Factors affecting participation in Understanding Society:

Qualitative study with panel members

Martin Mitchell, Debbie Collins and Ashley Brown
NatCen Social Research

Non-technical Summary

This report presents findings and recommendations from a qualitative study involving 45 members of the public who participated in Understanding Society to varying extents over the first four waves of the study. The purpose of this study was to identify practical and effective actions to reduce attrition. The purposive sample included a mix of (a) respondents who had taken part consistently, year-on-year in Understanding Society (b) people who had dropped in and out and (c) people who had been deemed to have refused to continue. Particular attention was given to including people from groups known to have higher attrition rates: young people, ethnic minorities, and people in households that have moved or split.

The research was conducted and prepared by experienced qualitative NatCen researchers not connected with Understanding Society itself to ensure independence and the study was funded by NatCen.

Communications
Many participants are primarily motivated to continue taking part by having a positive experience of the survey itself and a belief that Understanding Society is useful to society. But now that the study has been running for four waves, they are calling for concrete evidence that their contributions do have real value. There is an opportunity to build in such evidence into the various communications as part of the root and branch review of materials now underway.

Incentives
Lapsed participants are more motivated by tangible incentives than continuing respondents. The latter primarily see the incentive as a *"nice-to-have thank you"*.

Participant-centred planning of interviews
Some participants did not consciously refuse to take part ever again but rather refused to participate at that moment in time; a time when their circumstances were such that it really wasn't a good time in their life to be taking part. Additionally, some expressed the view that a face to face interview was difficult to schedule and that an alternative mode of carrying out the interview would provide greater flexibility in terms of when they could take part. The interviewer is an important factor in the experience and decision to participate for some panel members.

Gatekeepers
In some cases there is a household gatekeeper who takes it upon him or herself to decide whether others will or won't take part, despite interviewers' best efforts. This can create two issues: people who have been "volunteered" can feel unmotivated and refuse in due course, and some proxy refusals may in fact have been willing to take part.

Features of the study
The length of the interview is viewed as a problem by some participants, particularly: where English is not a first language; when participants had not reckoned on such a long time commitment; and where they might have been reluctant if they had known how long it would be. This is exacerbated when people see some of the content as intrusive, burdensome, and repetitive.

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Abstract:

This report presents findings and recommendations from a qualitative study involving 45 members of the public who participated in Understanding Society to varying extents over the first four waves of the study. The purpose of the study was to identify practical and effective actions to reduce attrition. Particular attention was given to including those from groups known to have higher attrition rates: young people, ethnic minorities, and people in households that have moved or split. The report identifies a number of factors affecting participation which include communications, incentives, interaction with the interviewer, circumstances at the time of the interview, and others.

Contents

1. Background, aims and methods

1.1 Background

Understanding Society is a large, longitudinal survey following the lives of individuals living in private households in the UK. The survey started in 2009 and includes three different samples: a main, general population sample; an ethnic minority boost sample; and the former British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) sample.

Adults aged 16 years and over are asked to take part in an annual individual interview, which for waves 1-5 was face-to-face, and to complete a self completion questionnaire (which was completed on paper in waves 1 and 2, and moved to Computer Assisted Self Interview (CASI) from wave 3). In addition, household level information is collected from one adult in the household. Some information about children (aged 0-15 years) is collected by proxy from a parent, with young people aged 10-15 years being asked to fill in a paper self-completion questionnaire. In addition, there have been some additional data collection activities added on to the survey: wave 3 included interviewer-administered cognitive function tests, and wave 2 and the first year of wave 3 involved a follow up nurse visit to collect a number of anthropometric and physiological measurements.

1.2 Aims

The level of panel attrition on Understanding Society is higher than anticipated and this is a real cause for concern among everyone involved in the study. As part of a package of self-funded work NatCen, in agreement with ISER, undertook a qualitative piece of work during the summer of 2012 to explore:
- what motivates participation in Understanding Society, including the role of the monetary incentive;
- why people drop out of the survey;
- the role of other members of the household in influencing individual participation;
- barriers to continuing participation for higher attrition groups - ethnic minorities, young people aged 16-24, and people who had 'split' away from others in their household).
- the role of the interviewer and interviewer strategies in maintaining participation;
- the role of the questionnaire in engaging participants - length, mode, content, order and flow, and frequency of interview; and
- the role and effectiveness of communications (letters, leaflets, website) in maintaining co-operation and participation.

