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# Writing about age, birthdays and the passage of time

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## **ABSTRACT**

How do we experience ageing, how do we interpret changes in our lives and what do we say about the passage of time? The aim of this paper is to present longitudinal evidence about the personal and social significance of birthdays in adult life and, in particular, how birthdays contribute to a sense of ageing. The primary source of data is the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Members of its panel of ‘ordinary’ people living in the United Kingdom were in 1990 invited to write anonymously about celebrations, and in 2002 they were invited to write more specifically on the topic of birthdays. A total of 120 accepted both invitations and 55 included accounts of their last birthday in both submissions. As a consequence, it is possible to compare what they wrote on the two occasions and how this reflects their unfolding experience and changing feelings about age. The analysis reveals the personal salience of the date of a birthday and of continuity in how birthdays are celebrated. Who remembers birthdays and who participates in their celebration reflect the generational structure of families and age-related patterns of friendship. Birthdays are used to celebrate collective continuity more than individual change.

**KEY WORDS** – chronological age, change, annual cycle, anniversary, celebration, family, friends.

## **Introduction**

Nikander (2002, 2009) has provided a detailed analysis of how ‘ordinary’ Finnish people talk about age when approaching their 50th birthday. She uncovered some of the ‘active language practices’ that are used to make sense of experiences such as turning 50. Her pioneering research prompts questions about how such practices vary with age and, more particularly, how individual practices change as people grow older. For example, her research reveals how the 50th birthday is viewed by many as ‘a milestone’, which prompts the question: as that particular event

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becomes part of personal history, how do people rethink and reconstruct their age identities as they face the ever-changing timescape of their future lives?

The 50th birthday is of course widely perceived to be a significant event in the lifecourse, and Nikander comments on the 'somewhat peculiar and persistent tradition' in newspapers in Finland to print interviews with various prominent people on its occasion (2009: 867). She includes examples from a series of interviews published in 1997 with celebrities who had been born in 1947. Her focus therefore is on one particular milestone, rather than on the cyclical and thereby routine and more mundane nature of birthdays. It is in dealing with repeated events and habitual activities, as well as the unexpected challenges of life, that people accumulate experience, knowledge and expertise. Everyday practices are learnt in childhood and absorbed into the routines of adulthood. As Alasuutari (2004: 17) reasoned: 'All the time the human mind and body gather experience from circumstances and the conclusions drawn from them, and such accumulated knowledge is conditioned into habitual information processes that operate inside our conscious mind. Such culturally unconscious routines not only assist our self-conscious mind; they make perception and understanding possible'.

In particular, the annual cycle becomes familiar at an early age: the seasons, the festivals and the annual move to the next class in school, for example, and prominent in this cycle is the individual's birthday. Early in life, many people learn to interpret their birthday as 'their special day', a day when they are free to break loose from certain conventions and to indulge in, and be indulged in, non-routine pleasures. It is hardly surprising if in relation to these predictable changes and events, certain expectations and practices develop and, in this respect, the marking or celebration of birthdays is not exceptional.

How does research access the longitudinal evidence that might confirm whether this perspective on the changing course of life persists into later life? In Bytheway (1993), I explored the possibility of using published writing in a case study of the published letters and diaries of Bernard and Mary Berenson (McComb 1965; Strachey and Samuels 1983). Fourteen ways in which the Berensons expressed their understanding of ageing over the course of their long lives were identified. The comparison was hampered, however, by differences in how their respective editors approached the task of selecting material for publication. My conclusion focused on how age was theorised by the Berensons 'in the course of it being experienced' (1993: 164), but as the analysis demonstrated, from the original act of writing through selective editing to the marketing of the product, the process of publication entails a degree of self-consciousness,

vested interest, profit and fame that undermined the generalisability of the conclusions.

### **The Mass-Observation Archive**

It was in the course of studying accounts of birthdays held by the Mass-Observation Archive (M-O) that I realised it is a unique source of qualitative longitudinal data that can generate insights into the unfolding experience of ageing (Bytheway 2005: 468). This is because it is possible to read and compare what the same person writes on different occasions, potentially 20 years apart, and to include in the analysis the writings of many 'ordinary' people living in all parts of the United Kingdom. The Archive is maintained by the University of Sussex Library. Three times a year its panel of several hundred people receive a 'directive', an invitation to comment anonymously on specified current affairs and everyday topics. The invitations began in 1981 and they continue 27 years later. The Archive places a high priority on two aims: to ensure that the panel is as diverse as possible, and to maintain their continuing participation. Inducting new members takes time and those who are not used to writing require encouragement and assistance to develop the necessary skills and confidence. So it makes sense, given limited resources, to retain the participation of those who become experienced contributors, as well as to endeavour to recruit new panel members from under-represented sections of the population. The strength of the Archive is not that the panel is 'statistically representative' but rather that it is large and diverse. It is particularly valuable for the study of later life because many members have remained loyal, growing older as the project has continued to flourish.

Sheridan, Street and Bloome (2000: 124–7) critically examined the relevance of the Archive for social science, and argued that reading and writing should be understood as social and cultural practices. They paid particular attention to the potential differences between those who write for the Archive and those who read what is written. For example, some M-O writers may view knowledge as unproblematic and provide what they consider to be truthful accounts of what they have witnessed or experienced – 'telling it like it is' – whereas their readers may be more sceptical, interpreting what they read as the writer's 'definition of the situation' (Harrison and McGhee 2003: 35). Many of those who have drawn on the M-O Archive have commented on the sense of intimacy that arises when reading what often appear to be the 'secret' thoughts of the unknown writer. A critical reader of an early draft of this paper

commented, for example, that one story was ‘so sad’ and that another was ‘very poignant’.

