UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY: CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING FORWARD

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LOOKING AHEAD

By Stephanie L. McFall
The Editor has the fortunate task of appreciating the work of others and getting to suggest some additional directions for research. The set of chapters included in this volume is of varied types, in addition to showing the independent perspectives of the authors. There are three types of chapters – overview chapters about the overall study of Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, chapters that define measures and research opportunities related to major domains of research such as work, and application chapters about specific research question. The overview chapters, written by researchers active in each field, endow their summary of available measures with a sense of their future research contributions. They alert users to the expanding opportunities in these domains. The application articles were not meant to pre-empt enquiry related to their topics, but to raise expectations with what can be done now with more complex cross-sectional analyses and, in particular, with longitudinal research.

OVERVIEWS OF UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY

The opening chapter (Broadfoot, Buck) reminds us of the major investments that has been made in Understanding Society to produce a panel study sufficiently large, varied in sample characteristics and content, and innovative in methodological approach to support investigations into the nature of UK society for many years to come. Some of the trends shaping the research agenda of Understanding Society include the ageing of society; the effects of immigration and ethnic diversity; changes in family and work life; and the conflicting movements toward European centralisation, regionalisation, and devolution. The research applications presented in this volume are relevant to the research agenda described by Buck, but only begin their exploration.

Changing family and household contexts are an important part of the Understanding Society research agenda

I anticipate that users of the data will find themselves frequently referring to the description of the study design, data collection methods, and content plan contained in the design overview by Burton, Laurie and Lynn (Appendix). Their initial presentation of the response outcomes will be useful to those planning to use the data. They also demonstrate that the characteristics of the sample are broadly comparable to the Labour Force Survey for the same period. The process of examining such benchmarks of survey quality will be ongoing.

Methodological research on longitudinal surveys is underdeveloped relative to what is known about cross-sectional surveys. The importance of developing this knowledge base is reflected in the research agenda for Understanding Society and in the investment in a methodological testbed called the Innovation Panel (IP). Uhrig describes the design and operation of the Innovation Panel, which supports research into the best ways of asking questions and conducting fieldwork operations for longitudinal household surveys. While not all studies using the Innovation Panel are experimental, it is a major capability of the IP. He presents two case study experiments related to the complex measurement of household consumption and decisions about the format of materials to communicate with study participants. It is interesting that in each case the decision derived from the study integrated the study results with considerations of resources.

FAMILY RELATIONS AND THE LIVES OF YOUTH

Changing family and household contexts are an important part of the Understanding Society research agenda, integral to its design and long-term content. Ermisch, Iacovou and Skew introduced current and future measures that have been widely used in research on family relationships. Their illustrative analyses focus on satisfaction with relationships and bring together the perspectives of household members with different roles – male and female partners and parents and children.

Two application chapters focus on the well-being of young people in relation to lack of material resources and in response to repeated negative interactions or bullying. Not being able to do things expected in life, like getting together with friends socially, has been viewed as closer to the experience of deprivation than lack of money alone. Following that, measures of material deprivation viewed relevant to children have been developed. Knies asks if the overall life satisfaction of children aged 10–15 is related to measures of material deprivation of children. This analysis found that life satisfaction is associated with overall financial resources and with family relationships, notably presence of siblings, but not to the childhood material deprivation measures.

Wolke and Skew use novel data from the Youth Questionnaire to show adverse effects of bullying on life satisfaction and a measure of behavioural problems, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. A great deal of research on bullying has focused on organised settings like schools. However, this chapter reports on the heightened problems experienced by children of this age when bullied within both schools and homes (by siblings).
WORK AND INCOME

Understanding Society’s research agenda also has a major focus on economic productivity, employment, unemployment and the experience of work. Bryan provides an overview of measures important to labour market research. For a research illustration he chose the association of work-related measures to two summary measures of sleep; perceived quality and duration. This research shows complex interplay between objective and subjective aspects of work and home life, which vary by gender.

