

SOLVING THE PROBLEM OF ATTRITION IN LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS

Aims

1. to investigate the causes of non-response in longitudinal surveys through statistical modelling of attrition processes using data relating to attrition in established longitudinal surveys / BHPS, NCDSS, BCS70, FACS
2. to formulate, in the light of the results of the modelling, optimum strategy for encouraging continued participation as a basis for improved field practice to reduce attrition
3. to design and implement an exemplar field experiment to test the new strategy using a survey or (surveys) from a series of repeated cross-sectional ('Omnibus') surveys to supply the first wave of a longitudinal survey; respondents are allocated in the second wave to different field work approaches
4. to draw conclusions from the experimental results for improved theory and practice in the field as applied to longitudinal surveys and to appraise the value of the approach for further field experimentation to test and develop the theory further
5. to communicate the results of the work widely to constituencies concerned with commissioning and carrying out longitudinal surveys

Progress

Stage 1 of the project comprised identification of suitable datasets for secondary analysis and foci for the work. The three selected were:

- British Household Panel Study (BHPS) – Peter Lynn and Noah Ulrig, U of Essex
- 1970 and 1958 birth cohort studies (BCS70 and NCDS) – John MacDonald and Sosthenes Ketende, Institute of Education
- Family and Children Study (FACS) – Harvey Goldstein, U of Bristol; Gabi Durrant U of Southampton; Rebecca Taylor, NatCen; Shaun Scholes, NatCen

Each analysis has focused on modelling attrition across waves of the respective surveys as predicted from sample member characteristics, contextual features of the interview setting (e.g. locality, housing etc) and nature of the interviews that took place, (e.g. contact procedure, door step approach, interviewer characteristics etc) . Each team has been preparing a report on their findings which will be consolidated in a paper for a team meeting in October by Harvey Goldstein, who has been co-ordinating the statistical work. The report will be used as a basis for designing the field experiment involving changes in normal survey practice, in the light of the secondary analysis findings, applied in a specially created second wave of the NatCen Omnibus Survey. The field experiment involves randomised allocation to a treatment and control group of the 1,600 participants in the March 2008 Omnibus survey, who will be followed up one year later, i.e. in March 2009 when the 'treatment' embodied in the new approach will be introduced. The results will be used to extend to longitudinal surveys the Groves and Couper theory of cross-sectional survey non-response and disseminated widely.

Longview
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