1.3 Methodology

This entirely qualitative study involved face-to-face and telephone depth interviews, and one group discussion[1], with three types of Understanding Society sample member:
- **Continuous** participants – those taking part in waves two and three or waves two, three and four of the survey[2];

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[1] Originally we planned to conduct three focus groups but due to the geographical spread of the available sample individual telephone interviews were undertaken instead.

- **Intermittent** participants– those who had taken part in two out of three of the last three waves;
- **Refusers** – those who were considered to have refused to take part in at least two waves.

A topic guide, tailored to the three different sample groups and in addition to young people aged 16-24, focused on the research aims set out in section 1.2. Fieldwork was undertaken during the summer of 2012 by experienced NatCen qualitative researchers, who were not part of the NatCen Understanding Society team. Interviews lasted between 20-50 minutes: the focus group lasted an hour-and-a-half. Interviews were recorded, with participants' consent and summarised into an analytical framework by the interviewer subsequently reviewing the recording. A thematic analysis was undertaken by members of this study's research team and this report is based on findings from this analysis.

1.4 Who we spoke to

In total 45 people took part in the study, all members of the Understanding Society general population sample. In addition to the continuous, intermittent and refuser groups discussed above, specific emphasis was placed on the recruitment of groups with higher attrition rates. The number of interviews undertaken within each type of Understanding Society panel member is shown in Table 1.1. Within each participant category interviews were carried out with a diverse range of panel members in terms of their sex, ethnicity, size of household, relationship in the household to the person who completes the household part of the survey and whether households had split or not since the previous wave.

Table 1.1	Interviews achieved with different types of panel member			
	Total	**BME**	**Young People (16-25)**	**Mover/ splitters**
Continuous	20	6	7	7
Intermittent	13	9	2	2
Refusers	12	3	3	2
Total	**45**	**18**	**11**	**11**

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[2] We recruited continuous respondents whose last Understanding Society interview took place in January-March 2012. These included both wave 4 (year 1) and wave 3 (year 2) participants.

2. Findings

2.1 Factors affecting participation

Perhaps unsurprisingly, no single factor was found to drive participation in the study. Different issues combined to influence individual decisions to take part or not. These comprised:

- the effectiveness of survey communication;
- personal reward;
- the interviewer;
- personal circumstances;
- household dynamics; and
- structural features of the survey.

The remainder of this section discusses each of these factors in turn, outlining how each of them either supported or undermined participation. Appendix A includes a detailed table which shows how each issue played out for the three types of participant in this study (continuous, intermittent and refuser) and also draws out specific issues for panel members from ethnic minorities, younger participants and those who had moved or split from their original household.

2.1.1 Effectiveness of communication

The main means of communication about the purpose of the survey and what it involves is the advance letter, which is sent to each individual (continuous and intermittent) sample member aged 16 years and over each year, before the interviewer visits. At the time of this research interviewers had a range of documents available that they could give to panel members as required, including a short A5 flyer and an A5 information booklet covering frequently asked questions (normally for new entrants). All documents included a link to the participants' website, where more information was available about the study. There had been several inter-wave mailings, which contained some findings: after Wave 2 year 2 and Wave 3 year 1, when a "summary of the First Findings" report was sent to the person who completed the household questionnaire, with all other adults being sent a letter. Earlier mailings, containing more limited findings, were sent to individuals after wave one and wave two, year one. The wave two year one mailings contained tailored findings for young people, older people, workers, ethnic minorities, the BHPS sample and a generic report for everyone else.

We found different levels of understanding of the purpose of the survey and commitment to its aims among participants. As one might have expected, understanding and commitment were higher among continuing participants. Commitment was built on two pillars: a belief that by taking part in the study they were contributing to a better understanding of society which in turn might be used to effect change; and an understanding of the value of research based on personal experience. There was also more commitment to the survey where participants thought that it was an opportunity to have their views heard or represent 'people like them'. This perspective was especially recurrent among BME participants. By contrast, intermittent and refuser participants had less of an understanding of the aims of the survey despite

having received written information and interviewer explanations, and saw the survey as less important to them personally.

Understanding the purpose and value of the study

There was limited understanding across the whole sample that panel members were special; that if they did not continue with the survey they could not be replaced by someone else. Even among continuous participants there was inconsistent appreciation of their uniqueness to the study. Moreover, there was sometimes a view that if one individual dropped out it would not make a difference in such a big survey. This perspective was what actually undermined continued participation for other participants:

'Must be a big thing, one person isn't going to make much dent or damage' (Adult intermittent).

