Can we improve the survey representation of non-resident parents, and collect robust data on reasons for separation?

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About the authors

- Caroline Bryson is a partner of Bryson Purdon Social Research LLP, an independent research partnership set up in 2009 specialising in policy and programme impact evaluation and survey methodology.
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About this report

This report summarises the findings from the Nuffield-funded project to assess options for improving the representation of non-resident parents in Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Survey).

The non-resident parent experiment is written up in more detail in a CASE Working Paper (Bryson and McKay, 2018): http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper210.pdf.

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Foreword

At any one time, there are more than four million children living in separated families in the UK. A Nuffield Foundation report published last year concluded that a lack of data on these families is hindering effective policymaking. Improved survey data on separated families, particularly on non-resident parents, has the potential to inform and improve decision-making on issues such as child support, welfare benefits, and housing.

Last year's report, *Understanding the lives of separating and separated families in the UK,* concluded that a number of the existing longitudinal surveys, including *Understanding Society* (the UK Household Longitudinal Study), could be enhanced to address some of the evidence gaps. In light of this, Caroline Bryson and Stephen McKay applied to the *Understanding Society* Innovation Panel to test questions and shed some light on two important knowledge gaps. We funded Caroline's and Stephen's analyses of these data.

First, the study team devised a new question approach aimed at identifying both a larger and a more representative sample of non-resident parents than achieved previously in UK surveys. The team identified the potential to improve the survey representation of non-resident parents by including questions on fertility, adoption, and step-parenting histories in conjunction with traditional questions about children living outside the household. As a result, the *Understanding Society* team is now undertaking further work comparing the two approaches using the larger sample available in the main Panel.

Second, the study focused on the reasons for separation – and who instigates it – with a view to future research on how this affects post-separation trajectories and outcomes. Having demonstrated the feasibility of asking separated couples about the reasons for separation, the study team recommend additional cognitive testing to improve the questions and the quality of the data collected.

Understanding the social and economic factors that affect people's chances in life is central to the Foundation's mission to advance social well-being. We hope that this study – with its practical approach to enabling greater understanding of increasingly diverse family types - will ultimately help improve the lives of separating and separated families, but we recognise that further data developments are still needed. We remain committed to helping facilitate the enhancement of relevant longitudinal studies and research.

On behalf of the Foundation, I extend my thanks to the study team, and to *Understanding Society,* for their commitment to this project.

Mark Franks
Director of Welfare

1. Summary

This paper summarises the findings from two methodological experiments fielded on Wave 10 of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKLHS) Innovation Panel (the IP10) during 2017. With both experiments, we add to the evidence base on how to improve the data collected on family separation.

Identifying non-resident parents

- The first experiment focused on identifying non-resident parents in surveys, testing whether both prevalence rates and representativeness could be improved.
- Currently, the under-representation of non-resident parents in surveys biases the data that are collected and contributes to many funders and researchers choosing not to collect survey data from non-resident parents.
- However, with four million children living in separated families at any point in time, combined with a growing recognition of the importance of fathers[1], we need to strive to better reflect the diversity of family structures in our surveys.
- In our experiment, we compared the more usual approach to identifying non-resident parents in surveys – asking about children living outside the household – to a detailed fertility, adoption and step-parenting history, found to have been the better approach in the US.
- Our findings are necessarily tentative, with around 100 non-resident parents identified in our experiment from among the 2,500 IP10 households. However, they point towards the potential to improve the survey representativeness of non-resident parents, at least to some degree.
- While we found no statistically significant differences in prevalence rates between the two groups, *in combination* they increased the non-resident parent sample by one quarter.
- Moreover, the fertility history approach appears to improve the representativeness of the sample, in terms of both their socio-demographic profile and their levels of parental involvement.

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[1] Nine in ten non-resident parents are fathers.

Reasons for separation

- Our second experiment trialled questions on reasons for separation among separated parents looking in particular for evidence on the quality of the responses, given the sensitivity of the questions.

- When couples split, we have little survey data about how the reasons for their separation affect their later relationships and decision-making.

- It is inadequate to use indicators of the quality of the couple relationship prior to separation, with a relatively low correlation between reported relationship quality and later separation.

