

INDEPENDENCE FOR STATISTICS: A CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

Response from John Bynner, ¹

1. The value of new structures for national statistics needs to be judged in terms of potential improvements for end users. These reside in the relevance, integrity, clarity, coherence of statistical production and seamlessness of communication of outputs across the whole of government. The principle as applied in England of decentralised responsibility across departments for statistical production (Para 1.5) works against the added value of what is proposed.

2. Despite all the moves to ameliorate its effects through the move from a separate GRO, GSS and CSO through their subsequent mergers - first OPCS (GRO +GSS), and then to ONS (OPCS + CSO) - from the standpoint of the end user the system remains uncoordinated and the output fragmented. This is because whatever the exhortations and whatever the mechanisms for co-ordination, individual departments with their own cultural imperatives and ministers to serve will, as far they are able, continue to 'do their own thing'.

3. There is an important lacuna in the document in relation to this issue in the sense that nowhere in it is the distinction made between statistics as the means of describing the population via the census, or via estimation from sample surveys, and statistics as the parameters of explanatory models of population processes². From my perspective as a past director of three large scale national longitudinal surveys (the 1958, 1970 and Millennium cohort studies) and now directing a new organisation with the mission of promoting longitudinal study, these functions ('description' and 'explanation') are distinct yet serve complementary purposes. The need for coordination is therefore equally important for both of them. A new national framework of the kind the paper is suggesting needs similarly to embrace both.

4. Descriptive statistics contextualise the model parameter estimates obtained in longitudinal studies supplying the baseline information about the population and secular trends against which the longitudinal sample characteristics need to be set. Statistical model parameter estimates, on the other hand, whether obtained inside government, or outside, contribute to the scientific knowledge base. Thus such government longitudinal studies as DWP's Family and Children Study FACS and the DFES Longitudinal Study of Young People in England LSYPE³ need to be seen as both complementing and replicating parameter estimates of, for example, 'returns to qualifications' from the whole range of UK longitudinal studies taking place outside government⁴:

- the birth cohort studies spanning half a century of births (NSHD, BCDS., BCS70, ALSPAC, MCS),

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² Moser, C.A. and Kalton, G. (1971) Survey Methods in Social Investigation pp2-3. Aldershot: Ashgate.

³ Two of the 12 studies (plus 5 in development) as of January 2006 listed by ONS in a paper for ESRC's Longitudinal Strategy Committee

⁴ See Strategic Review of Panel and Cohort Studies carried out for ESRC, www.longviewuk.com

- British Household Panel study (BHPS),
- 'Whitehall studies of chronic illness
- English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA)
- MRC/Wellcome 'Biobank'

5. In the case of the census-based ONS Longitudinal study (LS) both descriptive and explanatory functions are performed. There is also the range of cross sectional surveys that may serve descriptive and explanatory purposes - some like LFS with longitudinal elements and others such as the ONS surveys of smoking, disability income and expenditure and attitudes to airport noise that though cross sectional are primarily explanatory in purpose. There are also the surveys used in evaluating the effectiveness of government policies such as New Deal, Sure Start and EMS. These may be done within government by ONS, or either the whole survey, or the field work, or both, commissioned out. Finally, the administrative data bases held by government departments also need to be included as a potentially key component of the statistical resource base as they supply the longitudinal back cloth in which key data such as tax payments can be found and missing data in the longitudinal survey record made good. The point to make is that all these contributors to explanatory statistics should be seen as part of a comprehensive and coherent national programme, not as something separate from it.

Descriptive statistics

6. The current statistical output shows all the marks of a service that cobbles together products from disparate sources rather than one that produces a uniform output for common consumption from a single source. Despite some recent improvements, there is still little sense in Britain of statistical production in accordance with a common code that is fully transparent and understood by producers and consumers.

7. The problem is further complicated by the privatisation of the distribution services, principally HMSO that has broken the flow of easily accessible statistical information to those who need it. HMSO was a landmark guarantee of reputable statistics from government sources that was much weakened by such a change. Across government the problem is inevitably compounded with each department, still clinging to the idea of largely ploughing their own furrows. Compare the British approach to that of international agencies such as the United Nations, OECD, Eurostat or a national agency like Stats Canada. Devolution has only made things worse. I recently sought the population distribution for 2004-5 across the four countries of the UK. The only place I finally found it in one table was on a primary school website! Any inspection of the four UK government statistics websites leaves the impression that they were written for populations living on different planets.