Amongst intermittent participants and refusers there was certainly an inadequate understanding of the aims and potential value of Understanding Society and of the importance their continued individual contribution could make to the bigger picture. For example, one participant said:

'If I knew what the survey was about it would encourage me more to participate (Adult refuser)

Providing information about **the findings of the study** encouraged some participants to continue to take part. Those who recalled seeing a leaflet or booklet of findings sent between waves, or who had gone to the study website to view findings online, said that it allowed them to see where they 'stood' in relation to others. It also helped them clarify the ways in which their contributions were being used and made them feel that what they had said was valuable. For example, a participant who had received the booklet of findings from the survey said:

'[It was] very, very helpful because it showed how the information was actually used in areas of healthcare or other areas of society. .. It made me feel I was contributing in a useful way that was going to help society (Adult intermittent).

A notable change in emphasis, however, was that some participants now also wanted information on **how the findings were having an impact** or had made a difference to policies and political decision-making. There was evidence to suggest that in the absence of this information, or memory of it, some participants were now starting to doubt the impact and value of the study and in turn whether they would continue to take part in future. There was also a need for a variety of information formats to satisfy those who want more or less detail, on paper and on the web.

The following recommendations were made based on these findings.

Understanding of what the interview covers

There was a desire for more information about the content of the survey in broad terms. The desire for more information about the **survey's content** was voiced by all types of participants for two key reasons.

Advance knowledge would have prepared some participants for talking about what were perceived as 'intrusive' topics such as finances and personal relationships. Despite being aware that they did not have to answer if they did not want to, intermittent participants and refusers felt that being alerted in advance that these topics would come-up during the interview would have led to more continuous participation.

Similarly, prior knowledge of the content would have allowed some participants to prepare better. It was frustrating to some participants that they had to respond to factual information (e.g. financial information) on the spot. They felt that if they could have gathered this information and documentation together before the interview it would have helped them in giving more accurate answers. They wanted to be prepared, as this could save time.

Of course there is a risk that in providing panel members with prior information about the interview content this could encourage people to drop out rather than encourage participation. Care therefore needs to be taken in providing the right level of detail. The following recommendation was made based on these findings.

2.1.2 Personal reward

At the time this research was carried out all issued existing face-to-face panel members in Great Britain received an unconditional £10 voucher in their advance

mailing. In Northern Ireland, only previous-wave productive individuals and rising-16s (those eligible for their first adult interview) received the £10 incentive in advance of their interview. Members of the main Understanding Society sample received a Post Office voucher redeemed for cash. For BHPS sample members this was a 'Love2Shop' gift voucher, which could be spent in a number of High Street stores. New entrants to the study and those who did not receive their advance mailing for whatever reason were posted a £10 voucher after completing a productive interview. Those aged 10-15 who completed and returned a paper self-completion received a £5 voucher.

This study found that an important driver of participation for panel members was the perceived personal gain or reward from participating in the study. Such rewards were discussed in two ways. First, the monetary incentives (described above) were for some a key determinant of participation. Second, there emerged a range of other 'rewards' that panel members perceived as being important in securing their participation (crucially how enjoyable it was to take part).

The importance of the **monetary incentives** varied according to participants' understanding of the aims and the purpose of the survey and its perceived value to them personally. For participants who believed in the value of the survey, the monetary incentive was of secondary importance. It did help in initially encouraging people to take but its importance diminished over time and was seen more as a 'bonus', a 'nice gesture' or a 'thank you' for their time. However participants who did not see the value of the survey said that they had mainly or only initially taken part because of the monetary incentive; in some of these cases panel members dropped out because the current level of the monetary reward by itself was not sufficient for them to continue.   A recurring view was that participants felt more valued when they received more 'liquid' incentives, such as postal orders rather than high street vouchers, because it allowed them to spend the money more widely.

It's clear that **participation itself is a sufficiently motivating factor** for some panel members. The opportunity afforded by the survey to 'take stock' of one's circumstances and to 'think about the value of life' were mentioned by some as important reasons for continuing to participate in the survey. The nurse interview was also regarded by some as useful in providing important and useful information about the participant's health. This even extended to the cognitive tests, which were seen by some as offering fun and novel experiences. However this was by no means a universal view and some participants were wary of those tests and unsure about how they related to measuring change in society. They also added to the length of the interview.

An area therefore where some participants thought further encouragement to continue participating could be made was in promoting the personal benefits and positive aspects of participation alongside monetary rewards. The following recommendations were made based on these findings.