Taylor made use of the overlap of the recession of 2009 with the period of data collection for Wave 1, Year 1 of Understanding Society. In this chapter he identifies groups that were among the bigger losers in the recession in relation to having employment. Groups that were more affected were the young, those with lower education levels, single rather than partnered people, lone parents, and those working in construction, wholesale and retail and hospitality industries. He also examined more subjective outcomes of financial well-being (finding it difficult to get by) and expectations for the future.

Berthoud’s chapter on Income and Economic Well-Being is grouped with this section because earnings are a major component of income. Income is frequently the focus of policy and basic research. It is even more frequently employed as a variable explaining access to other desirable states. Berthoud introduces potential users of Understanding Society to basic process in the collection and derivation of such variables as total household income and poverty. Perhaps because of the centrality of income in social and economic research, it is rare for such an experienced analyst to lead potential users of the data through the underlying decisions in data collection and computation of measures. Research using these measures from this study is at its beginning. The rough correspondence to the family resources survey should be encouraging to potential users. They should also welcome planned value-added developments related to income and other financial resources.

HEALTH STATUS AND SLEEP

Relative to the British Household Panel Study, Understanding Society has an expanded focus on health. Booker and Sacker provide an overview of measures of health included in the early waves of the study. They also describe the research potential for planned linkage of administrative health records to the Understanding Society survey data and the collection of bio-measures. As a research illustration, they take up the question of impairments and employment of persons aged 60–69. Various policy proposals have considered mechanisms to encourage people to stay in the labour market to older ages. Their analysis suggests that the magnitude of the group to stay employed may be smaller than imagined based on health limitations of the group. Arber and Meadows introduce a novel set of measures of sleep and sleep problems. Understanding Society will be the first longitudinal study to have both varied indicators of sleep and wide-ranging health and socio-economic variables. Their findings on sleep associations with sociodemographic characteristics will be interesting to explore to trace interconnections with health and major social variables. Their chief contribution is to show that persons with lower social resources – lower educational qualifications and social class – are disadvantaged with respect to sleep. Future research should deepen our understanding of the determinants and consequences of what happens in a segment of life in which all engage but do not all equally enjoy.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION, LOCAL ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOURS

The Understanding Society research agenda includes a focus on connections to place and social participation. Buck and Rabe summarise measures relevant to research about local environments and social networks. There is growing interest in the use of multi-level models to explore the unique and joint influences of local environments and individual level characteristics. Their illustrative research includes the first application of geo-coded data to the Understanding Society survey data. There is a growing amount of aggregate and area level information, and analysts will be able to link it via various UK geographies. Buck and Rabe contrast the social and demographic characteristics of neighbourhoods that are highest and lowest in amount of ‘green space’. They also examine multiple indicators of social cohesion for varying environmental units.

Social cohesion and social participation is the topic of the application chapter by Ferragina, Tomlinson and Walker. They present a theoretical model of participation that combines indicators of social cohesion and consumption, arguing that the inability to afford a certain level of consumption excludes people from full participation. Participation has long been an important sociological concept. Their model shows that Understanding Society will be a rich source of data for novel theoretical explorations.
The overview chapter by Lynn and Longhi on environmental attitudes and behaviours summarises novel measures among the puzzle pieces needed to address policy questions about the environment and sustainability. Like Arber and Meadows’ chapter on sleep, these analyses of environmental attitudes and behaviours illustrate the capacity of Understanding Society to link objective and subjective perspectives on important areas of life.

LOOKING AHEAD

This volume is based on data collected in 2009, the first year and wave of Understanding Society from the new general population sample. The research agenda related to ethnic diversity was not addressed and awaits the release of data from the ethnic minority boost sample. The capability to compare and contrast the experiences of major ethnic minority groups will be a much anticipated development.

The overview chapters – environmental behaviours, family relations, health, work, and local environments – placed the survey’s contents in the context of prior research in these areas. Since each also noted the important contributions that will come with additional waves of the study, I refer those planning their future research to the individual chapters.

The social sciences in the UK are justifiably conscious of the legacy and prospects of longitudinal surveys. The design of Understanding Society is intended to support an important and varied research agenda. This volume is the introduction to the important contributions expected from this investment in the social sciences.