- Most respondents answered the questions (i.e. there were low levels of refusals or don't knows), with evidence that respondents were willing to provide sensitive information about the reason for their break-up (e.g. 35 per cent cited abusive behaviour). There are indications that, for some sensitive responses, a face-to-face interview elicits more than an online web survey, perhaps surprisingly.

- However, it is concerning – from a methodological perspective – that just eight per cent of respondents cite a reason which puts themselves as 'at fault' in the relationship breakdown, with the vast majority of reasons for separation either not attributing fault (72 per cent) or blaming the ex-partner (46 per cent).[2]

- Similarly, a minority of respondents (17 per cent) say that their ex-partner instigated the separation, with most saying it was theirs (52 per cent) or a joint decision (21 per cent).

- This experiment indicates that it is feasible to ask separating couples about the reason for their separation. However, cognitive work could help to improve the data, especially by investigating ways of encouraging the less socially desirable or blameworthy responses.

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[2] More than one response could be given.

2. Introduction

In 2017, we published the findings of a study (Bryson et al., 2017) which evaluated how far the current UK data infrastructure met current and future evidence needs on the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of separating and separated families. Among the key data gaps identified in that study were:

- data collected directly from non-resident parents (rather than relying on resident parent reports), with a key driver being challenges in identifying representative samples of non-resident parents.
- data on the reasons why families separate and who instigates the split.

Here, we report on an experimental study which tested methodologies with the potential to help fill these two data gaps. Fielding questions on Wave 10 of the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKLHS) Innovation Panel (the IP10) between May and October 2017, we:

- Compared two approaches to identifying non-resident parents: asking about children aged 18 and under with whom respondents do not live (the current approach in the UKHLS and typical for UK surveys) versus a fertility history collecting information on births, adoptions and step-parent experiences regarding children currently aged 18 and under.
- Tested questions on reasons for separation and who instigated the split.

We report on the two experiments in turn, for each explaining the value to the evidence base of these data and the challenges in collecting them before presenting the results of our study. The non-resident parent experiment is written up in more detail in a CASE Working Paper (Bryson and McKay, 2018): http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper210.pdf. Plus, an early write-up of these findings – based on a preliminary dataset – was published within an Understanding Society Working Paper (Al Baghal et al., 2018): https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/working-papers/2018-06.pdf.

Note on terminology

The terms 'resident parent' and 'non-resident parent' are used here for want of better terminology. Although commonly used to distinguish which parent has primary care of the child (or with whom the child mostly lives), they mask the varied circumstances of separated families, where children may spend significant amounts of time (including overnight) with a 'non-resident' parent.

Likewise, the term 'single parent' refers to their household status, rather than implying that the other parent (or a new partner) is not involved in the upbringing of the child (or indeed not potentially living with the child for a minority of the time).

The data

The UKHLS (also known as *Understanding Society*) is the most comprehensive longitudinal survey in the UK, arguably worldwide, annually tracking the lives of around 40,000 households, interviewing all household members aged 16 and over (and administering a self-completion survey with those aged 10 to 15) (University of Essex, 2017). A separate Innovation Panel is surveyed each year, providing a testing ground for a range of methodological experiments (e.g. around mode or question design). In 2017, Wave 10 of the Innovation Panel (the IP10) involved around 2,000 existing Panel households and a refreshment sample of 500 new households (University of Essex, 2018). While the new sample was interviewed face-to-face in-home, the survey mode for existing Panel households was split 2:1 between face-to-face survey and web self-completion.

3. Non-resident parents: why are they hard to capture in surveys and what can we do about it?

Introduction

Although the paucity of data collected directly from non-resident parents can be explained in part by an insufficient priority placed in many studies on the role of non-resident parents in post-separation parenting - or on the role of fathers more generally - an equally, if not more, pivotal reason is the methodological challenge in achieving representative samples of non-resident parents. There is no comprehensive sampling frame from which to identify non-resident parents – only the minority who go to court or use the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) are identifiable in administrative systems, although sampling from such sources is not always possible. Therefore, general population surveys remain the only route for researchers to identify representative samples of the non-resident parent population. The UKHLS currently identifies non-resident parents as respondents with a son/daughter aged under 16 living outside their household, asking them to pick all living relative types from a showcard list. A range of other UK studies have employed similar approaches (e.g. Bradshaw et al., 1999; Blackwell and Dawe, 2003; Peacey and Hunt, 2008; Wikeley et al.[3], 2008) attempting to identify non-resident parents by asking directly whether respondents had children with whom they did not live.

