

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Origins of Understanding Society

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Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a new household panel survey motivated by the success of longitudinal studies in the UK, and funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) with co-funding from UK government departments. The UK has a diverse and rich portfolio of longitudinal studies including the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), based on 5,500 households, which ran for eighteen years from 1991 and is the predecessor of *Understanding Society*. The BHPS continues to be a widely used dataset in the UK and internationally, but as the panel matured it was recognised there was a need to look to the future of longitudinal data resources for the coming decades in the UK. The ESRC and the wider academic community saw this as a strategic priority to meet the emerging data needs of the social science and policy-making communities. The ESRC were successful in establishing funding for a new study which would incorporate the existing BHPS sample but with an expanded and ambitious scientific research agenda. What follows is a short description of the study's development to date to provide the background for the papers included in this special section.

In July 2005, the ESRC submitted a pivotal bid to the UK Government's Large Facilities Capital Fund, which typically funds key infrastructural investments across the natural sciences. The success of this bid represented a sea change in funding mechanisms for the social sciences, with the growing recognition that large data sets are the key infrastructural investments for the social sciences, equivalent to laboratories for the natural sciences such as the Large Hadron Collider facility in Geneva. The bid sought funding for a new and much

larger household panel study, following a consultation report carried out by *Longview*, which recommended renewal and major expansion of the BHPS (Martin et al 2004). In May 2006, the then Office for Science and Information agreed funding for the new household panel study.

The new UK household longitudinal study (UKHLS), which became known as *Understanding Society*, was to have the following features:

- A longitudinal survey, with at least a 20 year life, of a cross-section of UK households
- A sample size of 40,000 households
- Innovative methods and types of data collection
- A resource facilitating research on a wide variety of issues, involving not just traditional social science but linking to medical and environmental sciences
- Data collection starting in 2008

Four 'expert studies' were commissioned to address distinctive aspects of the study design:

- The transition from BHPS into the UKHLS
- Integrating ethnic minority research within the design of the UKHLS
- Sample design, innovation and new methods of data collection
- Collection of biomarkers in the UKHLS

These features make possible the expanded and ambitious scientific research agenda mentioned above. This includes research possibilities enabled by the main survey design including its large sample size, longitudinal nature, household structure and high frequency interviewing schedule; research facilitated by the collection of biomarkers, enabling

links between biological and social research; the inclusion of the BHPS sample with 18 previous waves, especially for health research (the BHPS respondents are part of the biomarkers survey sample and will be linked to hospital records and health registers); new ethnicity research based on the ethnic minority boost and the extra interview time for questions relevant for such research; methodological research in areas such as response and measurement in mixed mode surveys; and the possibilities for cross-national comparative research. The *Understanding Society* team are committed to contributing the data to international data harmonisation efforts, especially for the Cross-National Equivalence File

(<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/research/centers-programs/german-panel/cnef.cfm>)

and supporting cross-national comparability between *Understanding Society*, the U.S. Panel Study of Income Dynamics and the German Socio-Economic Panel. A capacity for policy analysis will also be developed by incorporating *Understanding Society* data into the EUROMOD

(www.iser.essex.ac.uk/euromod) cross-national tax and benefit simulation model – this will provide researchers with the ability to estimate policy impacts under different scenarios.

The paper in this issue on ‘*Understanding Society: Design Overview*’ by Buck and McFall sets out in detail the main features of the design of *Understanding Society* that reflect its scientific rationale and how it can be exploited to generate major innovations in scientific research. From its inception, *Understanding Society* was conceived as a multi-topic, bio-social survey suitable for analysis across a range of disciplines, and designed to facilitate inter-disciplinary research within and beyond the social sciences. The aim was to provide breadth of content and high quality longitudinal data to meet research and policy needs over the coming decades.