Explanatory statistics

8. The range of longitudinal and evaluation studies now extend to many different places outside and inside government placing an imperative, one might think, on coordination of the different sources of funding and production of statistics:

- Government departments,
- ONS, ESRC, MRC
- University centres with responsibility for national longitudinal studies such as:

- Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex (ISER)
- Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) at the Institute of Education.

9. Huge investments with long-term consequences are made in longitudinal surveys of the kind for which these bodies are responsible, but attempts at coordination by, for example, the ONS-led Longitudinal Data Co-ordination Group⁵ have been enfeebled by departments striving to retain autonomy. It remains to be seen, whether the newly established ESRC-inspired Data Forum, not mentioned in the paper but embracing alongside ONS, the ESRC, the MRC, the Nuffield Foundation and the Wellcome Trust, will do any better.

10. If Governments across Europe can share the commitment to a single particle accelerator in Geneva, the least one might expect is that the various UK stakeholders in statistics could share the commitment to a truly comprehensive statistical service in the UK⁶.

Proposal

11. In relation to the specific proposals regarding the reconstruction of ONS (the new 'Statistics Office') all seem sensible. In so far as they move the body (with or without responsibility for the census) towards more independence and accountability to the public via parliament rather than to a particular government department and minister, then a genuinely national service could emerge.

12. However there is one anomaly in what is proposed that I have not been able to resolve. 'GSS' at one time referred to the Government Social Survey, which following its post war location in the Central Office of Information (COI), in line with the recommendations of the Heyworth report, briefly became an independent organisation within Government responsible directly to the Treasury. Subsequently GSS was merged with the General Registry Office (GRO) to form OPCS. But throughout the paper 'GSS' refers to Government Statistical Services and nowhere is what became known as Social Survey Division (SSD) in ONS mentioned. It remains unclear from the document whether the two are synonymous and if not what the future of SSD if at all in the new organisation will be.

13. It is not necessarily essential that the SSD function of direct data gathering through surveys should necessarily be preserved in the new Statistics Office though a body that sets the standards for the field (as the Government Social Survey originally did) does in principle continue to have appeal. Following earlier logics the proposed hiving off of the census from the new body could argue for the social survey function going with it. But it should be recognised that the whole thrust of this proposal to separate the GRO and NHSCR from the Statistics Office is at variance with thinking over the last thirty years. As Klaus Moser when head of the CSO argued, descriptive statistics elaborate and extend the statistics the census produces. Therefore there is merit in linking the surveys the new Statistics Office does to the census as well. The document at present leaves the future of this key

⁵ A consortium of government departments with an interest in longitudinal data

⁶ The situation is analogous to the failure of the UK to produce a coordinated approach to research on aging – see House of Lords searing critique in *Ageing Scientific Aspects*, Volume 1, House of Lords Report, 2005, p83 par 8.7

SSD function, survey data collection - if it is to exist at all under the new arrangements - unclear.

14. Undoubtedly though, it is the coordinating, facilitating, transforming and standard-setting functions backed by statutory responsibilities for its Board that is where the strengths of the new Statistics Office will lie. However paras 4.7- 4.8 remain the Achilles heel of the whole enterprise that may lead to failure as it has done consistently in the past. There should be one body with ultimate responsibility for production and communication of *national statistics* (c.f. paras 4.15 and 4.20). Such a body should not only set standards and draw up guidelines for the collection of relevant data: centrally such as in the census; from departmental surveys; and from the administrative records held by departments (c.f. para 4.26). It should also have control over their compilation and communication as national statistics.

15. This responsibility must extend to ensuring that government statistics collected for model parameter estimation are part of a national evidence base rather than stand outside it. Good science is founded on a range of diverse approaches to diverse questions producing results that are cumulative within an agreed research programme or programmes. This principle applies as much to social questions as it does to physical and biological questions. It should therefore govern this area of government as well.

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