2.1.3 The interaction with the interviewer

As mentioned in section 1, the interviewer's task is to enumerate the number of people living at the address, interview each adult (aged 16 and over), ensure adults and young people aged 10-15 complete the self completion questionnaire, and collect some household level information from a responsible adult. At the time this research was undertaken interviewers were provided with information (where available) about the time of the previous interview and which call patterns worked best for getting hold of the panel member. Interviewers were instructed to make initial contact face-to-face, although subsequent contact could be by telephone, if the sample member had requested this. The interviewer might return to the household on a number of occasions during each wave to ensure that all interviews are completed and self-completions collected.

Interviewers play an important role, being the 'face' of the survey, and are an important ingredient in its success. This study found that overall interviewers were thought of very highly and were very good at carrying out the procedural parts of the survey. They were variously described as *"professional"*, *"polite"* and *"friendly"*, had put participants at their ease and encouraged them to continue with the survey. And there was clear evidence to suggest that the interaction with the interviewer had an important role to play for some in their decision about whether to continue to take part in the survey. Three issues in particular emerged as important here: interviewer continuity, the interviewer's style and interviewer responsiveness to respondent circumstances.

Among **Refusers** the interviewer was not the (main) reason for withdrawing co-operation. Rather drop out was related to changes in personal circumstances, features of the survey (length, topic sensitivity) and lack of commitment.

Earlier analysis of interviewer continuity on individual's year-on-year participation carried out by NatCen showed that cases with the same interviewer had higher response rates than those that didn't, even after controlling for a range of other variables.

Continuity of interviewer was regarded by some participants in this study as important because of the rapport it allowed them to establish with their interviewer. This made some panel members feel more at ease and able to open up during the questioning. There was also some evidence that a change of interviewer had contributed to the decision of some participants to drop out because they thought they would not have the same bond or 'gel' as well with another person.

Having said this, this was not a universal view and there were those who believed that having different interviewers at different waves did not impact on their decision whether to continue to participate or not. Among this group what was believed to make a

difference was the new **interviewer's personality and communications style** and how that affected the building of rapport. Put simply some respondents didn't warm to the new interviewer's personality and manner.

The final way in which interviewers directly had an impact on participation was when they were perceived to not **adequately respond to the circumstances being presented by panel members**. The following recommendation was made based on these findings.

Interaction with the interviewer

- Ensure continuity of interviewer where possible in order to reduce risks of drop out. However, where maintaining interviewer continuity is not feasible (e.g. because the panel member moves) then help the 'new' interviewer be more alert to the importance of the panel member's preferred interview style (e.g. 'chatty', 'focused'). This may help maintain participation by building a suitable rapport.

2.1.4 Circumstances at the time of the interview

At the time of this research, quarterly data were required on Understanding Society that were representative of the sample as a whole. This requirement shaped the organisation of fieldwork to a greater extent, with there being a three month window for fieldwork. Cases were allocated to a fieldwork month, spread over a two year period: interviewers had an initial six week period in which they attempted to carry out the interview, followed by a two week reissue period.

This study found that changes in circumstances and significant life events were often the main or only reason that intermittent and refuser participants had decided not to take part in the survey. Changing circumstances discussed related to moving home - sometimes linked to separation or divorce, the birth of a child, or a time away from home (in prison or on a student 'gap year'). Despite the attempts of interviewers to be as flexible around the timing of the interviews as possible within the fieldwork period, these participants did not feel that they could take part during that time. Interestingly, these participants, although labelled as having refused the survey, did not see themselves as actually having dropped out. Some participants said that if the interviewer was able to come back in six, nine or twelve month's time they would have continued to take part in the survey because their circumstances were more likely to have improved at this stage. Movers particularly expressed this view saying greater flexibility in the timing and (in some cases coupled with more flexibility around the mode of interview) would have made it possible for them to take part in a wave where they had not done so. Of course what people say and what they actually do in practice can be very different, and it may well be that even with a more flexible fieldwork period people may still not participate. But in cases where panel members were always away at a particular time of the year, which coincided with when they would be approached to take part in the survey (as in the case of one or two people we spoke to) being able to offer them an alternative point in the year when they would be in the country or able to take part would be helpful.