### **The two directives**

Towards the end of 1990 and in anticipation of Christmas, the panel was invited to write about *celebrations*. The directive they received began with three longish paragraphs inquiring into celebrations and how they feature in ‘your year’. Descriptions were sought of recent ‘special occasions’. The third paragraph had a long list of prompts: food, drink, decorations, present-giving, rituals, traditions, music, singing and dancing. In the fourth and last paragraph, there was the first mention of birthdays and age: ‘Your last birthday. How did you spend it? Did you receive presents and cards? Who shared it with you? Was it a typical birthday? What do you recall about your childhood birthdays? (Please mention your age now)’. Nearly 12 years later, in the summer of 2002, the panel was asked to write about the more specific topic of *birthdays*. This directive was worded without any reference back to the questions posed in 1990. Nevertheless the first paragraph was similarly referenced to ‘your last birthday’ and seven bullet points followed the opening instruction ‘We would first like you to describe as simply as possible what happened at your last birthday’:

- when it was
- how old you were
- what you did that day
- how, if at all, it was celebrated
- how many cards or presents you received
- from whom
- what else do you remember about the day?

Comparing the two directives, some strong similarities in the wording are found but also awkward differences. In regard to other people, the 1990 question is about ‘sharing’ the birthday, whereas the 2002 question is about cards and presents. And then in 1990 the participants were asked how they spent the day, whereas in 2002 about what they did. So although the focus was on the *same* event, ‘your last birthday’, somewhat different questions were posed. It is important to note, however, that in every M-O directive the panel is instructed to think of the questions as little more than prompts. The M-O website guidance reads: ‘Don’t worry about rambling or going off at a tangent. We know that some subjects inspire some people

and leave others cold. You must feel free to pick and choose and to write about your own experience’.

## Analysis

This paper is based on a systematic analysis of all responses to the 1990 and 2002 directives. Accounts of ‘your last birthday’ were abstracted and, as examples, the responses of five members of the panel are reproduced in Table 1: those of Wendy (born in 1957), Zandra (1946), Ben (1923), Alice (1917) and Hilda (1913). In addition, extracts from other responses are quoted where appropriate. All names are pseudonyms, and extracts are referenced to the year of the directive and to the writer’s standard M-O identification number.

When interpreting the responses, it is important to appreciate that the panel members do not respond in controlled settings, as is typically the case in research interviews. They may produce a carefully considered reply, or they may write on impulse. Some write with literary flair, others rather more cryptically (*cf.* Ben’s and Alice’s responses in Table 1); some write by hand, others use word processors, and in 2002 several responded by email (*e.g.* Zandra); some pay no regard to matters of spelling or punctuation, others appear to be much more scrupulous (compare Alice and Wendy). Regarding dates, no deadline is set; some participants reply by return of post, while others leave it for several weeks. In 2002, five writers responded only after their birthday had passed (see Wendy, Line 1, 2002), and 14 others indicated that in writing about their last birthdays they had consulted their diaries (*e.g.* Hilda, Line 1, 1990; and Line 2, 2002). So an important consideration for readers of the birthday stories are the substantial differences in the writers’ practices, and the various challenges that they faced in recalling what happened on their last birthday. Inevitably there is some uncertainty in reading and interpreting the paired stories. When, for example, Zandra refers to both ‘lover’ and ‘husband’ in 1990 (Lines 5 and 15), and to ‘partner’ and ‘ex-husband’ in 2002 (Lines 2 and 7), how sure can we be that these are the same two people? Without personal identifiers (as supplied by Wendy), the reader has to speculate as to who is who, or alternatively decide that the question is unimportant.

Birthdays are a category of clearly defined and comparable annual events. If asked, people are able to talk about their last birthday, recognising that there are certain cultural expectations and associated routines. Indeed there is a ‘technical vocabulary’ – words such as party, card, present, surprise, cake, candles and ‘the big one’ are used in many M-O

TABLE I. *The paired stories from five respondents in response to the 1990 and 2002 directives***Wendy, born 1957 (W729)**

