displayed improved levels of morale and psychological morbidity, compared with those who did not participate in activities at all. This implies that in order to maximise psychological benefits activities should be available as part of a philosophy of care that recognises diversity and the importance of listening to people's stories, past and present. Hopefully this finding will contribute to improving the quality of care and quality of life of older people in long term care settings, and that alone makes our efforts worthwhile.

In many ways the low recruitment rate and reasons for non-participation support our findings that reflecting on the past as an activity is not appropriate for everyone. In retrospect the low recruitment rate reflects the sensitivity of our recruitment protocol. Given the sensitive and complex issues involved in reminiscence work, and in being researched, this should be valued as integrity rather than failure. Our experience highlights a general mistrust of research and also challenges assumptions that frail older people in long-term care settings are passive 'sitting ducks'. Involving frail older people in research is a challenge, and approaches must be both sensitive to people's needs and uphold integrity. ■

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Recruitment and Retention: Thoughts from the 'Environment and Identity in Later Life' Team

Sheila Peace, Caroline Holland and Leonie Kellaher

Collective brainstorming has brought us these thoughts which will no doubt seem familiar to other members of the GO programme. Ours is a multi-method ethnographic study and most of our experiences here come from recruitment of older people. We started by organising focus groups within our three locations. Easy you may say, well, until you do it. We found that walking the streets was the best starting point and 'being prepared to go where the people are'. This included talking over the billiards to get a respondent from the 'billiards men'; accosting a vicar who turned out to be a very useful gatekeeper for finding people and hiring a hall and; learning how much of our sewing we had forgotten with the women of the Irish Community Centre sewing group.

Finally, providing people with a gift for doing our long interviews has been a bonus especially when getting men to participate. This has meant that we have had to move money around in our budget, but it was well worth it. It has been very interesting how the type of gift token we have chosen has led people to become quite assertive. We may have gone for the nearest large shop e.g. Tesco - when the time of year has meant that Marks and Spencer was better - or Boots rather than Sainsbury's. We have had various negotiations and location, time of year and focus on product have been important. Choice is crucial. ■

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We ran a group within the African Caribbean Seniors Association in Tottenham and this proved a little more difficult to set up. The organiser wanted to know how we could possibly do our research if we were not black ourselves. She put us on the spot and we really had to talk our way through the process in which we were involved and how we could feedback our interpretations to be commented on by the group. We were allowed to run the meeting but were very nervous. The group of predominantly older women was very receptive and interested. It went really well and four members of the group agreed to take part in the second stage of the study that involved in-depth interviewing.

We realised that feedback had to be on-going throughout and one of us turned everyone's ideas into newsletters. This was good for retention. Copies of any photos that we have tried to take at every interview have been a very great source of feedback and we will be going back with our video on 'attachment to place' to get people's reactions before a final edit.

We have realised during the research that older people are reacting differently to recruitment methods. If we have gone through groups that are already organised there are advantages and disadvantages. Those within groups - such as day centre users - know each other and gossip can be an issue. The main criteria for our purposive sample has been dwelling type, including

domestic and non-domestic accommodation. These different forms of housing have had different hurdles to climb - people to see etc., and this has slowed the research in places. We should have anticipated this.

Access to people's dwellings is of research interest in itself. We had thought that all interviews would take place within the person's accommodation but a few people have refused to let us over the threshold. We intend to study this small sub-group separately at some point. We have tried some snowballing to gain access to people living in particular types of accommodation and this has worked more easily in non-urban areas and within domestic housing.

Some people have said to us that they feel that they have taken part in too much research and have declined our invitation to talk. This was especially true in the London Borough of Haringey. Other people only wanted to get involved as respondents and we recognised that not all older people want to be participant researchers involved in interpretation. People will only get involved with the parts of the work they want to - why did we expect otherwise?

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Project Updates

Brief updates to keep readers informed about the progress of GO projects

DEFINING AND MEASURING QUALITY OF LIFE

Coping with Life and Using Services: How People Over 75 Maintain Their Dignity and Self-esteem When Faced with a Limiting Physical Condition (John Baldock - jcb4@ukc.ac.uk)

This project was completed at the end of October 2001. We followed a sample of 35 people over 75 who were living alone and whose health had recently deteriorated to a point that they were effectively housebound. We measured changes to their self-esteem and evaluated how their sense of self was affected. We have also considered the implications of our findings for service providers. Our broad conclusion is that older people's self-esteem is likely to improve where services are put in quickly even where they are not ideally tailored to their needs. An article has appeared in *Quality in Ageing*, March 2002. We have reported our findings to the older people in the sample and to groups of professionals and they have been received with interest and, of course, with some reservations and criticisms.