Notably, there were a group of participants for whom even a six to twelve month delay in participation would have made no difference because they felt their circumstances

had changed permanently. This group included people who had started a new job, now had a number of young children or simply had busy lives. These 'busy' participants said that flexibility in the mode of completion (e.g. online or telephone submission) may have encouraged them to continue with the survey because they could do it at a time more convenient to them and without disruption of their home environment (e.g. feeling that they had to tidy-up their house for the interviewer's visit). The following recommendations were made based on these findings.

Circumstances of the interview

- Consider offering greater flexibility about when the interview could take place for panel members who cannot commit the time within the current fieldwork period.
- Collect better information about why people are unable to take part so that appropriate action can be taken in relation to each case, including in relation to reissuing.

2.1.5 Household dynamics and consent

At the time this research was carried out at start of each wave of fieldwork, interviewers were required to make contact with each adult at the sampled address to seek their consent to take part. In households containing more than one adult, the person who completes the household level questionnaire and assists with the enumeration of everyone in the household is known as the main contact person.

However, it is clear from this study that panel members did not always see the study as an individual endeavour; rather individual outcomes were sometimes driven by collective action. To be specific, it was clear that where panel members lived with others (in a family unit) individual decisions about participation were made in three different ways.

Collective decision-making, participation and consent – all members of the household made a collective decision to take part and take a similar approach to decisions to continue or to drop out. If the household 'spilt' they continued to make decisions about participation in discussion with each other.

Individual decision-making and consent with parental or partner encouragement – a parent or partner is the main person who initially decides to take part and they act as a 'linchpin', encouraging their partner or children to (continue) participating, but leaving the final decision about whether to take part to each individual. This dynamic has two effects when households split.

The fact that each individual understood what survey participation involved and had fully consented to take part, meant they continued to do so when the household split.

Where parental or partner encouragement had had a greater influence on their individual decision to take part, exercise of their individual judgement when they moved away from their original home meant they reversed their decision about participation.

Decision-making and consent on behalf of the household – participation was driven by one member of the household who tended to make decisions on behalf of other household members. Despite interviewer contact with other household members to try to ensure informed consent, a partner or parent had more or less 'told' the participant that they had to complete the survey without them having full knowledge of its purpose. This was especially the case for young people under 16 whose involvement in the survey was limited to completing a self-completion questionnaire. The fact that they did not fully understand the importance of what they were doing themselves meant they had little interest in the survey and were less inclined to continue with it when they moved out of the parental home as young adults. The same applied to partners when they separated or divorced, although to a slightly lesser extent. The following recommendations were made based on these findings.

Household dynamics and consent

- Improve direct written and verbal communication with each participant to help to ensure that all individuals living in a household understand the purpose of the survey and can make an informed decision about whether they want to take part.
- Encourage interviewers to make further efforts to make contact with each individual in a household to explain why their participation is important may help build individual commitment to the survey.
- Develop more focused and direct communication with young people about the aims of the study that may help build greater commitment to the survey.
- Consider targeting communications at those young people coming up to important transitions (e.g. approaching 16 or 18) when they can make their own decisions about participation and where risk of drop out is greatest.

2.1.6 The survey protocol

As described in section 1.1. Understanding Society collects information about all individuals at the originally sampled address, and attempts to follow everyone 16 and older over many years, even when they move or split away from their existing household or family. Each adult is asked to take part in an individual face-to-face interview, and to complete a self-completion questionnaire. In addition one (responsible) adult will be asked questions about the household. Children and young people aged 10-15 are asked to complete a self-completion questionnaire.

Three key features of the survey protocol emerged as important influences on participation: the length of the survey; the mode of completion; and the questionnaire content.

Length of interview – the length of survey interviews among participants was said to vary considerably from half-an-hour to two-and-a-half hours (for a participant whose first language was not English) for the household part of the questionnaire and from 20-30 minutes to two hours for the individual part. All types of panel member said that the interviews felt long. For participants who were less busy or who had been able to plan their time according to how long they had been told the interview would take this was

not necessarily a significant problem. Length was a problem, however, when the interviews felt exceptionally long (50 minutes to 1 hour for an individual or over two hours as in the case of the participant whose first language was not English); or on some occasions when an interviewer had given the impression that the interview would not take 'that long' but where in fact, due to the respondent's circumstances the interview took much longer than anticipated.

'I was just happy to do it at the time. But because it took so long, I didn't want to carry on' (Young refuser, aged 19).

It's worth noting that interviewers were trained not to give a specific time but rather to indicate a range and to stress that the interview can be a bit longer or shorter depending upon the respondent's circumstances. It is clearly a fine balancing act.

