



## University of Brighton

### ***“So what do human rights mean to you?” A study of how older people think and talk about human rights***

The Older People and Human Rights Project, a small pilot study undertaken by the University of Brighton, set out to explore how older people think and talk about human rights. The study used a discussion group methodology and made comparisons between two groups of older people who self defined either as activist or non-activist.

#### **Background**

- Within the current interest in the dynamics of aging the research team wanted to explore what the concept of human rights meant to older people and the language that they used when talking about it.
- Society has changed towards a rights based rather than a needs based frame of understanding and has moved towards more consumerist approaches to care and services. The team was keen to find out whether older people feel comfortable with these shifts.
- Being aware of significant activism within the older people's movement the team also wished to consider any differences between how those who defined themselves as activist within older people's issues, and those who did not, understood and talked about human rights.

**Research  
Findings**

October 2008

## Methodology

The study worked with two groups of older people, activist and non-activist and met with each group three times over a period of two months between February and April 2008. Both groups covered the same subjects and the discussion was led in the same way in each group. The groups were encouraged to discuss what they would define as human rights and what they thought about human rights in the context of issues like; pensions and housing, care and health, technology and transport, empowerment and discrimination.

There were eleven participants in total in the two groups. They were self-selected through a snowballing technique and were all from the Brighton & Hove area. The activist group was mixed and the non-activist group all female. Their ages ranged from 69 – 85.

The participants were a highly articulate and literate sample who had all had independent working lives and were well connected within their lives through family or community. It was recognised that in a pilot study a wholly representative sample would be difficult to achieve and that this would have a bearing on the findings of the study.

## Analysis of the discussions

The discussions were analysed in two ways. A themed analysis under five areas and a reflection on potential areas for further work.

It became clear that there was some great agreement between the groups but also some differences which derived from the activist/non-activist split and from the different gender make up of each group.

## The five themed areas

### What do human rights encompass for older people?

Participants recognised two groups of human rights: those that were fundamental like freedom of speech, freedom from fear, freedom from hunger and suffering and the right to justice, and those that were conditional on other things like the right to a pension and the right to care.

There was significant recognition of the fact that some parts of the world did not have basic freedoms and both groups felt strongly about international and fundamental human rights.

Both groups felt they had a human right to be treated with dignity in older age and to be heard in their “*own*” voice not the voices of others speaking for them.

Both groups felt there was a human right to decide when to end their lives and particularly to have a right to die with dignity. “*if I’m of sound mind and I know it’s sort of coming I should have the right to say no I don’t want to be there not looked after properly*”

“*It should be a human right to decide when we want to end our lives*”

### What sort of language and concepts do older people use to talk about human rights?

#### Concepts

The following concepts were covered by both groups;

Dignity and the right to that in older age including the right to appropriate financial support. “*sufficient money to live in dignity in retirement*”

Fairness, manners and civility including a sense of common good and how an increasingly individualistic society

mitigates against this. *"we are living in a society which is growing terribly selfish"*

Entitlement and contribution, particularly contribution through taxation and as a citizen.

Nationhood and the conflicts between the laws of the land and the religious or community laws of particular groups within society.

### Language

The language of rights was more familiar to those with a background in democratic representational or legal roles or those involved in human rights or peace movement organisations.

Both groups had a strong sense of the language of fairness and balance and were comfortable with the language of freedom, caring and respect.

### Are human rights seen as conditional and what impact does the context have?

Both groups discussed the right to a certain level of material necessity for everyone in society but felt that age, opportunity and circumstance limited this. *"it all comes down to money"*

Both groups discussed the conflicts between group and individual rights. *"whose right is right"*

Both groups also discussed the conflicts that arise where people chose to operate outside the structures of law and society but still wish to claim rights in that society.

Both groups discussed other cultures and how the issue of terrorism, in particular, was changing what had always been seen as fundamental human rights. *"the human rights we once believed in that you don't lock people up without trial is actually being taken away from us"*

Both groups discussed the issue of how they are seen as older people; the images that are shown of them and the assumptions made. *"I think age goes against us... because you've got some wrinkles and grey hair and you've got a stoop you're immediately summed up"*

Both groups discussed the issue of manners and behaviour and the association for their generation with their upbringing. *"I knew my place"*

### Do boundaries get blurred between human, society and consumer rights?

The boundaries between society, human and citizen rights were considered by both groups. *"human rights are coloured very much nowadays by society and what society means"*

Age discrimination was seen as prevalent and affected them economically, in the allocation of health and other services and in how they were represented in the media. *"physical care is not catered for from the age of 70 and that seems to me to be a desertion of older people's rights"*

How decisions are made both politically and economically in this country was considered and in particular how the prioritising of services impacted on them. *"some things (operations) are more important in later life than earlier on because if I have to wait six months that six months is precious once you're 88"*

Both groups wished for equal treatment as older people and not to be seen as a different category of citizen. They also wished for a better recognition of the huge variety within the older age group.

