

REVIEW: CHANGING SCOTLAND

Frank Bechhofer

John F. Ermisch and Robert E. Wright, (eds). **Changing Scotland: Evidence from the British Household Panel Study**, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2005, xv + 310 pp, hb, £65.00, ISBN 1861345933.

Cross-sectional surveys (for example, the British and Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys), abound in the UK, are well known and are widely used. Panel studies are less familiar to many people. They interview, and re-interview the same sample of people at regular intervals. Each wave of the survey can of course be analysed like any cross sectional survey but the real power of the design is only realised when longitudinal analysis is involved. If one wishes to analyse processes of social change, such a study is far superior to a series of cross sectional surveys interviewing different people at each stage. This is chiefly because actually observed individual changes in behaviour can be measured rather than aggregate changes, and partly because it is to some extent possible to control for unmeasured factors.

The British Household Panel Study (BHPS) was established and has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council since 1989. Located at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, it is one of the UK's richest and most important data sources available to researchers. In essence, the same people are interviewed annually. The survey is household based, interviewing every adult member of the sampled households. It has gathered extensive work histories, socioeconomic information, and a wide range of attitudinal data. The first wave of data was collected from around 5,500 households, comprising 10,300 individuals in 1991, and has continued annually ever since.

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For researchers interested in analysing data for Britain as a whole, the BHPS is almost certainly the most comprehensive data set available. Some questions are asked annually but there is a modular structure whereby questions on some specific areas or issues (or additional questions in these areas) are only asked every few years. The survey has now been running long enough for there to be information over time even for these areas, and the design allows the survey to cover a much larger range of material over a period of years.

For researchers interested in change in Scotland specifically, or in sub-groups within the Scottish population, say single mothers or the elderly, there has until relatively recently been a fairly obvious major difficulty which explains why the survey has not been as extensively used for research on Scotland as one might expect. The data are representative of Britain as a whole, and indeed of Scotland as a whole, but for the first eight years only between 400 and 500 Scottish households are available for analysis. Sample sizes are too small for detailed analysis of most sub-groups.

Following devolution, the ESRC was persuaded of the need to boost the Scottish and Welsh samples to around 2,000 households not only to allow detailed analysis of change in Scottish and Welsh affairs but, perhaps more crucially, to allow detailed comparison with England, thus making it possible to track comparatively the impact of devolution and different policies in the three nations of Britain. These larger samples have been available since 1999, and in the fullness of time will become as useful for the above purposes as the survey as a whole is for the analysis of behaviour in Britain.

This somewhat extended account is necessary for this review because it explains why the book may appear from the title to promise more than it delivers, and, partly, why taken as a whole it is disappointing. The chapters are revised versions of papers delivered at a conference held at the University of Stirling at a time when only two waves of the enhanced Scottish data (1999 and 2000) were available for analysis. One of the declared aims of the volume is to provide a baseline which may aid policy formulation in Scotland and, perhaps of greater importance, against which the impact of different policies in Scotland and England may be assessed in the future. If a similar conference is held in 2007, or 2012, the contributors to the resulting book will be able to fully exploit the data and such a volume is to be eagerly anticipated. Already there are sufficient waves available that we can expect a steady flow of valuable articles to appear in the journals. Because of the modular nature of the survey referred to above, it is not yet possible to carry out over time analysis of

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some topics; the Scottish data, like those for Britain as a whole, will gain potential as the years go by.

There are seventeen substantive chapters grouped into four sections – families and households; inequalities; labour market issues; social and political behaviour. It is improbable that any reader will find all or indeed most of the material of interest; many academics will find it well worth seeking out chapters relevant to their interests. The general reader and policy makers will find much of the book hard going, sometimes for technical reasons, sometimes because the thrust of the argument is obscured in the detail, or any policy focus is tenuous.

The declared aim, according to the editors, is ‘to demonstrate how data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) can be used to examine, on a consistent basis, a variety of social, economic and political differences between Scotland and other regions (sic) of the UK that are relevant for policy evaluation and formulation’. Its secondary aim is to establish an empirical baseline against which future changes can be assessed. Despite the varying quality of the chapters, that very important first aim is undoubtedly achieved, and it is to be hoped that the book encourages many more researchers to exploit the BHPS.

The second aim is achieved to some extent in the chapters addressing relatively broad issues. It is, however, arguable that seventeen papers written by 29 authors for a conference, all addressing their specific interests with the aid of the BHPS, cannot be sufficiently focused to create such a book. Further, while a book written more tightly round the theme by a much smaller group of people might succeed, it is not clear that such a once and for all baseline is either feasible or required for research purposes. The data will not disappear; researchers addressing any of these issues in the future can construct the undoubtedly necessary baseline for their specific purposes at any time. Were the book more sharply focused on policy and written with policy makers much more clearly in mind, then such a baseline would be highly relevant and might even have an impact on the Scottish Executive.

Anyone who has ever taken on the thankless task of editing conference proceedings into a book will understand only too well the problems confronting the editors. However sympathetic one is though, there is no escaping the fact the book could have done with a good deal more (and much tougher) editing. It clearly betrays its origins as various authors feel obliged to tell their audience about the details of the BHPS and its structure. There is a

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repeated emphasis on how useful the BHPS will become. The often justifiable if frequently derided academic mantra of 'more research is required' is replaced with 'future waves will open up avenues for further research' and 'longitudinal analysis, which is what is really required, will have to await future waves of data'. The editors would have been beset with howls of anguish, but greater unity might have been achieved by omitting some chapters, not necessarily because they are weak, though some are, but to provide a sharper focus. Occasionally technical presentation jars; one otherwise interesting chapter presents tables, presumably lifted straight off the computer output, percentaged to two decimal places, regardless both of the size of the base and any conceivable value in so doing. It is a trivial issue but these tables should not have made it to the final book in this form. Some chapters are unnecessarily and relentlessly detailed; they could beneficially have been edited.

To conclude on a more positive, personal note. It is the fate of reviewers that they are not able to skim or even skip large portions of a book of this kind, and this has undoubtedly jaundiced this account. I found a good many of the chapters interesting and enjoyable, and it is likely that most readers would have the same experience. Some were useful in bringing me up to speed in areas where I have relatively little expertise. I very much hope that in a few years time a book, based on the BHPS, can be produced which addresses the issues of 'Changing Scotland' both in the sense of tracing change since devolution, and offering policy options which show how Scotland can be changed. This book shows what can potentially be done even if it is not that much needed book.

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