Mode of interview – there were three main views on mode of completion. The first was voiced by those who had a strong preference for a face-to-face interview. Here a great deal of importance was placed on the human contact made during a face-to-face encounter, the trust that was built up with the interviewer during those and, sometimes, that it was the most expedient way of receiving the financial incentive. The second view favoured by refusers was that they had wanted greater flexibility in terms of mode of interview. Specifically they wanted to take part online or by telephone, as this would have been more convenient for them and they suggested that this *may* have prevented them dropping out if the options had been available. (Of course this may reflect a preference for a mode that makes it easier to not take part.) Finally, there were some who were agnostic about mode and for this group it wasn't clear whether offering choice would make any difference to their decision to participate.

Questionnaire content – continuous participants saw the relevance of content to the study aims and were more inclined to see the questions as interesting. The views of intermittent participants and refusers varied from *"not overly boring"* to being not really interested in the survey at all except for the financial reward. Two issues arose for intermittent and refuser participants that affected their views about continuing participation: (a) they had stronger views than continuous participants that some questions were intrusive, and (in theory at least) they thought intrusiveness could have been reduced if they had received more information about the topics to be covered in advance; (b) they had less understanding than continuous participants about why questions needed to be repeated at each wave, and/ or they felt the content was repetitive because not much had changed in their circumstances during the year. A suggestion was made by one participant that panel members could be shown their previous responses and only answer questions where there was a change in order to avoid the feeling that some questions were repetitive. Having a section of the questionnaire with a different focus each year was felt to be an important way of encouraging participants to continue to take part. The following recommendations were made based on these findings.

3. Issues affecting continued participation or attrition for specific social groups

Response rates vary by sub group and sample type. For example, the overall individual response among productive households in the general population sample at wave 3 was 83 per cent – and is higher for the BHPS sample (88 per cent) and lower for the Ethnic Minority boost sample (74 per cent). Within households, those aged 16-24 have the lowest response rate of all age groups (70 per cent at wave 3) and only around 40% of households who move or are eligible for tracing are returned with a productive outcome code[4]. One of the aims of this study was to explore why certain groups (ethnic minorities, young people 16-24, and movers) drop out of the survey more than others.

3.1 Issues affecting Black and Minority Ethnic participants' participation

For **BME participants**, the wish to ensure that their views were included in the survey was an important rationale for some for their initial and continuing participation. These participants particularly wanted to ensure that their views were included on key topics of interest to them, such as immigration and identity, in order to prevent perspectives on these issues being 'skewed'. A statement that BME people are sometimes under-represented in surveys was thought to be an important piece of information that could encourage more ethnic minority participants to take part in surveys in future.

On most aspects of the respondent experience, there was limited evidence to suggest that the encounter was markedly different for BME participants. However, three issues were raised by the BME participants interviewed.

The length of interview for panel members who did not have English as a first language was perceived to take a long time (e.g. two hours for an individual

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[3] At the time of writing this report evidence from the IP5 mixed mode experiment was not available.

[4] Scott, A., Jessop, C. (2013) UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) Wave 3 Technical Report. NatCen. Available at:
http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/6676/mrdoc/pdf/6676_wave3_technical_report_final_141013.pdf

respondent). In one case this contributed to the respondent dropping out from the study.

The **nature of the interaction with the interviewer** was also signalled by some BME panel members as being a consideration in their decision to drop out of the study. In these cases participants were unsure themselves whether ethnicity and cultural insensitivity played a part in the interaction or whether difficulties arose from a clash between interviewer style and preferred respondent approach (e.g. a female participant initially thought a new interviewer had treated her more formally because of her ethnicity but with further consideration said it was the difference in the new interviewer's personal style compared to the previous one that may have been the issue).

BME participants, like their non-BME counterparts, also wanted **more information about the value and impact of their contributions**. Targeted information on issues that are important to BME panel members (e.g. identity and immigration) may encourage continuing commitment to taking part. However we did not explore with BME panel members whether survey findings should be tailored to specific BME groups (i.e. to Pakistanis or Black Caribbean's). Further investigation in this area is needed. Based on these findings the following recommendations were made.

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BME participants

- Emphasise the importance of the survey capturing the views and experience of BME respondents in order to promote better 'buy in' and encourage continued participation.
- Investigate further whether BME respondents would like tailored findings and whether this should be for BME respondents as a whole or for specific sub groups in order to reduce attrition among these groups.