1990	2002
1 My last birthday – it was the day L and I went	1 My last birthday was yesterday (July 6th). I was 45 years old
2 on holiday. Because I don't like, and never	2 and on holiday for a few days in San Francisco. My husband
3 have been keen on celebrations, and because	3 and I went out to a cafe for breakfast and I had French Toast
4 even now (at 33!) my mother still makes a	4 with sausage and crispy bacon and maple syrup and coffee
5 thing of my birthday if she gets given a	5 and cod water. We also watched the Wimbledon ladies semi
6 chance, I prefer to be away on that day. In	6 final before breakfast. Then we caught a Blue and Gold Line
7 1989 it was a perfect day on the Dingle	7 ferry to Teberou, on the other side of the bay from San
8 Peninsula in Ireland. This year it was mostly	8 Francisco and spent a couple of hours wandering around its
9 on the A9 between here and Ullapool, on the	9 little shops and streets. We also had more coffee out on a
10 way to the Outer Hebrides. The day before	10 deck and got the waitress to take a photo of us with the bay
11 everyone (parents, aunt and uncle) had come	11 behind us. Then we came back to San Francisco and went to
12 over to our house with cards and presents so	12 the Sony Centre – all gadgets I didn't understand. At night we
13 on the day (July 6th) we could get away early.	13 walked to Pier 39 from our hotel and had a meal – fishy – and
14 I can't remember what I got, nor is it written in	14 wine and dessert. I was really tired at the end of the day. I
15 my diary, but my Mum did give me a tiny iced	15 suppose the celebration bit was the meal at night, but as we
16 cake (4-6 ins high and maybe 4ins across) and	16 were on holiday, in a city we'd never been to before, doing
17 we stopped near Inverness at a picnic site and	17 things we wanted to do the whole day was nice. L gave me a
18 cut this cake, it had one candle and a wide	18 card on the day and before we come on holiday (a week ago)
19 lilac ribbon round the outside. I have a photo	19 my parents and L's parents gave me a cheque for £25 which I
20 of it somewhere, me sitting at the picnic table	20 banked, and will get something on holiday with the money.
21 with cake. We ended up in a lovely bed and	21 My parents gave me and L a joint £100 and I got a make up
22 breakfast in Ullapool (Rose Cottage or Rose	22 case and cosmetics from them and also sweets. My aunt and
23 Villa or something like that) and had a lovely	23 uncle gave me money and a card and the card also came.
24 seafood meal in a hotel that night. It was a	24 ( <i>handwritten</i> )
25 good birthday. ( <i>handwritten</i> )	

**Hilda, born 1913 (H280)**

1 My last birthday – diary note. March 21 –	1 My last birthday was 21.3.2002. I was 89. It was a lovely day
2 sunny & mild enough. Short mat bowls 9.30 –	2 - I note in my diary – "dull at first, lovely afternoon with people
3 11.30 am – 17 people + 2 non players. When	3 on the beach – fluffy clouds & blue sky! My daughter took me
4 we had our break and cups of tea or coffee	4 to lunch at a local restaurant with sea views. We had one of
5 and biscuits, they all sang "Happy Birthday" to	5 their special dishes – a sizzler on a red hot iron skillet thing,
6 me. (I went all pink & even pinker when asked	6 so that the steak cooks a bit on the plate, so I always order
7 my age! I think I was the oldest in the room!)	7 "rare" – which is called "pink" round here. Finished off with a
8 (born 1913). My presents were sweets from	8 thing called "chocolate graveyard" (nearly kills you to eat it).
9 my husband and a white cardi from my	9 It is ice cream & cream & choc sauce on a huge piece of soft
10 daughter. Some little oddments – pendant,	10 chocolate gâteau. I think there are nuts & little hard choc
11 pen & knee-warmers! from a friend I made in	11 balls hidden in there too. We know the owner pretty well &
12 1941, and a funny little fuzzy green pea pod	12 she knocked a bit off the bill, as she didn't give us the
13 which unzipped to show 5 little fuzzy peas!	13 complimentary wine.
14 from my nephew & his kids. I just died with	14 After the meal, I staggered to the doctor to get my prescription
15 laughter. In the evening I went to a WI group	15 (for BP & thinning the blood. I keep asking to knock them off
16 meeting at Hemsby. Helped on the Bring &	16 or reduce the strength – but they say leave well alone) To PO
17 Buy stall. I had 10 birthday cards.	17 for pension, being Thursday, then to chemist for the tablets.
( <i>handwritten</i> )	18 While they were being counted, I went over the road to the
	19 chemist to put my cards on the mantel piece.
	20 I had twelve cards –
	21 daughter & her man (partner)
	22 new people next door!
	23 daughter's mother-in-law,
	24 & friends from 1931-2002.
	25 2 presents: daughter & John & the lunch.
	26 1 present, friend.
	27 7 presents & a parcel from a family.
	28 1 bunch flowers – friend. ( <i>handwritten</i> )

TABLE I. (Cont.)

**Zandra, born 1946 (Z2276)**

1990	2002
1 My last birthday was odd. I'm 44. It was a	1 My last birthday was 8 August 2001, and I was 55. My
2 weekday so I was at work. As I leave for work	2 partner was away in France so I went to work as usual that
3 at 6.45am the family agreed to give me	3 day, did some supermarket shopping on the way home, and
4 presents in the evening not breakfast, so it	4 spent the evening seeing two clients (at that time I had a
5 started out just like any old day. My lover rang	5 small private practice as a counsellor and psychotherapist). I
6 me at work which was wonderful. I went out &	6 didn't do any celebrating that day but I got phone calls from
7 bought everyone in my office chocolate eclairs	7 both my children, my ex husband, my partner in France, my
8 & they were all much amazed as they'd not	8 brother and three of my women friends. As far as I recall I got
9 known it was my birthday. Later that day my	9 about 14 cards and 7 presents, though the presents weren't
10 boss appeared with a HUGE bunch of flowers	10 all on the day. The cards were from: my son, my daughter,
11 & I felt really cherished. I had presents from	11 my partner, my ex-husband, my boss, my brother, an ex-date,
12 the family when I got home & my daughter	12 approx 7 women friends.
13 made supper – we decided to postpone the	13 I can't recall much else about the day except missing my
14 meal out till the w/end (ie ½ way between my +	14 partner very badly and feeling pleased that no-one at work
15 my husband's birthday). It was a fairly typical	15 (apart from my boss who was away on holiday) know it was
16 birthday, better in fact than ones when the	16 my birthday. This isn't because I feel bad about revealing my
17 children were little & I was home all day.	17 age – its not a problem – but I loathe workspace pseudo
18 Nothing special happened at all then.	18 celebrations. (email)
19 (handwritten)	