The problem is that, using these methods, non-resident parents are consistently under-represented in population surveys[4]: only a proportion self-identify when asked, and those who do are unrepresentative of non-resident parents as a whole. Often non-resident parents are outnumbered by resident parents by a factor of between two and three. By way of example, the UKHLS Wave 3 identified nearly three times as many resident parent[5] as non-resident parent households. Moreover, the responses of non-resident parents suggest bias towards those more engaged with their children. For example, over 60 per cent of non-resident parents reported paying child support, while just 37 per cent of resident parents reported receiving it. Eleven per cent of non-resident parents reported never seeing their child, while resident parent responses suggested around 33 per cent.

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[3] Wikeley et al.'s study included a combination of resident and non-resident parents involved with the CSA, sampled through CSA records, and other separated parents identified through screening respondents to the Family Resources Survey.
[4] Within population surveys, we include both those of the general population, of families/parents and those focusing specifically on separated families/parents.
[5] Resident parents are identified within the household grid.

The reasons why surveys fail to identify sufficient numbers – or representative profiles – of non-resident parents are unclear, and a combination of factors is likely at play. Part of the explanation likely lies in the fact that younger men of lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate in surveys – and, in turn, make up a disproportionate number of non-resident parents. For instance, Peacey and Hunt (2008) report differential non-response among men (compared to women), particularly divorced, separated and never-married men. However, it is suspected that at least some of the explanation lies in a reticence among non-resident parents to self-identify - because of a painful relationship or because of a lack of fulfilment of their parental and/or financial obligations - or a perception among some non-resident parents that they do not 'count' as a parent, because they have no contact or a poor relationship. This may be due in part to child support obligations, but also to the sensitivities of talking about children for whom they have no ongoing parental role.

Given the methodological challenges in involving non-resident parents in surveys, an easy solution would be to not attempt to do so, and instead rely on the reports of resident parents. Indeed, this is the approach historically taken in a range of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies focusing on children's outcomes, parenting or family. However, moving forward, this is inadequate on several levels:

- First, both research and policy need study designs to reflect diversity in family structures. With four in ten children experiencing lone parenthood during their childhood (DWP, 2015), two and a half million separated families are raising four million dependent children at any point in time (Punton-Li et al, 2012). This means that non-resident parents represent a substantial proportion of the UK's parents, too big a proportion to exclude them from quantitative research, or to 'make do' with poor quality data.
- Second, child- and family-focused studies need to better capture the role of *both* parents rather than continue with the traditional mother-centric focus. With fathers making up nine in ten non-resident parents (Lader, 2008), the need for data from non-resident parents can be seen as part of a wider recognition of the need for better data on fathers. Relatively little is known about the role of non-resident parents in their children's development, with data collection often limited to the frequency of contact with their children (e.g. Poole et al. 2016), despite evidence that the quality, rather than the quantity, of their involvement appears to be most important (Adamsons and Johnson, 2013).
- Thirdly, although data collected from resident parents can provide a picture of the level and type of contact and relationships they have with the non-resident parent, the financial contribution (s)he makes, involvement in parenting, and so forth, this is

only a partial picture, often from one perspective. Even on seemingly objective measures such as the level of contact and the provision of financial support, studies of separated parents indicate that – even attempting to take into account non-response bias among non-resident parents – resident parents tend to under-report and non-resident parents to over-report the non-resident parent's involvement (Peacey and Hunt, 2009; Bell et al., 2006). Without interviewing non-resident parents, we have very limited evidence on the non-resident parent perspectives and about the impact of family separation on non-resident parents, and on any subsequent new families they have.

The experiment: can we try to improve non-resident parent representation by changing the question approach?