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3.2 Issues affecting young people's participation

Three main issues emerged as important for young people in securing their continued participation. In some cases this related to the experiences pre-16 years old, although where these experiences had an influence on their views subsequently is indicated below.

Being treated as an individual in their own right
The fact that parents did not see their responses to some parts of the survey (e.g. how they were feeling, whether they smoked) because this information was captured in a self-completion was important and encouraged them to continue participating. This had been particularly important to young people when they were younger (under 16) and for those we spoke to who were 16-18 at the time of the qualitative interview.

Getting their buy-in directly rather than through a third party
Even though young people's consent to take part in the survey was sought by interviewers pre and post-16, the fact that parents had often made the initial decision about their taking part in the survey when they were younger meant they could feel less committed to the survey and less inclined to continue with it when they moved out of

the parental home. This affected the views of young people about whether or not to continue across the age ranges of young people interviewed in this study (16-24).

Communicating directly with young people in ways and forms that they feel are relevant
Communications were sometimes filtered through parents (especially pre-16 and in the 16-18 age group), which meant they did not always have a full understanding of the aims and value of the survey which reduced their commitment to it over time. This was reinforced through the fact that they saw reporting of the findings as non-young people-friendly.

Based on these findings the following recommendations were made.

Young people
- Find ways of more direct written and verbal communication with young people before and after 16 years old in order to secure their full consent and commitment to the survey, especially around the time when they may be about to leave the parental home, which may help foster an increased sense of belonging to the survey.
- Produce tailored young people-friendly summaries of findings for young people in order to reinforce the value of their contribution and reduce attrition among them.

3.3. Issues affecting the participation of movers and splitters

Moving house or separating from a partner was sometimes the main or only reason that participants had not taken part in one or more waves. Greater flexibility in the timing of the interview (e.g. a delay of six months) and/ or mode of completion (especially online or telephone) would have resolved these difficulties for some movers and splitters. In other cases the move or the split made barriers to participation so difficult in the short to medium term that they needed a longer time before they would be able to continue (e.g. at least twelve months) or their circumstances were so changed that they felt no longer able to take part. An example in the latter case was the eldest daughter in a household who had moved to a new home when she had a baby. The following recommendation was made based on these findings.

Movers and splitters
- Explore the possibilities of greater flexibility in the timing of interviews and mode of completion to see if anything further can be done to help people going through significant change in their lives to continue to participate.

Summary of factors affecting participation for different types of respondent

Table A.1	Overarching factors affecting participation in Understanding Society		
Factor affecting participation	**Continuous participants** *(participant in waves 2-4)*	**Intermittent participants** *(taken part in two of three waves)*	**Refuser participants** *(designated as refusing participation in the last two waves)*
Communication • **Understanding, purpose and value of Understanding Society**	Understood the purpose of the study. *Important to contribute views and experiences of people like them* (especially BME). Some understanding of importance of continuing participation as an individual.	Different levels of understanding. Survey was *not very important or valuable to them.*	Wanted 'to help' initially. *Survey not very important or valuable to them.* Personal contribution and continuity did not feel important (felt they could be easily replaced).
• **Understanding of what's involved in taking part**	Would be helpful to know broad topics to be covered to avoid feelings of intrusiveness and allow gathering of information. Better communication about the length of interview so can set aside time accordingly. Booklet on findings very interesting; would like more information on *findings and their impact/ use.*	Wanted more information on topics to be covered; would not have felt so strongly that topics on finances and personal relationships were *intrusive* if had been pre warned. Wanted better communication about how long the interview would take. Booklet on findings was interesting; would like to think the findings were making a difference but *increasingly unsure if they do.*	Found topics like finances, personal relationships, etc. *intrusive* and 'Big Brotherish' (even though told did not have to answer). Wanted *better communication* about how long the interview would take; a few participants could not remember being told the survey would be an on-going commitment. More information about *how findings would be used and if making a difference* may have encouraged them to continue.
Personal reward • **Monetary incentive**	*Incentive important initially*; *nice bonus and gesture* but not a major motivation.	Incentive is a nice bonus or gesture. Mainly or only took part for the incentive (more 'liquid' incentives that can be spent in more places preferred).	*Mainly or only took part for the incentive.*
• **Non-monetary rewards:**	Found the survey process *interesting and enjoyable* (inc. nurse interview and cognitive tests); useful to 'take stock'.	Survey *sometimes fun* and nurse interview useful.	Survey process, nurse interview enjoyable/ positive experience but *tired of on-going commitment.*
The interaction with the interviewer	Interviewers *professional* and put them at ease. *Continuity of interviewer important* where a rapport was developed and style of interviewing matched (e.g. 'chatty' or 'sharp and focused'). *Continuity less important if rapport, style and professionalism matched with new interviewer.*	Interviewers *professional* and put them at ease. However there were one of two bad experiences. *Continuity of interviewer important* where a rapport was developed and style of interviewing matched. *Continuity less important if rapport, style and professionalism matched* with new interviewer. *Mismatch of interviewer style made continuing more difficult.*	Interviewers *professional* and put them at ease. Interviewer *was not the reason for them dropping out.* Had same interviewer or different interviewer but not a major concern.