**Ben, born 1923 (B1442)**

1 My last birthday was on July 25 when I was	1 My last birthday was 25 July 2001 and I was 78 years old. I
2 67. My younger son and daughter in law came	2 did nothing unusual that I can remember.
3 to dinner with us. My eldest son, who's	3 My birthday was not celebrated.
4 birthday was also July 25 had been killed in	4 I received 2 bottles of wine from my wife.
5 France a year earlier, so there was sadness as	5 2 bottles of wine from my son
6 well as a happy birthday.	6 3 bottles of wine and 1 bottle of sherry from my daughter who
7 I am generous about giving Xmas and Birthday	7 lives 51 miles away, so I did not get the wine until August
8 and Anniversary presents but I hate receiving	8 when my son brought it back after visiting her.
9 presents.	9 I received cards from my wife, my son, my daughter and from
10 I am given things and books that I do not want	10 my son's daughters.
11 and cannot read, so it is all so much waste,	11 I don't remember anything else about my last birthday.
12 and I hate waste.	12 (handwritten, p. 1)
13 If only I could be given 1 bottle of German	
14 wine I would be so pleased, but instead I get	
15 showered with presents I do not want or like	
16 and it makes me sad. (handwritten, p. 2)	

**Alice, born 1917 (W563)**

1 This last Birthday we went to the Golf Club for	1 Last b/day - July! & my son from the continent comes over for
2 a Meal & then on to Betsw Coed – with our 2	2 it – alone.- I've had the Daughter, last year! Come over from
3 friends from opposite – all the Children Rang	3 Australia – the Daughter in U.S.A. did not, as she was here, in
4 me – at all different Hours – got flowers from	4 the March! for Her fathers – now in "CARE HOME" He was 88
5 Hubby, & the Meal Paid for by the	5 - I get fussed for my B/day! always have - But since I've got
6 Neighbours – the children send Money – Tho	6 Ancient, & been in Hospital, Quite a Lot, they try to get here to
7 the girl in Oz sends Warm Winter Nighties that	7 see me! But Phone me! Most Days. I spend Lots of Time on
8 I can't Buy Here – the Girl in U.S.A Slippers as	8 Phone, Talking To Them, & its So nice now! To be <u>So</u> Close
9 I asked they were the most Comfy & not seen	9 <u>VIA</u> the Phone – To the So <u>Far Away</u> Places They <u>All</u> live -
10 Here – the Son Money, which I spent on a	10 My Son on Last B/day came + took me & his Father out for a
11 large Baileys Cream etc. (handwritten, 1990)	11 Nice Meal in a Hotel. I get Presents, & Really Cant use
	12 Them – I do not now get out & about as I used to – Most of
	13 my Friends To! are Dead! one friend! Since I was 17, & we
	14 kept in Touch, has Two Daughters, + on my B/day They send
	15 me Flowers – for them! they say its like sending them To
	16 Their Mum – one is 60 & the other say 58, I have only one
	17 other Friend alive – She To, Lives quite a way from me – as
	18 did J - & She like my Husband, has Senile Dementia, & now
	19 does not write me, as she used To. (handwritten, 2002)

*Note:* These are literal transcripts, preserving as far as possible all abbreviations, capital letters and punctuation.



TABLE 2. *Gender and year of birth of the respondents*

Years of birth	Women		Men	
	Selected	Total	Selected	Total
1910–19	2	2	2	3
1920–29	9	25	7	17
1930–39	12	33	4	7
1940–49	9	16	2	2
1950–59	7	13	1	1
Not stated	0	0	0	1
Total	39	89	16	31

*Note:* The selected respondents provided accounts of ‘your last birthday’ in both 1990 and 2002.

stories in a way which implies a shared understanding. Many set about the task of describing their last birthday by constructing ‘a story’ around it: a straightforward narrative detailing the day from beginning to end; an account of how it was unusual or exceptional; or of how it was a lovely day or why it all went wrong. In this way, readers can identify with the writer’s experience (or so the writers appear to assume) and are able to compare these stories with those of their own birthdays.

Given the questions posed in the two directives, my analysis has addressed the following five specific questions that were the most amenable to comparative analysis:

1. How was the day identified?
2. How was the day spent and the birthday celebrated?
3. Who was mentioned as remembering the birthday or participating in the celebrations?
4. What similarities are there in the stories?
5. To what extent do the differences reflect age-related changes?

A total of 120 panellists submitted replies to both directives and 55 included accounts of their last birthday in response to both directives. In 1990, the majority focused on other kinds of celebration, typically Christmas, and did not mention birthdays. The following analysis is limited to these 55 paired stories. Each pair was written by the same writer about the same annual event, ‘their last birthday’. The key criterion is the use of the past tense: each story is about ‘what happened’. Table 2 presents the age and gender of the writers. The years of birth of the 39 women ranged from 1913 to 1959 (they were aged 31–77 years in 1990), and those of the 16 men from 1916 to 1952 (ages 38–74 years).