Although UK studies have tried to identify non-resident parents by asking directly about children they have with whom they do not live, Stykes et al.'s (2013) comparison of approaches in the US found that more – and a more representative profile of – non-resident parents were identified by asking a detailed fertility history than by these more traditional question approaches. Our experiment on the IP10 tested whether such an approach in the UK could alleviate the representativeness issues described above and identify a higher number of non-resident parents. We fielded two sets of questions on the IP10, both of which aimed at identifying non-resident parents, and both of which were asked of all respondents:

1. A detailed set of questions on fertility, adoptive and step-parenting history;
2. The standard UKHLS questions on living relatives, with minor adaptations to (a) allow for the separate identification of biological, adopted and step-children and (b) dependent children up to the age of 18 (rather than, as currently, 16).

In the event, there were no statistically significant differences in the proportions of non-resident parents identified via each question approach (Table 1). Asking about living relatives outside the household identified 3.3 per cent (n=84) of respondents as non-resident parents, compared to 3.2 per cent (n=75) identified through the fertility history. Perhaps the optimal approach is to identify non-resident parents across *both* sets of questions.[6] Among the 103 non-resident parents identified, only 56 (or 54 per cent) were identified under both question methods, with 19 (18 per cent) identified only in the fertility questions and 28 (27 per cent) only in the living relative questions. Moving from the current UKHLS approach to

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[6] Given both are asked as standard (in a modified form) as part of the UKHLS each year.

also including non-resident parents identified via a set of fertility questions could increase the non-resident parent sample by 23 per cent (19 extra cases/84 cases identified using existing living relatives approach)[7].

However, even the combined approach falls far short of identifying the numbers of non-resident parents whom we would expect within the panel. Within the IP10, 4.7 per cent of the sample were identified in the household grid as resident parents with biological or adopted children, compared to 3.0 per cent of non-resident parents with biological or adopted children identified across both of our question approaches. While we might expect somewhat fewer non-resident parents than resident parents (e.g. through widowhood, non-resident parents having children with more than one resident parent, non-resident parents being unaware that they even have a child), this cannot account for much of the disparity we observe here, and across several other studies.

Table 1: Identification of non-resident parents, by question set

	All (LR or FH)	Question approach	
		Living relatives (LR)	Fertility history (FH)
	%	%	%
Non-resident parent (biological, adoptive, step)	**4.2**	**3.3**	**3.2**
Biological non-resident parent	3.0	2.6	2.4
Adoptive non-resident parent	[N=2]	[N=2]	[N=1]
Step non-resident parent	1.3	0.7	0.8
Resident parents (biological, adoptive)	**4.7**	n/a	n/a
Base: all respondents	*2,570*	*2,570*	*2,570*

Source: UKHLS IP wave 10.

As we report above, under the current UKHLS approach – with a pattern replicated across a range of studies cited above – non-resident parents who self-identify are skewed towards those more family-oriented, as measured by their previous and current relationship statuses and their parental involvement post-separation. Table 2 provides a profile of the non-resident parents identified, overall and within each question approach. Although the sample sizes are small, there is tentative evidence that the fertility history approach somewhat improves the

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[7] Although the small sample size means the margin of error around these results is quite large.

representativeness of the non-resident parent sample, identifying non-resident parents who are less family-oriented than the living relatives approach[8]. The fertility history results in:

- More non-resident parents with no contact with their children (14 per cent compared to eight per cent in the living relatives arm of the experiment);
- Fewer non-resident parents who were previously married (64 per cent compared to 74 per cent under the living relatives approach) and fewer having a current relationship (41 per cent compared to 55 per cent);
- A higher proportion of non-white non-resident parents, which is important given previous work which highlights particular issues around Black non-resident fathers identifying their parent role (Roopnarine and Hossain, 2013).

Also of note is that, although non-resident mothers appear more likely than non-resident fathers to self-identify, via both approaches, there is tentative evidence here to suggest that the fertility history approach is better than the living history approach at identifying non-resident fathers (75 per cent of the non-resident parents identified via the fertility history were fathers compared to 68 per cent of those identified under the living relatives approach[9]).