Quality of Life of Healthy Older People: Residential Settings and Social Comparison Processes (Graham Beaumont - gbeaumont@rhn.org.uk)

The project continues to make good progress and is on schedule. We are now in the final stage of data acquisition with about 650 interviews completed and roughly 80 still to conduct by August of this year. Our attrition rate in this longitudinal study has been satisfactorily low. Preliminary analyses of the Phase 1 data have allowed some models of the relationship among perceived health, social, psychological and cognitive variables to be explored which can shortly be applied to the full data set.

Adding Quality to Quantity: Older People's Views on Their Quality of Life and Its Enhancement (Ann Bowling - a.bowling@pcps.ucl.ac.uk)

The analyses from the survey data are ongoing. One paper based on the survey will be published by *Ageing and Mental Health* and a second has been submitted elsewhere; two others are in preparation. The qualitative follow-up interviews have been completed and are being transcribed and analysed.

Spiritual Beliefs and Existential Meaning in Later Life: The Experience of Older Bereaved Spouses (Peter Coleman - pgc@soton.ac.uk)

Marie Mills spoke about our study and its implications at the Methodist Church London Region's meeting held at Westminster Central Hall on May 11th on the subject of 'The Church, Older People and Attitudes to Faith'. Peter Coleman also highlighted the study in his keynote address on 'Spiritual questioning in later life' to the Second International Conference on Ageing, Spirituality and Well-Being, arranged by the Christian Council on Ageing and MHA Care Group at Durham University 5-9th July. We are receiving many requests for information about our work, also some proposals for collaborative work.

An Anthropological Investigation of Lay and Professional Meanings of Quality of Life (Chris McKeivitt - christopher.mckeivitt@kcl.ac.uk)

This project ended in July. A paper on professionals' concepts of quality of life appeared in *Quality and Ageing*. A poster on stroke patients' participation in decision making was presented at the European Stroke Conference in Geneva in May. Other papers have been submitted and are in preparation.

Environment and Identity in Later Life: A Cross-Setting Study (Sheila Peace - s.m.peace@open.ac.uk)

We have moved into the analysis phase. In-depth interviewing of respondents in our three locations has almost been completed and material from all respondents is being transcribed for qualitative analysis alongside findings from quantitative data. Two chapters for international texts are being developed around issues of (a) identity and the community environment and (b) attachment to place, and papers have been submitted to conferences on these themes. Work is also taking place on the project video which focusses on place attachment. The final day's filming is imminent and an edited version will be taken back to groups for discussion. This has been a very exciting venture which has produced more research material.

INEQUALITIES IN QUALITY OF LIFE

Influences on Quality of Life in Early Old Age (David Blane - d.blane@ic.ac.uk)

The end of the project approaches (31st July 2002) and we are firmly in the 'final analyses and write up' stage. The measure of quality of life which we developed for the project (CASP-19) has been well received by many researchers in quantitative sociology, epidemiology and social medicine; and is being used in several other studies (mostly large scale surveys). Our work has attracted the attention of two London boroughs; and grant holders Richard Wiggins and Paul Higgs are working with these boroughs to develop 'active ageing' policies. Some of our findings were featured on Channel 4 News - Richard Wiggins was interviewed and CASP-19 lodged on the Channel 4 website (for self-completion by interested viewers - currently we are analysing these replies).

Inequalities in Quality of Life Among People Aged 75 and Over Living in the Community (Elizabeth Breeze - elizabeth.breeze@lshtm.ac.uk)

The end of award report was sent to ESRC at the end of April 2001 and should be posted on the Regard website by the end of March. The data set is deposited in the ESRC Data Archive and ready for use. Some further analysis has been undertaken by the researchers since the project officially finished and papers will now be prepared for submission to journals. Findings are now available in printed form and on the GO website. Papers will be submitted in due course.

Ethnic Inequalities in Quality of Life at Older Ages: Subjective and objective Components (James Nazroo - j.nazroo@public-health.ucl.ac.uk)

The qualitative fieldwork for this project has been completed. This involved interviews with almost 80 respondents from four ethnic groups (Jamaican, Hindu Gujarati, Punjabi Pakistani and white English), sampled from respondents to the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities. Analyses of these data are close to completion and papers are being drafted. We are also close to completing the secondary analysis of the quantitative data from the Fourth National Survey, and papers on the quantitative analysis are being drafted alongside those focussing on the qualitative analysis, so that insights from the qualitative work can be tested in the quantitative data. We are actively engaged in disseminating our findings at conferences. Papers have been given at a US National Academy of Science meeting organised by the National Institutes on Aging, at the British Geriatrics Society spring meeting, and at a London-based conference on innovative research methods. Papers are also scheduled for the annual British Society of Gerontology Conference, the BSA

Medical Sociology annual conference and the European Society for Health and Medical Sociology biennial conference.