One of the key elements for the new study is its sample size, as it was recognised that a larger sample size than was available in the BHPS would enable a broader range of analysis and finer-grained analysis of sub-groups within the population. The BHPS initially sampled some 5,500 households containing over 10,000 members. These households were augmented by Scotland and Wales booster samples in 1999 and a Northern Ireland booster sample in 2001, so that in 2009, almost 14,500

adults and 1,222 youth aged 11-16 years were interviewed. The total achieved sample for *Understanding Society* was set at 40,000 households, with an estimated 100,000 household members, and includes the existing sample of BHPS households to enable this long-running sample to continue as part of the new study. Some examples of the size of sub-groups of the general population sample (see Buck and McFall, this issue) are over 6,600 adults aged 70 years and older; almost 6,600 unmarried cohabiting partners; 3,700 self-employed individuals; and 4,650 adults with asthma.

The papers in this special section were written before the release of the *Understanding Society* Mainstage Wave 1 data, and several are based on the first year’s data for the general population sample. Jenkins and Taylor’s paper combines data from the BHPS (before it became incorporated into *Understanding Society*) with the first year’s data, to examine non-employment rates by age over the economic cycle. They show that from 1991-2009, non-employment rates have changed most for the youngest and oldest age groups. Their paper exemplifies how data from the two surveys may be combined – in future, researchers will be able to document trends over more than 20 years in outcomes such as labour market behaviour. The large sample size of *Understanding Society* enables an examination of recent trends for subgroups of the population in greater detail than was possible hitherto. As the sample covers the full age range, the study complements age-focused cohort studies in the UK and provides a unique look at behaviours and transitions in mid-life. The study also adds to the cohort studies by sampling adults currently over 65 years, (65 being the present age of the cohort in the Medical Research Council’s National Survey of Health and Development), and complements the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. Moreover the large sample size means that cohorts within *Understanding Society* can be analysed at a common point in time.

The household focus of the design allows analysis of all members of the household and their interactions. Two papers in this special section provide examples of such analyses. The first, by Booker and Sacker, examines well-being within families when other family members have a limiting long-term illness. They find that the effect of limiting illness of one family member on the well-being of other family members depends on their

age and relationship to the sick individual. For example, well-being was maintained by adult children of an older parent with limiting illness and by older parents of an adult child with limiting illness, but not by partners or younger children of a sick parent.

The second paper, by Meadows and Arber, examines sleep maintenance among older and younger partners and also finds differences by age. *Understanding Society* includes several questions on sleep quality and quantity from which the authors focus on self-reported nocturnal awakenings. Using multi-level models, Meadows and Arber illustrate how both younger and older women had more difficulties with sleep maintenance than their male partners. For both men and women, poor sleep maintenance was associated with poor health, own unemployment, dissatisfaction with income, having had a previous cohabiting relationship and having younger children. Further understanding of the dynamic relationships of health, behaviour and affect between family members, suggested by the analyses in these two papers, will be revealed through longitudinal analysis as *Understanding Society* matures.

A further focus is on ethnic minority research and the study includes an over-sample of ethnic minority groups to facilitate the analysis of within-group and between-group differences as well as comparisons with the general population in the UK. This provides the first longitudinal panel data for ethnic minority research in the UK. The paper by Nandi and Platt describes the process of development of a series of new ethnic identity questions, designed specifically for inclusion in *Understanding Society*. They explain the rationale for the development of the ethnic identity questions and the process by which the final set of questions was arrived at. In due course, this careful generation of effective and appropriate measures of ethnic identity will allow researchers to investigate mechanisms underlying changes in identity and its development across the lifecourse.