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[8] We report on a wider set of socio-demographics and relationship questions in Bryson and McKay (2018).

[9] It is also possible that non-resident parents can also be resident parents, for instance if children do not all reside with one parent after a separation.

Table 2: Comparison of the profiles of non-resident parents, by question set

	All (LR or FH)	Question approach	
		Living relatives (LR)	Fertility history (FH)
	%	%	%
In contact with child(ren)			
Few times a year	11.1	10.4	12.8
Once a month or less	6.6	3.2	6.1
Several times a month	4.4	5.1	2.9
About once a week	18.9	20.5	15.8
Several times a week	30.5	35.4	31.0
Almost every day	15.7	16.1	15.9
50/50 shared care	1.4	1.7	1.9
Base: all children with non-resident parent	*150*	*135*	*117*
Gender**			
Male	67.0	66.7	74.7
Female	33.0	33.3	25.3
Ever married**	68.6	73.5	63.5
Living arrangements**			
Living with spouse or in civil partnership	35.0	36.9	26.7
Cohabiting	18.4	17.9	14.7
Not living with partner	46.6	45.2	58.7
Ethnicity			
White	75.7	78.6	70.7
Black	3.9	3.6	5.3
Asian	2.9	2.4	4.0
Mix	1.0	1.2	1.3
Other	16.5	14.3	18.7
Base: all non-resident parents	103	84	75

** indicates statistically significant at the 5% level.
Source: UKHLS IP wave 10.

What do we conclude?

However, our experiment suggests that a small step towards increasing the identification rate – and improving the profile of non-resident parents who identify – might be to combine our fertility history alongside more standard questions on children who live outside of the survey household. Of course, our numbers are small – and findings necessarily tentative – so the next stage should be a larger test to see whether our findings are replicated among a larger sample. The UKHLS team have begun further work using the main UKHLS sample.

4. Reasons for separation: what can we ask in surveys and why do we need to know?

Introduction

When couples split, we have little survey data about how the reasons for their separation affect their later relationships and decision-making, although plausibly we might expect such links. These reasons – in combination with who instigates the split – may be important mediating factors influencing how couples later negotiate finances and parenting roles. Perhaps because of the sensitivities or perceived reliability of reporting, UK studies rarely collect these data, even though other sensitive areas are often explored.

This means that we rely on (sometimes prospective, sometimes retrospective) data on the quality of the couple relationship in the period prior to separation as a proxy. However, a number of studies shows the limited value of this approach, finding relatively low levels of correlation between the couple relationship and later separation. Benson and James (2015) found that only 40 per cent of separating married couples in the UKHLS had reported being unhappy in their relationship two years prior, and only nine per cent had been in high conflict relationships. And, using the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), Benson and McKay (2017) found that only 30 per cent of mothers who were unhappy with their couple relationship when their child was nine months old had separated by the time their child was 11. These findings were further mirrored in Amato and Hohmann-Mariott's (2007) work using the US National Survey of Families and Households. Moreover, Amato's earlier work (Amato and Rogers 1997) found that marital problems – particularly infidelity – greatly increased the risk of divorce, providing evidence of the importance of a 'shock' event rather than prior relationship quality.

These findings suggest that a couple's separation often does not arise (solely) out of their feelings about their relationship in the preceding period. Rather, there is a trigger or combination of events which causes a couple to separate, events which the survey respondent may or may not know about in advance of them happening. Or, in the case of a split instigated by the partner, it may be due to their feelings about the relationship, rather than the survey respondent. And, in turn, the experience of the separation itself will be playing a major part in post-separation trajectories and outcomes. However, among the range of longitudinal studies in the UK, only the MCS asks about the reasons for the separation. It includes a question asked of mothers who separate from their partner between

survey waves about the reason for that separation. Nor do UK surveys collected data about grounds for divorce.

While the inclusion of the reasons for separation allows researchers to link this to later outcomes for children, were these data to be collected in the UKHLS, this would have several added advantages. The UKHLS is the most comprehensive longitudinal survey in the UK, annually tracking the lives of around 40,000 households, interviewing all household members aged 16 and over (and administering a self-completion survey with those aged 10 to 15). It provides the richest UK data on pre- and post-separation relationships (Bryson et al 2017). And, importantly, it collects data from both members of the couple, allowing for the investigation of separation using data from both parties.