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Circumstances at the time of the interview	*Easy to participate where participant was not busy* and because interview was flexible about the time of the interview. *Flexibility in the mode or timing of the interview would have helped where participants moved house.*	***Moving house or changes in circumstances (e.g. more work, increased family commitments) were the main reason for not taking part.*** *Flexibility of mode* (e.g. completing on paper or online) would have made it more likely they would have taken part.	***Change in circumstances was the main or only reason for not taking part (e.g. bereavement, separation, divorce, birth of child, moving home, gap year, in prison).*** Some *did not recall 'refusing'*; would or *may have considered taking part again if interviewer came back in six months to a year* *Flexibility of mode* would only make marginal difference
Household dynamics and consent	Contact mainly through parent/s or partner but interviewer always asks for consent *All household take part together and consent equally.*	Parent/s or *partners are the main driver* of participation encouraging other household members to take part All household take part together and consent equally	*Parent/s or partner were the main driver of participation; when split or moved to separate homes one or more decided not to continue* (e.g. young person, divorcees) Partners took part together and decided not to take part together
The survey protocol • **Length**	*Length* not a problem when can put aside the time; feels long but manageable.	*Length became a problem* as circumstances changed or life became busier. Sometimes the survey was felt too long.	*Length* would not have been a problem if given more accurate information about how long the process would take. Some YP thought the survey was boring and 'long-winded'.
• **Mode**	Some have strong preference for face-to-face because of build in rapport; others want more flexibility of mode.	Face-to-face means they 'did it' but *would have liked flexibility of mode.*	Wanted more choice of mode, especially online.
• **Content**	Content was *interesting*. Understood reason for asking the same questions each year; specific focus each year provides variation and interest. Participants understood reasons for yearly completion and frequency seems about right.	Content *'not overly boring'* Understood reason for asking the same questions each year but felt repetitive. Sometimes topics felt intrusive.	Content *not particularly important to them and questioning too long.* Understood the reasons for asking the same questions each year but *seemed repetitive* Sometimes felt intrusive. Find a way of saying 'nothing has changed' to avoid feelings of repetition.
Issues for BME groups	Wanting to ensure that BME views are included is a key reason for participating, especially where there is information about possible under-representation. Felt that some of the questions being asked were important to BME participants (e.g. identity)	Need to make sure that BME participants feel comfortable with their interviewer (does not necessarily mean ethnicity matching for interviewer and participant). Length of Interviews for people whose first language is not English can be a reason for not continuing to take part.	Issues for refusal not mainly linked to ethnicity among the refuser participants interviewed. Other issues involved were value placed on participation, need for greater information about use and impact of findings, changes in circumstances, desire for flexibility of mode.
Young people	Confidentiality for self-completion parts of the survey and for YP booklets was important. Important to directly speak to young people about participation even where parents agree to involvement. Want more relevant and YP-friendly information on findings.	Felt that parent/s made decision about participation in the survey even though their consent was sought by the interviewer.	Only took part because everyone else in the household did. Commitment lessened when moved out of parental home due to previously established household dynamics (see above)

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Factor affecting participation	**Continuous participants** *(participant in waves 2-4)*	**Intermittent participants** *(taken part in two of three waves)*	**Refuser participants** *(designated as refusing participation in the last two waves)*
Movers and splitters	Greater flexibility in the mode or timing of the interview would have helped where participants moved house.	Moving house or changes in circumstances (e.g. more work, increased family commitments) were the main reason for not taking part. Flexibility in the fieldwork period may have made a difference.	Change in circumstances was the *main or only reason for not taking part* (e.g. separation, divorce, moving home, in prison). Flexibility in the fieldwork period made a difference in some cases but in others circumstances had changed so much to deter further participation (e.g. moving home and having a baby)