

# Understanding society

MICHAELA BENZEVAL and NICK BUCK



In 2014, *Understanding Society* was adopted as a British Academy Research Project.

Michaela Benzeval is Professor of Longitudinal Research at the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex, and Director of the *Understanding Society* project. Professor Nick Buck is Director of ISER.

Social science research aims to understand how society works – how people are affected by social and economic changes around them, the way in which families change over time, who does well in education and why, what makes people healthy and happy, how changes in the labour market and pensions influence when people retire and their subsequent living standards, and so on. Such research is vital for governments and policy-makers to understand the nature of economic and social problems and the impact of the policies they introduce on different sections of society. To answer such questions researchers need data that track individuals and households over time, to observe changes in people's lives and investigate their causes and consequences.

*Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, collects such data and deposits them in the UK Data Service<sup>1</sup> for researchers and policy-makers to investigate changes in a wide range of social issues. It involves collecting data annually from all the adults, as well as children aged 10-15, who live in sample households, and following them as they move between different households. It is based on a large sample, representing all ages and all countries and regions of the UK, which allows researchers to explore issues for subgroups and geographic areas for which other longitudinal surveys are too small to support effective research. There are immigrant and ethnic minority boost samples which provide the only source of longitudinal information

on ethnic minorities of all ages in the UK. The fact that all adults within sample households are interviewed means that interactions between household members can be studied. Since the study is a long-running one, it captures outcomes and behaviours as they vary over periods of secular change.

## Why longitudinal studies?

There are distinct advantages of longitudinal surveys such as *Understanding Society* as compared with ordinary ('cross-sectional') surveys. Cross-sectional surveys tell us what people are thinking or doing at any one time. If the same questions are asked in another, later, survey, we can learn how these results change for the population as a whole. But we do not know how individuals have changed their views or their behaviour, or why. The only way we can do this is if we ask questions of the same people at different times. We can then start to understand change and stability at the level of the individual, rather than for the population as a whole. Longitudinal studies thus have a major role in understanding the social and economic changes facing western societies since they collect data about different time points within an individual's life, or indeed look across generations, by collecting and linking data from different points in the lives of parents and children. For example, longitudinal data can shed light on:

- The incidence of states such as poverty or unemployment over time. It is known that there are major variations in the degree to which people experience short or long spells of such conditions. The experience of long-term unemployment or persistent poverty has different implications for other outcomes such as health, compared to short-term or transitory occurrences. Longitudinal studies are uniquely placed to collect the information necessary to analyse these effects.
- The conditions associated with individuals entering or leaving different circumstances such as ill health or partnerships, and the frequency with which they do such things.

1. <http://ukdataservice.ac.uk>

- The association between changes in the different domains (e.g., health and the labour market), to understand how they may affect each other. Panel surveys encourage more reliable analytical techniques to assess causal sequences than can be supported by cross-sectional data, based on only a single observation of each individual.
- As annual waves of data accumulate, these can be used to analyse the long-term accumulation of personal and financial resources and their implications for other behaviours and outcomes.

### And what is special about household panels?

The household panel design of *Understanding Society* contrasts with that of the cohort design of many longitudinal studies. In cohort studies, a sample of individuals from a particular age group is selected and followed to investigate their development at key life stages and how this affects outcomes later in life. In the household panel design a sample of the whole population is selected in their household context, and data are collected much more frequently so that researchers can examine short- and long-run social and economic changes across the whole of society, and – to the extent that families and households overlap – explore the evolution of families through time.

There are several specific advantages of the household panel design. Firstly, it provides a very important resource for the study of how households are changing and the demographic processes which lead to such change. Secondly, economic welfare, income and material conditions are normally assessed at the household level, because of the degree of sharing of resources. Households also provide a context for understanding the social and cultural resources available to both children and adults. Thirdly, the household focus allows the inter-relationships between individuals within households and families to be explored. For example, household panel surveys have contributed to understandings of how siblings influence each other's educational outcomes and how children 'inherit' their parents' behaviours. They also permit examination of changing patterns in partnerships, such as dissolution and cohabitation, timings of marriages and births, and repartnering in relation to childbearing and employment outcomes. Observing multiple generations and all siblings allows examination of long-term transmission processes, and isolates the effects of commonly shared family background characteristics.

*Understanding Society* forms part of an international network of household panel studies. The household panel design was established in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) in the USA in the late 1960s, and now also includes the German Socio-Economic Panel Study, the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey, the Swiss Household Panel and other active household panels in South Africa, Israel, Canada, Korea, China. This design has proved extremely powerful in understanding changes in populations and the determinants of behaviour and outcomes at household and individual level. International comparisons across



Further information about *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, can be found via [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)

these studies enable researchers to explore how social change and behaviours are influenced by different national contexts.