## The day

Birthdays are the anniversary of birth, and the particular numbered day in a specified month is socially designated as marking ‘the anniversary’: it is the *day* that is celebrated rather than the hour or the week. For most people, possibly because of this precision, the day is special. As a social event it is uniquely identified by the date, the age and the name of the individual. In *Bytheway* (2005), I discussed the relationship between birthdays and age identities. The examples included in this paper confirm that most people have no difficulty in including their chronological age when specifying their last birthday (*e.g.* Zandra, Line 1, 1990; Line 1, 2002). In 2002, the panel was asked when their birthday was, and 46 of the 55 specified the date. Although there was no equivalent request in 1990, 19 of the 55 specified the date, typically early in their accounts (including Hilda, Line 1, and Ben, Line 1, as well as Zandra). For most people, the date is personally salient: note how Hilda described the weather on the day (Lines 2–3, 2002). Brenda (B1771) included the date and her age in the first sentence of the descriptions written in both 1990 and 2002:

On my birthday (54th) 23rd April, this year I awoke to be handed an envelope with two tickets for *Les Misérables*. (1990)

My birthday was April 23rd and I was 66 years old. Husband made tea and asked me to be downstairs by gam if possible. There was a knock at the door at 8.45 so he answered and took the flowers from the florist intended for me. (2002)

Brenda represents well those writers who offer the story of the day from beginning to end. It is as though she is drawing on a template of how such stories should be told: date, age, beginning the day in bed, then a surprise, and so on. Like many others, she ended the 1990 story with an expression of satisfaction: ‘the best I have had in ages ... a memorable occasion ... that I will treasure’, and in 2002 she reported that the day had been ‘very happy’.

Because the date identifies the day, many of the writers were interested in its coincidence with historical or cultural events or the birthdays of well-known people. Sarah (S2207), for example, commented in 1990 that her birthday fell on April 1st – ‘All Fools’ Day’ – adding that it sometimes coincided with Easter, and then, confirming this, she noted in 2002 that her birthday was on Easter Monday. Several described how their birthdays were – and always had been – overshadowed by Christmas. The potential significance given to a coincident event is made evident by Ann (A1706) who, in 2002, commented: ‘At last I feel I have a foothold on history, as my birthday is September 11th. Need I say more?’

Coincidences can be far more personal and poignant. Ben noted that his birthday coincides with that of his deceased eldest son (Lines 3–6, 1990) and, in response to the question posed in 2002 about his ‘most memorable’ birthday, he referred back to the day in 1956 when his son was born. In these different ways, the birthday coincides with other anniversaries, and many of the writers’ thoughts on the day are reflections on these seemingly random links. As events come and go, coincidences ‘accumulate’ and, as one ages, celebration of one’s birthday is increasingly compromised in these ways. Eighteen respondents named the day of the week, and some writers recollected that they were at work on their birthday (e.g. Zandra, Line 2, 1990). Others, however, wanted to indicate how – for them – their birthday was ‘just another day’. Susan (S1399), for example, began her account in 1990: ‘My birthday is spent as an ordinary day’ and concluded ‘basically the same as any other Saturday’. In 2002 she wrote: ‘just a (relatively) normal Sunday’.

Some birthdays were jointly celebrated with those of partners or friends. Zandra, for example, shared a 1990 birthday celebration half way between her husband’s birthday and her own (Lines 14–15). Nevertheless, despite such flexibility, for some the day of a birthday remained a socially charged time: receiving cards or phone calls on the day itself is important. The strength and reciprocity of personal relationships is often tested by the ability to remember birthdays. Some confessed to keeping a book of those they ‘needed’ to remember, and others offered comments on those who failed to mark the day. Thelma (W571, 1990), for example, comments: ‘I didn’t get a card or present from my daughter until the following day, when she knew that I was calling to see her during the day, but it spoilt it somewhat, having to wait’. In the same account, she revealed how seemingly inexplicable failures can generate anxiety, particularly when taking account of age: ‘I was surprised when I didn’t receive a card from my godmother, who has never, ever, forgotten and, as she is over 80 years old, I was worried that she might be ill’.

Conversely, some expressed confusion over unexpected cards. Brenda (B1771, 2002) had a good birthday but commented: ‘for the first time that I could recall, a friend from the past also sent a card. Don’t know why’. Similarly others described how they were puzzled that exchanging birthday cards should sustain otherwise insignificant relationships. Hannah (H1705, 2002), for example, commented:

I also received a card from my late mother’s god-daughter who is also the cousin of my cousin. She lives in England and keeps in touch. Her birthday is a week after mine and she is 53. I suppose the proximity of birthdays is why we keep sending each other a card, because we were never that close – I expect neither of us feels we can stop at this stage.

Thus there are strong expectations about how the day itself will be marked by family and friends, but this is complicated by expectations regarding the surprise element. On occasions, this can precipitate a crisis. For example, here is how Mary (W853, 2002) recounted her ‘worst birthday’:

the year absolutely nobody got it right. Not my husband, or sons, and even my mother posted a card and gift late. All day I thought it was a joke, and a big surprise would unfold in the evening. One son was away at university, and I thought he was probably coming home unexpectedly. By late evening, when I realised the bitter truth, I gave in to floods of tears. I felt so rejected.