Children in *Understanding Society* households are interviewed as part of the main survey once they reach the age of 16, but there is also a special survey of household members aged 10-15 included in *Understanding Society*. The Youth Panel receive a self-completion questionnaire which is designed to measure key features of young people's behaviour,

interests and attitudes in a format likely to appeal to this age group. One of these features is the use of emoticons (figures such as smiley, neutral and sad faces to represent emotions) to capture feelings of happiness about different aspects of their life. Wolke and Skew use these data in their analysis of bullying victimisation and well-being during adolescence. Sibling bullying was widespread, with half of youth with siblings involved in bullying each other. Reports of bullying at school were much lower, with around 12 percent being victims of bullying. Both bullies and victims at home and those victimized at school were at increased risk for behaviour problems and were significantly less happy. Sibling bullying was related to having brothers and a greater number of siblings, and to less or negative parental involvement. School bullying was more likely among those growing up in materially deprived homes and among those who were bullied by their siblings. A research question awaiting further waves of *Understanding Society* is whether a legacy of bullying experiences is detrimental for adult well-being, independent of the material disadvantage which also tends to track into adulthood.

Finally, ensuring the study is supported by a programme of methodological research, to inform the survey development and to contribute to longitudinal survey methodology in general, is a key feature of the scientific research programme. The study includes an Innovation Panel of 1500 households for methodological research and testing which is a resource for survey practitioners and methodologists. In his paper, Uhrig presents results on an investigation of bias in self-reported height and bodyweight using the first two waves of the Innovation Panel. A major strength of this paper is that it used an experimental design to test ideas on panel conditioning. He examined whether the sensitivity of survey questions affected the tendency to give socially desirable responses over time. Uhrig found that because height and weight questions may cause embarrassment when posed, respondents are motivated to misreport their body size in cross-sectional studies, but this motivation dissipates when they are asked again in a longitudinal study. Although the effects of obesity on employment should be affected by biases in self-reported height and bodyweight, the results did not support this hypothesis. Although one cannot extrapolate from a single finding, this null finding

adds to the body of knowledge for researchers who have reservations about the collection of self-reported anthropometrics in surveys.

The Innovation Panel is a resource not only for its scientific team but also for the wider academic community to carry out methodological research. Calls for proposals for methodological studies are issued each year, with the next one on wave 6 due to be published in spring 2012. Interested readers should consult

<http://www.understandingsociety.org.uk/design/innovation/content.aspx>.

Perhaps most innovatively for a household panel survey of its kind, is the inclusion of a wide range of bio-markers and health indicators to ensure the study meets its inter-disciplinary objectives. This opens up exciting prospects for advances at the interface between social science and biomedical research, providing an opportunity to assess exposure and antecedent factors of health status in the context of household and socio-economic effects. In addition to the survey data collection, *Understanding Society* is undertaking an extensive programme of data linkage to administrative sources including geo-coded data, health, education, and pension and state benefit records. These data will provide significant new areas for analysis where the rich, contextual social survey data can be used in combination with administrative data.

The pace of development has been rapid. Wave 1 of the Innovation Panel was fielded in January 2008 and four waves of annual data collection have been carried out. Wave 1 of the main study began in January 2009 and was completed at the end of

2010. Data from the first half of Wave 1, covering interviews during 2009 are now available from the UK Data Archive. Waves 2 and 3 are currently in the field and Wave 4 goes into the field in January 2012. Supplementary funding from the Large Facilities Capital Fund has enabled the planned extension to a truly biosocial survey through the collection of biomarkers and cognitive measures, initially by nurse interviewers and to be supplemented by survey interviewers for more limited content. An innovative approach to increasing the depth of information covered has involved careful planning of the 'cycling' of some questions at intervals of two to four years. The pace of development continues and innovation remains a key priority.

The papers in this special section inevitably contribute more to study of the life course than to longitudinal analysis, since data are currently only available from half of the first wave. As the waves of data collected increase, *Understanding Society* will prove to be a major and important study both nationally and internationally. Its size, scope and interdisciplinary nature make it an invaluable resource and its value will increase over the years to come. It is truly a capital investment for the social and biomedical sciences that will appreciate in value. Its success so far, and continued promise, is attributable to the commitment of the scientific community to maintain the critical longitudinal data resources needed to further deepen our understanding of social change.

For further information about the design and content of *Understanding Society* see:

www.understandingsociety.org.uk

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