### *Understanding Society* design

Data collection on *Understanding Society* began in 2009 and mainly relies on repeated surveys with sample members at one year intervals. The content includes many areas of people's lives, including family circumstances, work and education, income and material well-being, health and health-related behaviours, social lives, neighbourhoods, environmental behaviours, attitudes to risk and engagement in civic society.

The study includes four samples: (i) a 1,500-household Innovation Panel (IP) used for methodological and other experiments, based on an annual competition for research ideas; (ii) a probability sample – the General Population Sample – of approximately 26,000 households; (iii) a boost sample of 4,000 ethnic minorities households covering the five major ethnic minority populations in the UK, and an additional immigrant and ethnicity minority boost begun in wave 6 to resample those populations as well as cover new immigrant groups; and (iv) the former British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) sample, which was established in 1991. A complex pattern of overlapping fieldwork cycles means that seven waves of the IP and four waves of the main dataset –

plus physical measures and biomarkers from a nurse visit – have been deposited at the UK Data Service, and genetics data are available by special application. Linked data from children's education records (with consent) are also available, as well as a wide range of geographic identifiers to enable researchers to combine survey information with different environmental, social and economic contextual information. Overall, more than 2,000 users have now obtained the data; there is further information on the *Understanding Society* website about the data available and findings from the study.<sup>2</sup>

There are a number of key features of *Understanding Society* that provide unique insights into UK Society.

### A multi-topic whole population survey

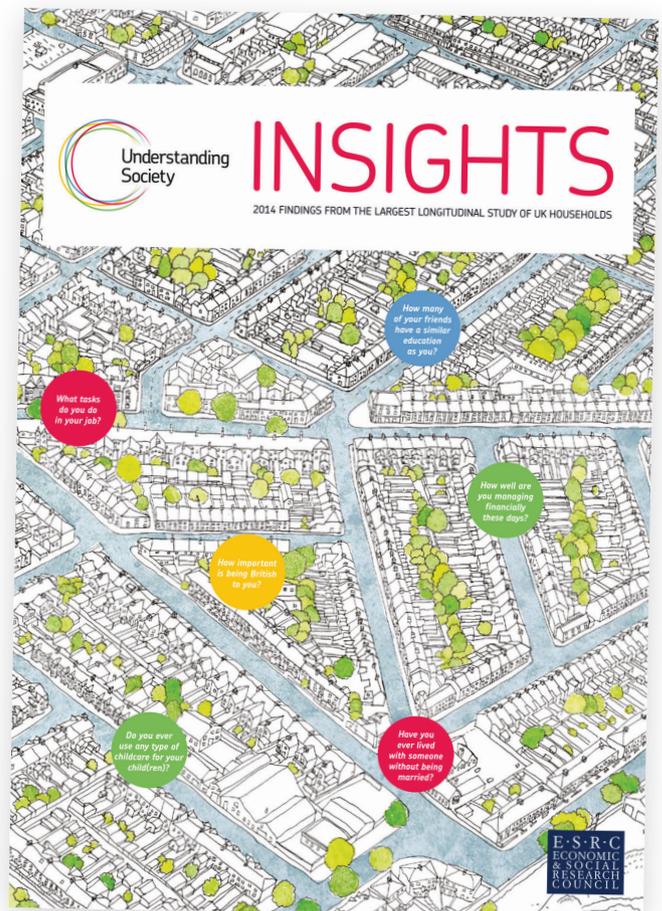
*Understanding Society* supports research across the range of social sciences as well as biomedical sciences and other physical sciences, such as environmental sciences. As noted above, its large sample size permits the analysis of small subgroups of the populations or regions of the country. For example, recent research has examined: the consequences of family breakdown for a wide range of adult and child outcomes; mixed religion partnerships in Northern Ireland; active commuting and health; the raising of school leaving age; ethnic penalties in occupation; the effect of the green electricity tariff; and the experience of bullying among adolescents.<sup>3</sup> *Understanding Society* data are also used to inform policy. For example the Office of National Statistics use the data to monitor trends in national well-being, the Department of Work and Pensions use them to track low income dynamics, and Public Health England have recently employed the data to model teenage smoking at the local level. Meanwhile researchers are using *Understanding Society* data to simulate the consequences of different aspects of devolution for tax and benefits in Scotland.