### **Celebrations**

Despite the differences in wording, both directives inspired detailed narratives of the events of the day. These revealed a high degree of continuity in how some respondents celebrated their birthdays. Wendy, one of the youngest, provided full accounts of both birthdays (see Table 1). Apart from the fact that her holiday location had shifted from the Outer Hebrides to San Francisco, perhaps reflecting increased affluence, it is striking that both birthdays were celebrated in much the same way: on holiday with her husband (Lines 1–2, 1990; 2–3, 2002); her parents, aunt and uncle giving cards and presents in advance (Lines 10–12, 1990; 18–23, 2002); and the day marked by a photograph (Lines 19–21, 1990; 10–11, 2002) and a meal (Lines 23–24, 1990; 13–14, 2002). The two accounts are also similar in the expressions of satisfaction with modest pleasures: in 1990, a ‘good birthday’ (Line 25), a ‘lovely’ bed-and-breakfast (Line 21) and ‘lovely’ seafood (Line 23); in 2002, a ‘nice’ day (Line 17), doing things they wanted to do (Lines 16–17).

Turning to the older respondents, there is evidence of continuity in the two stories of Alice, born in 1917: a meal (Lines 2, 1990; 11, 2002) and daughters, son, husband and flowers (Lines 4, 1990; 15, 2002). But in 2002 a sense of change was clearly associated with her own ageing: she was now ‘ancient’ (Line 6), in hospital (Line 6), receiving superfluous presents (Lines 11–12), and there were friends who had died (Lines 12–13). Hilda, born in 1913, was the oldest respondent, and she similarly provided two positive accounts of her birthday celebrations. In the first, there is evidence of a sensitivity to age (‘the oldest in the room’: Line 7) and distant dates (Lines 8 and 12) that was absent 12 years later. Instead there is a passing but telling reference to the management of routine medication (Lines 14–16). Both accounts tell a similar story of low-level celebrations, however, and both are laced with death-related humour (Lines 14, 1990; 8, 2002).

Ideally, gifts are surprises and some excitement may be shown as they are unwrapped. In 1990, Zandra was delighted with the flowers she received from her boss (Lines 9–11), and similarly Hilda appeared to be pleased with the knee-warmers from her old friend (Line 11, 1990). But some gifts appeared to have been ordered (*e.g.* Alice's warm winter nighties and slippers, Lines 7–9, 1990), and others were expected (*e.g.* Ben's wine, Lines 4–6, 2002). It is possible to sense the disappointment in Zandra's comment that not all her 2002 presents arrived on the day (Lines 9–10), and in Ben's revelation that he did not receive a son's present 'until August' (Line 7, 2002). Several older respondents indicated unambiguously that they did not want presents (Ben, Lines 10–12, 1990; Alice, Lines 11–12, 2002). Similarly telephone calls appeared to be 'expected' surprises (Zandra's phone calls in 2002, Lines 6–8; likewise Alice's in 1990, Lines 3–4; and 2002, Lines 7–9), and the same can be said for Alice's visitors in 2002 (Lines 1–3). It is interesting to contrast Mary's disappointment in not having a surprise celebration (see above) with the evident pleasure of unexpected gestures, such as those given to Hilda at the bowls club (Lines 4–6, 1990). On both occasions – 1990 and 2002 – it appears that most respondents sought to convey the impression that the celebration or marking of their birthdays had a pattern that recurred each year like the seasons and annual festivities. Some respondents also acknowledged, however, that changes affected the celebrations – missing people, health concerns, altered living arrangements – all of which can be interpreted as age-related.

One regrettable complication for this analysis is decadal birthday celebrations, the 'big ones'. Had the *Birthdays* directive been issued in 2000, ten years after the *Celebrations* one, it would have been possible to make a direct comparison of successive decadal birthdays. As it is, 17 of the 55 comparisons are complicated by one or other of the responses describing such an event. Eleven of these respondents were writing retrospectively, and for eight there were special celebrations. Of the six who wrote prior to the forthcoming event, three made no mention of it and just one said she was planning to celebrate 'in style'.

### **Participants in the birthday celebrations**

For most respondents, the people who participated in their birthday celebrations are a key element in their stories. The panel was specifically asked in both directives about presents and cards. Several conscientiously listed all those received (*e.g.* Hilda, Lines 20–28, 2002). Others simply enumerated the cards, which varied in number from two to 32. There is no

TABLE 3. *The participation of friends in birthday celebrations: younger and older women*

Age group and participation in 2002	Friends participating in 1990		
	No	Yes	All
Younger women (born 1930 or later):			
Friends participating in 2002: No	13	2	15
Friends participating in 2002: Yes	8	6	14
Older women (born before 1930):			
Friends participating in 2002: No	3	5	8
Friends participating in 2002: Yes	2	0	2
Both age groups			39

sign of the number falling with time: eight listed more cards in 2002 than in 1990, and only four listed fewer. Birthday cards are an important way of maintaining long-established relationships, representing a symbolic and continuing link with the past: some respondents indicated that they were much valued. Vera, for example, described how she still kept the cards she received from her family and stored them in the attic (H1703, 2002). Even those who avoided celebrations by not revealing the date of their birthday to their friends used cards as a way of sustaining long-established relationships. Edie (E174), for example, claimed in 1990 that ‘none of my neighbours or friends who live near know when my birthday is’ and, in 2002, that ‘I don’t think anyone else knows my birth date’. Nevertheless, in 2002 she reported receiving a card from ‘a married woman friend with whom I’ve been friends since we met at college 50 yrs ago’.