Older People in Deprived Neighbourhoods: Social Exclusion and Quality of Life in Old Age (Thomas Scharf - t.s.scharf@keele.ac.uk)

Analysis of data from a survey of 600 older people living in socially deprived neighbourhoods of three English cities is progressing. In addition, having completed the transcript stage, analysis has begun of data collected in detailed follow-up interviews with 90 older people. Papers arising from the research were presented in Spring 2002 at conferences of the British Psychological Society, the British Geriatrics Society, and the British Sociological Association. Dissemination includes preparing an overview of the study findings to be published jointly with Help the Aged in September 2002.

Exploring Perceptions of Quality of Life of Frail Older People During and After the Transition to Institutional Care (Susan Tester - susan.teste@stir.ac.uk)

Main fieldwork completed, including guided conversations and observation with sample of frail older residents in care homes. Analysis and further writing in progress. One journal paper and one book chapter published. Two journal papers submitted and three in preparation. Four papers and three posters presented at national conferences and two in preparation. Two papers presented at international conferences and two in preparation.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Transport and Ageing: Extending Quality of Life for Older People via Public and Private Transport (Mary Gilhooly -

m.gilhooly@paisley.ac.uk)

This study is now complete, with the final report submitted at the end of May. Some of the main findings included the following: (a) car ownership and access to transport were associated with higher perceived quality of life and the effects of car ownership were independent of wealth; (b) study participants who had had to give up driving were more positive about the advantages of not driving than were those who were current drivers; (c) older people were found to be most reluctant to ask family members for lifts, even to attend for hospital appointments; (d) only about half of study participants thought that the needs of older people were taken into consideration by the providers of public transport; (e) interviews with transport providers indicated that older people are thought of as a 'nuisance' and, in addition, transport providers are thinking mainly about disability and not ageing; (f) car manufacturers, on the other hand, were found to be thinking seriously about the ageing of the population and how to make driving easier and safer for older people. The findings from this study, indicating as they do that driving and travel by private car is a source of improved quality of life in old age, do not fit with government policy to get people off the roads and on to public transport.

HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE AGEING

Quality of Life and Real Life Cognitive Functioning (Mary Gilhooly - m.gilhooly@paisley.ac.uk)

The main aim of this study is to examine the extent to which risk factors measured in mid-life predict cognitive functioning in old age. Data collection for this study is now complete. 145 older people from the original Renfrew-Paisley epidemiolog-

ical study (known as the MIDSPAN study), which was conducted 30 years ago, took part in a series of assessments of current cognitive functioning. In addition, study participants were separately interviewed regarding their beliefs and behaviours in relation to maintaining good cognitive functioning in old age. The data are currently being analysed. Preliminary analysis suggested that several of the risk factors assessed in mid-life are significantly correlated with current cognitive functioning. For example, lung function (FEV1) and cholesterol levels are significantly correlated with fluid intelligence, and body mass index is significantly correlated with emotional intelligence. In addition, interesting relationships with quality of life are emerging. For example, emotional problem solving, executive function, two measures of current cognitive functioning are significantly correlated with reported quality of life. Several behaviours are also significantly correlated with reported quality of life; gardening and swimming, for example, are both significantly correlated with higher quality of life.

Evaluating the Impact of Reminiscence on the Quality of Life of Older People (Kevin McKee - k.j.mckee@sheffield.ac.uk)

The above project is now complete and findings have been presented at a conference aimed at local practitioners and policy makers. A summary of project findings highlights that participants in intervention groups had better psychological well-being after taking part in reminiscence-type activities, than those in the control group who did not take part in such activities. The type, context and form of the activity were generally not significantly related to outcomes. This is important from the point of view of policy, as it suggests that care staff need not worry overly about the

nature of the activity that they offer to older people so long as older people are provided with the opportunity to become involved. Listening to the views of older people and their carers reveals that older people and carers value reminiscence as an activity. The overall findings indicate diversity in old age, and a recognition that older people are not located only in the past. Interactions that offer meaningful links between the past and the present are essential in recognising diversity and providing the context for supporting personhood. A local conference identified a commitment between relevant organisations to develop the project findings and it is hoped that this will provide positive outcome relevant to practice. Further outputs are in development.

Older People's Experiences of Paid Employment: Participation and Quality of Life (Ivan Robertson - Ivan.Robertson@umist.ac.uk)

A final total of over 300 interviews have been completed as a follow-up to our original postal survey (n=1200). Fourteen categories are represented in the respondents - according to gender, age group and employment status. Data have been analysed and interim findings suggest that employment status does influence well being. This supports original hypotheses about the damaging effect of unemployment, at any age. Further analysis indicates that environmental factors play a key role in mediating the effects of employment status on psychological well-being. Presentations were made to the British Psychological Society Annual Conference in March 2001 and March 2002 and two research papers have been drafted for publication.