### An emphasis on ethnicity research

*Understanding Society* contributes to the understanding the lives of ethnic minorities living in the UK, which are relatively poorly covered by other longitudinal studies. As well as including boost samples to enable the exploration of the experiences of different ethnic groups in detail, *Understanding Society* collects additional measures relevant to their lives from members of the boost samples, other ethnic minority groups in the general sample, and a comparison group of around 1,000 adults. Examples of the additional ethnicity-relevant measures include ethnic identity, discrimination and harassment, questions about ethnicity and social networks, and questions about remittances. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has recently published a series of reports using these data on ethnic minorities' experience of poverty through the recession, occupational and

2. [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)

3. More about the research that has used *Understanding Society* data can be found via [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/search](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/search)



*Understanding Society* established a Policy Unit in 2014. The unit leads on the production of *Insights*, an annual summary of policy-relevant research findings from the Study. The edition to be published in autumn 2015 will focus on: young people's well-being; housing; and health behaviours.

residential segregation and social networks.<sup>4</sup> The ethnicity strand of *Understanding Society* also informs questions for the whole sample. The objective is that the whole study should contribute to the understanding of the UK as a multi-ethnic society.

### Collection of biomeasures

Understanding the interaction between people's social and economic circumstances and their health across the life span is essential to develop policies not only to improve the nation's health but also its social and economic capacities. The addition of a nurse visit to collect biomeasures – objective markers of health and disease – combined with the richness of the social and economic data in *Understanding Society* across all ages makes it a unique resource to investigate these issues. These data, released at the end of 2014, are beginning to shed light on issues around undiagnosed illness, the biological processes linking social factors to disease and vice versa, and to identify when inequalities in different dimensions of health emerge, which helps policy-makers to understand potential causes and intervention points.

4. [www.jrf.org.uk/topic/poverty-and-ethnicity](http://www.jrf.org.uk/topic/poverty-and-ethnicity)

## Innovation in measures and methods of data collection

*Understanding Society* involves innovation in both data collection methods and in the type of data collected. The IP is a testbed for research related to longitudinal survey methods; in its first eight waves, 55 unique experiments in survey methods have been conducted, with more in the pipeline. Many of these experiments have been designed and analysed by external researchers. However, the study team have used the IP to evaluate how best to transform *Understanding Society* from a traditional face-to-face survey to one which in the future will be conducted in multiple modes, so that respondents can complete the questionnaire when and how suits them, while ensuring that the high response rates and robust high quality data essential to effective social science research are maintained. Methodological research planned for the future will examine how to use opportunities that new technologies bring to expand the kinds of data that can be collected or the quality of information we already collect. For example, experiments are planned to investigate better ways of collecting household finance information and new ways of measuring health.

There are a growing set of associated studies attached to *Understanding Society* that allow researchers to design and conduct in-depth studies on sub populations within the study or on new specialised topics. For example, behavioural economists are currently conducting web surveys on respondents' attitudes to risk, while sociologists have conducted qualitative research on how households respond to one member losing their job, and a study is about to go into the field examining older adults' experiences of social support and caring. Anonymised versions of qualitative datasets are also deposited in the UK Data Service for secondary analysis.

## Generating impact

The *Understanding Society* team are keen to support researchers in their efforts to generate scientific and policy impact from the Study, as well as to build capacity for interdisciplinary longitudinal research based on the data. To achieve these goals, the team provide a wide range of training courses and resources for data users, and hold events and conferences to share findings from the Study and discuss their policy impact.

One example of this is the biennial scientific conference, the most recent of which took place in July 2015. Over 230 researchers and policy-makers attended the event to present or listen to research findings based on the Study. Topics ranged widely, including sleep, Scottish devolution, family change and poverty, education, work identity, intergenerational well-being, sibling and peer bullying among adolescents, active commuting and cardiovascular risk, genetics, social mobility, and survey methods – to mention a few.

## Conclusion

A key feature of the longitudinal studies is that they become more valuable with age, as more waves of data are collected and longer sequences in the lives of individuals and families can be observed. *Understanding Society* is now established, and researchers have demonstrated valuable new insights into social change in the UK and on the consequences of different social policies. However, it is still in its early stages, and the best is still to come. Support from the British Academy is helping to ensure this future promise can be realised, by raising awareness of the data for research and findings from it, as well as bringing together researchers to help shape its future content.

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We are grateful to all of the respondents who give up their time to take part in the study and as a result create an invaluable resource for social research and policy.

The British Academy grants the title of British Academy Research Project to about 55 long-term research enterprises – major infrastructural projects or research facilities, intended to produce fundamental works of scholarship – as a mark of their academic excellence. A full list of the projects can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/arp](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/arp)