Who participated in the 1990 and 2002 celebrations reflects broad age-related shifts in the writers’ social networks in two ways: the changing generational structure of families and a changed balance between family and friends. Table 3 compares the reported participation of the friends of the younger and older women in their birthday celebrations (there were too few men for a similar comparison). Most of the younger women (born in 1930 or more recently) who had friends that participated in 1990 wrote of their participation again in 2002, whereas none of the older women did so. As many as eight younger women with no friends participating in 1990 had friends participating in 2002. This suggests that friends become more significant for women up to the age of 65 years or so (perhaps reflecting freedom from the constraints of dependent children), but thereafter they become less so.

In addition to cards, the descriptions of birthdays included details of who participated in phone calls, meals, visits and parties. The predictable progression of generations through family life is again evident in these

details, not only in the more frequent absence of parents in 2002 than in 1990 (note, however, that while no aunts were mentioned in 1990, they were in three 2002 accounts), but also in the increased phone calls and visits from children who have left home, and in the appearance of grandchildren as birthday participants. Although some described birthdays being marked and celebrated ‘in the usual way’, this was always against a backdrop of a constantly shifting set of participants. The impact of deaths and other losses is only occasionally made explicit. Norah is an exception: in 1990, facing her first birthday as a widow, she described how she retreated to her son’s home:

I spent my last birthday 6-10-90 trying not to think too much about it by going to my son’s house where not many of my friends know his telephone number. It wasn’t because of being 56-years-old but because for the last 36 years I have shared my birthday with my husband and this was the first birthday on my own as he died in March 1990. (N399, 1990)

Twelve years later, she was not well and spent the day alone watching the television. She received cards and presents from her children and some friends. The description included the following sad comment: ‘My birthday may have been a lot different if my long-term carer, friend and neighbour had not recently retired and moved to Lincolnshire but all good things come to an end in some way’ (N399, 2002). The contrast in the significance of friendship is revealing: in 1990, Norah deliberately escaped the attentions of well-meaning friends, whereas in 2002 she deeply regretted the loss of one key friend.

Wilma’s mother is central to both her birthday stories (W853). In 1990 they met and lunched in a restaurant: ‘The sun shone, making my birthday a golden autumn day – as it usually is’. In contrast in 2002, her mother had dementia and ‘as with them all in recent years, it [Wilma’s birthday] was a bitter-sweet occasion’. Friends at the dog-club bought her a birthday cake, and her son and partner took her out for an evening meal:

They were some of the sweet moments but under the shadow of my sense of loss for those who no longer share the day with me, family I’ve outlived. Above all my mother who is still alive, but can no longer remember my birthday, although she does still know me, thank God. A few years ago when I realised this memory loss had begun, I kept the birthday card she gave me that year, and now, on my birthday I take it from the drawer, and place it on the mantle with the rest. (W853, 2002)

This is a good example of how major life changes ensure that there are very different stories to be told about what is nominally the same annual event. Dementia also affected Carol’s birthday in 2002, but she joked that it made no difference: ‘My husband has been hopeless at presents all

our married life so, now he has dementia, it makes no difference to (have) no present!’ (C2078). In contrast, her mother and sister died between 1990 and 2002 and she wrote that she missed their cards. Some continuity is implied in the lunch she had with some friends ‘as usual’. Thus, despite major differences in her life situation, at least some of the ways in which her birthday was celebrated remained the same.

Among the stories there are two striking examples of how gaining a new partner, rather than the loss of a regular participant, brought radical changes in how birthdays are celebrated. In addition to Zandra’s (see Table 1) there is Nancy’s (N1592) who, in 1990, had recently taken up with Jim, a new partner, after 11 years living on her own. Aged 59, Nancy is somewhat older than Zandra, and her 1990 story described at length how, for her, Jim’s arrival marked a new start in life. She began by describing how her birthday uncovered major challenges for them both:

It was ... very strange for me and not really within my understanding that he did not overtly refer to my birthday at all or give me a card or a present. I think he was probably upset by the cards & presents that had been arriving in dribs and drabs during the week before and felt he couldn’t or shouldn’t just climb on the bandwagon.

She returned to his discomfort in describing their bonfire at the end of the day:

while we enjoyed this ceremony he still never mentioned the fact that it was my birthday. I know my birthday was painful for him in some way – perhaps because HIS birthday had been so different, perhaps because he couldn’t work out whether to give me a card or present & ended up by not doing so – I can’t quite tell. I accept that he was upset & couldn’t find the words to tell me why.

Twelve years later there was a big celebration for Nancy’s 70th birthday. In a long description of the day and the birthday feast, she mentioned how Jim (same first name as in 1990, so we may presume him to be the same person) was moving chairs and chilling the champagne. Much of this story centres, however, not on Jim but on her son and daughter who had both travelled a long distance. In a dramatic age-related end to what had been a successful party, she gave her car to her son and a ‘compensatory cheque’ to her daughter: ‘Yes it was time to quit driving! I have poor sight, and decided to part with the car’. Reflecting the classic rise-and-fall model of the ageing process, she called this a ‘watershed’.

### **Continuity and change**

The analysis of the data addressed two further questions: what similarities are there in the stories? And, to what extent do the differences reflect



age-related changes? Proof of continuity or change in the lives of individuals depends upon longitudinal evidence from at least two points in time, so a quantitative approach ideally requires repetition of exactly the same question, of the form 'How many cards did you receive on your last birthday?' The M-O Archive stories were triggered by the same prompt, 'your last birthday', but addressed differently worded questions. Would the analysis have been any less problematic had the same wording been used? Changes during the 1990s in marketing, packaging and distribution practices altered what is understood by words such as 'present' and 'card', just as the mobile telephone revolution transformed the practice and costs of making phone calls. So, as ever, disentangling age and period effects proves difficult if not impossible.