FAMILY AND SUPPORT NETWORKS

Older Men: Their Social World and Healthy Lifestyles (Sara Arber -

K.Davidson@surrey.ac.uk)

The qualitative component of the project is complete. Observations in 25 social clubs and interviews with managers/secretaries have been analysed. Interviews with 85 married, widowed, divorced and never married men have been completed, transcribed and are being analysed. Secondary analysis of three major datasets is on-going and informing the analysis of the qualitative interviews.

Older Widow(er)s: Bereavement and Gender Effects on Lifestyle and Participation (Kate Bennett - kmb@liv.ac.uk)

Analysis of the interviews and questionnaire data of 46 widows and 45 widowers is ongoing. We are currently preparing papers on gender and psychological responses, widowed men's views and experiences of gender differences, the importance of keeping busy, and the transition from married to widowed status. A paper will be presented at the CRAG Conference in June. The funding of the project ends in July.

Quality of Life and Social Support Among Older People From Different Ethnic Groups (Jabeer Butt - jabeer@reunet.demon.co.uk)

Fieldwork is progressing and is due for completion in June, this includes interviews with older people who are part of a booster. Entry of both the quantitative and qualitative data has gone well, with interviews conducted in community languages being translated into English before being input for analysis with Atlas. Initial review of the data has allowed us to identify the structure of the final report.

Grandparenthood: Its Meaning and Contribution to Older People's Lives (Lynda Clarke - lynda.clarke@lshtm.ac.uk)

This project ended at the end of April

2002 and the results are currently being written up. The ONS Omnibus Survey was repeated in September/October 2001 and included more information on grandparents' support of grandchildren and opinions about wanting more or less involvement. The qualitative survey and analyses have been completed. Papers have been presented at conferences and published - more will be presented at the International Sociological Association conference in July and a meeting to disseminate recent research on grandparents being organised by the Nuffield Foundation (October 2002). The grandparents' conference report that was due to be published by FPSC will now be published by Policy Press.

Family, Work and Quality of Life: Changing Economic and Social Roles
(Maria Evandrou -

maria.evandrou@kcl.ac.uk)

The team is writing up the research findings on the employment, pension entitlement, health and social activities of mid-life men and women with family caring responsibilities and who are in paid work. Findings will be presented at the 2002 BSGS and BSG annual conferences. One paper is in press and a further two are being drafted.

Loneliness, Social Isolation and Living Alone in Later Life (Christina Victor -

c.victor@sghms.ac.uk)

The data collection and preliminary analysis is now completed. Our focus of attention has been upon the dissemination of the preliminary project results. A paper summarising the initial results was published in the Journal of Quality in Ageing. Another paper is being revised following the receipt of reviewers' comments. Christina Victor has presented papers from the project at the British Geriatrics Society Spring meeting and at a health promotion conference in Perth, Western Australia. We also presented papers at the World Congress

of Sociology in Brisbane and have been discussing replicating the project in Australia. The project formally concludes at the end of September and the research Fellow, Sasha Scambler will be taking up a Lectureship at the University of Surrey at Roehampton.

PARTICIPATION AND ACTIVITY

Empowerment and disempowerment: comparative study of Afro-Caribbean, Asian and White British women in their third age (Mary Maynard - mm45@york.ac.uk)

The project finished on 31st January 2002. The final report was submitted to the ESRC by the end of April deadline. Myfanwy Franks, who worked on the project until the end, now works half time as a researcher at the Children's Society and half time on an equal opportunities project at the University of York. The team is currently working on the early stages of a book focussing on insights and material from the GO research.

Older Women's Lives and Voices: Participation and Policy in Sheffield (Lorna Warren -

l.warren@shef.ac.uk)

All data now collected, transcribed and coded and currently being analysed. Final ESRC report being written and preparations being made to archive material. Paper being written for BSG 2002 annual conference in Birmingham where the group of volunteers will present. Video now available for purchase and will be shown and available at BSG conference. Resulting from the project conference (11th April) some planning of future work with Sheffield based organisations currently being conducted.

Older People and Lifelong Learning: Choices and Experiences (Alexandra Withnall - A.Withnall@warwick.ac.uk)

The project has been extended until July 2002 owing to a job change. We

are currently focusing on thematic analysis of 35 in-depth interviews with older learners and 'non-learners' that have been carried out by our trained team of 8 older interviewers as well as 10 learning diaries. We are also analysing the field note reporting forms completed by our interviewers and by our transcriber. A paper will be presented at the Association for Education and Ageing's Annual Conference in September 2002 and a journal article will appear shortly. ■

For Further Information:

Our web site includes detailed information on projects and activities.

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A larger print version of this newsletter is available from the Communications Secretary.