## What is the specific perspective of older people?

In both groups a number of the participants saw themselves as experienced but did not always feel their experience was valued by others. *“they think you’ve done nothing and you know nothing”*

A number of participants expressed a wish to be more in control of the decisions and situations that affect them. To be able to speak for themselves and not be talked down to. *“there is a tendency to sort of pat you on the head and start treating you like a child”*

There was recognition in one group in particular that perceptions of them are sometimes based on how others feel about aging. *“they don’t want to face old age and so they’d rather sort of pretend we’re not there“*

Both groups discussed how identity can be lost in later life. *“you become invisible, that little person over there who needs things done for them”*

A number of participants in both groups were aware of the changing nature of society and family structure and the impact this had on the role and support of older people. *“when I think back to our elderly they were all sure in their mind that they would be looked after at home”*

A few of them felt strongly that some of their aspirations for the society they grew up in have not been met particularly the welfare state. *“is it working and are we in fact putting people into a situation in which they can’t live independently or have a decent life independently”*

The impact of the Second World War in particular was discussed by the non – activist group. Despite the devastation to many lives there was a sense for this group of the way the war experience empowered their generation, particularly

the women, and created resilience in them as people. *“the war was a hugely liberating experience for many because you had a job and were taken seriously”*

In discussing the language of age some felt the language associated with age positioned them in a negative way *“I’d rather always be called older than elderly”*

Whilst recognising that the technological advances in society created benefits for the broader society many of the participants felt they often disadvantaged their generation.

In particular some of the non activist group felt that as a generation they were more accepting of authority and more uncomfortable with claiming rights than the younger generations. *“I think the older age group don’t find it easy to make assumptions about what is due to them”*

## Differences between the two groups

The life and work experience between the groups varied. The activist group had been more involved in democratically elected, legal or public roles and the non –activist group more in care, support, business and teaching.

The language of human rights was more familiar to the activist group. The non-activist group felt strongly that the language of human rights had become debased and was seen more as a language of complaint than rights.

Only the activist group specifically discussed the concept of nationhood and the cosmopolitan nature of the country.

The non-activist group discussed more issues to do with equality and being women including workplace rights, access to health care, family structure change and the impact of the war on women’s lives.

The non-activist group described their generation as “*pioneering pensioners*” in the same way that the suffragettes pioneered to change the view and rights of women. *“but when government wasn’t listening to them then they started to become more active and I think this is what is happening now perhaps with older people”*

### The participants experience

The participants particularly valued the opportunity to discuss an interesting and topical subject and to be able to voice their views openly.

They valued being with their peer group because of shared history and understanding. *“we’re on a similar wavelength”*

They found the discussion group format different to other forums or groups they attended. *“talking openly like that is not generally what groups do”*

Most of them felt the discussion made them more aware of human rights.

Strong feelings and opinions were expressed in parts of both groups’ discussions. Most felt that being able to express how they felt was positive and made them think about their own opinions more *“it felt alive”*

All of them felt that such discussion groups were of benefit to older people *“makes you feel you are still part of the world and can produce views and air your thoughts”*

All of them valued being asked their opinion and felt that older people are generally not asked about or expected to be engaged with current affairs. *“it’s nice when someone takes an interest in what you’re talking about and takes you seriously”*

Some also felt that older people can get set in their thoughts and such discussions *“shake you up a bit”*

Most felt that stimulating discussion was good for keeping them active mentally and that *“use it or lose it”* applied to mental capacity as well as physical.

---

### Reflections on the process

This was a small pilot study in which we wanted to understand whether the discussion group idea was a helpful way of understanding how older people think and talk about human rights. We were also interested in the value of doing any further work and in analysing the discussions felt there were four issues that could be explored further.

- Whether deliberative open ended forums and discussions of this kind are useful in enabling older people to find their own voice and to take an active part in thinking about and formulating their own ideas on current issues in society. *“older people should be entitled and enabled to talk about things that are current in the world”*
- Whether the focus of the active ageing agenda around the bio medical/bio mechanical processes of aging means that those processes that can provide mental and intellectual stimulation and keep the mind alive are given less importance. *“I don’t think you’re ever too old to learn”*

- How the language of human rights has been adopted within society to the point where it is seen increasingly as the language of dissatisfaction and legal redress and less as a language of positivity and inclusion. *“it’s become a sort of generic term for displeasure”*
- How not to lose the voice of the current older generation and to find a way to listen to and value what they have experienced and what others can learn from that. *“you know we’re kind of tough and independent on the whole and don’t ask for things”*

*“the younger age group don’t seem to have that same kind of self reliability I think it’s maybe to do with the war and society the way it used to be”*

---

### Research Team contact details

**Professor Marian Barnes**

Telephone : 01273 643960  
E-mail : marian.barnes@brighton.ac.uk

**Naomi Smith, Research Fellow**

Telephone : 01273 644530  
E-mail : nms4@brighton.ac.uk

**Professor Paul Stenner**

Telephone : 01273 643867  
E-mail : p.stenner@brighton.ac.uk

**Postal address;**

Health and Social Policy Research Centre, University of Brighton, Mayfield House,  
Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9PH