The analysis has revealed many striking similarities in the 55 paired stories. It is not difficult, for example, to read Wendy's accounts and recognise not just the similarities in how the two birthdays were celebrated, but also in how she told the stories. Indeed, should the ten stories in Table 1 be detached from their authors and spread randomly on a table, there would be few difficulties in pairing them up again. Each author has a distinctive style, and in their accounts of the same annual event many continuities are apparent: Zandra's work and the relationship she has with her 'boss' (Lines 10, 1990; 11, 2002); Ben's appreciation of bottles of wine (Lines 13–14, 1990; 4–6, 2002); Alice's distant daughters (Lines 7–8, 1990; 2–3, 2002); and Hilda's use of her diary (Lines 1, 1990; 2, 2002). Perhaps the most basic and simple continuity is the salience of the date. The analysis has revealed that a birth date is not just part of our bureaucratic identity but also of our social, cultural and personal identities.

What can we learn about age-related change and shifting timescapes from this unique evidence? How do individual perspectives on life shift over time? To what extent are lives dictated by annual routines, and how are they transformed by intervening events? The most obvious changes revealed by the analysis were in the respondents' family and social networks. We all learn to live with, the fact that generations 'move on', that mortality assures that one generation succeeds another, but the impact of this experience of ageing has not been satisfactorily documented by social gerontology. Moreover, this process does not unfold in an orderly manner. Whilst age-specific mortality rates in the United Kingdom in the late 20th century were such that people had come to expect a 'full' life – three-score-and-ten years and more – the fact remains that Ben had to live with the loss of his eldest son (Lines 3–6, 1990), and Alice had to accept that seemingly through chance most of her friends were dead and only two still alive (Lines 12–18, 2002). Whilst the histories of most families might

conform to the normative sequence of births, marriages and deaths, Zandra was not the only M-O correspondent who had broken loose, engaged with a new partner and, in 2002, had a transformed relationship with the man who used to be her husband.

Age-related change is not only evident in the relationships of the family members who participated in celebrations, but also in the durations of friendships and acquaintanceships. The analysis has shown that birthdays provide a periodic opportunity for people to sustain long-term relationships, some of which might otherwise be abandoned through distance or neglect. Conversely, there is also evidence that more recently established friendships are made and consolidated through birthday celebrations (*e.g.* Hilda's 'new neighbours', Line 22, 2002). Although both directives raised issues of age, there were comparatively few comments about age as such. Asides such as Alice's 'ancient' (Line 6, 2002) and Hilda's guess that she might be the oldest in the room (Line 7, 1990) are exceptional. Some who recounted a decadal birthday expressed disbelief. Jane (J1890), for example, commented: 'I can't believe I am seventy and I didn't particularly want to be seventy. I used to think that seventy was really old but now that I have reached that age I realise that it isn't old at all!' (J1890). The fact that respondents were so ready to declare their chronological age and yet so rarely chose to elaborate, supports Nikander's (2002: 214) conclusion that '(are) quantified and mathematised descriptions of time ... used as a means of generalising the importance of age and of downplaying its personal significance'.

## Discussion

There are a number of ways of reading the M-O Archive stories. First, they can be read as – and interpreted as being written as – entertainment. Wendy, for example, offers a teasing comment about her mother 'making a thing' of her birthday (Lines 4–6, 1990), and Hilda delights in describing the present she received from her nephew (Lines 12–14, 1990). The writers attempted to construct engaging stories by selecting and combining those elements of their birthday experiences that they imagined might produce a knowing smile or laugh on the part of their readers. We can also read these stories as idealisations of family life. Several examples spring to mind. Alice, for example, had phone calls from 'all the children' in 1990 (Line 3) and she detailed their presents (Lines 6–11). In 2002 she again described how she 'got fussed' and claimed she 'always' had (Line 5). In this way, the writers extracted the positives of their birthday experiences, already

looking back, perhaps several months, and seeing the celebrations as evidence of what they value in their family lives.

Thirdly, the stories can be read as accounts of the 'lived world'. By focusing upon unfolding, on-going, lived-through accounts of how people react to and cope with life transformations and the day-to-day, year-by-year management of their personal, domestic and social lives, experience is a concept that can help develop research-based theories of ageing (Bytheway, 1996). This is echoed in Alasuutari's comment, quoted at the beginning of the paper, that 'all the time the human mind and body gather experience'. Through the M-O Archive, we are able to compare how people articulated their experience of their last birthday at two points in their lives nearly 12 years apart. Zandra, for example, wrote particularly vivid accounts of the events of the two days.

The aim of this analysis has been to compare equivalent stories told at two points of time. As for any periodically repeated event, with birthdays there are obvious similarities and continuities. At one and the same time, they are the same but different stories. Where the comparison of the two birthdays is not complicated by decadal celebrations or disruptive events, the material supports the conclusion that people tell the same type of story year on year. The analysis has also suggested that whereas some people use birthdays as an opportunity to tease the celebrants over their age, others use them to sustain family life, and in this way to deny, or at least resist, the implications of the celebrant growing even older. In this way we may celebrate collective continuity rather than individual change. As one generation succeeds another, family and social life rolls on, and each year there is a familiar calendar of celebratory events.

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