The experiment: how do separated parents answer questions on reasons for separation?

Given the value of collecting data in the UKHLS on the reasons why couples separate, we trialled questions on the IP10 which seek to understand the (perceived) reasons for the separation, and which partner led the decision-making. We asked all resident and non-resident parents[10] in IP10 about the reasons they separated from their previous partner, and which partner led the decision-making. We made use of the in-built experimental design to look at variation by mode and length of time in the panel. In developing the questions, we drew on a small number of studies which have collected these data: the DWP Survey of Relationship Breakdown (Wikeley et al. 2008) and the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK; the US Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey; and the Australian Longitudinal Study of Separated Families.

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[10] The decision to restrict the question to separated *parents* was a practical one, given the trial was part of a wider experiment about separating parents. Should this question be included in the main UKHLS, we assume it would be asked of all separating couples, regardless of whether they have children.

Using a pre-coded list of responses, plus an opportunity to write in others, the questions read:

We know that relationship break ups can be difficult and happen for many reasons. Can you tell me the reasons why you separated or decided to live apart from [child(ren)'s] mother/father?

Which of these would you consider to be the **main** reason you separated or decided to live apart from [child(ren)'s] mother/father?

In your opinion, whose decision was it to finally end the relationship? Was it mostly yours, mostly your ex-partner's or a joint decision (with options for 'other' and 'don't know')?

Can we ask survey respondents about the reasons for their separation?

Table 3 summarises the survey responses. The first column shows the overall results, with the subsequent two columns showing, for existing panel members, how responses varied by survey mode.[11] In order to maximise the data, we report on all reasons given for separation, rather than the main reason. We have condensed the responses in two ways[12]:

1. By type of issue
2. By whether the respondent attributes the reason for the break-up to themselves, their ex-partner or whether the reason is not attributed.

There is no definitive way of assessing whether the questions provide 'valid' data. Rather we have looked at the pattern of responses to make a judgement (e.g. proportion of refusals, don't knows; the selection of more sensitive responses versus more general responses such as 'grown apart'; selection of responses identifying themselves versus their ex-partner as 'at fault'). Overall, most respondents were willing and able to answer questions on the reasons for their separation, with just seven per cent of separated parents choosing the 'don't know' or refusal option. Although the most commonly used category (by 41 per cent of separated parents) reflected general dissatisfaction with the relationship (e.g. they had 'grown apart'),

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[11] See Al Baghal et al (2018) for a breakdown by whether the respondent was a new or existing panel member: https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/525086

[12] For a full breakdown of responses on the provisional data, see Appendix Table A1 in Al Baghal et al (2018): https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/525086

substantial proportions chose potentially more sensitive responses (e.g. 21 per cent cited abusive behaviour, 19 per cent adultery and 17 per cent health or dependency issues). Perhaps most concerning, in terms of the potential validity of the data, is the low proportion (eight per cent) citing reasons that put themselves as the party at fault, compared to close to half (46 per cent) citing a reason involving the fault of their ex-partner. This may reflect how people come to deal with the end of the relationship. At the time of writing, there is a consultation on removing elements of fault from the formal marriage dissolution process.

Due to the potential sensitivity of the questions, we expected the self-completion mode to elicit more accurate responses than the face-to-face interview. This proved to be the case for adultery and abusive behaviours, which were more often cited in the online mode than face-to-face (e.g. 31 per cent of web respondents cited their own or their ex-partner's adultery or that they found someone else, compared to 14 per cent of face-to-face respondents). However, for other sensitive issues, there are some indications that, in fact, face-to-face elicits more, and more nuanced information than online. For instance, face-to-face respondents more than twice as likely to cite health or dependency issues.

Table 3: Reasons for separation

	All	Mode (existing panel)	
		Face-to-face	Web
	%	%	%
Don't know	2	-	6
Refused	4	4	4
Other missing	1	-	4
Base: all separated parents	*300*	*205*	*95*
Base: all separated parents reasons known	*270*	*192*	*78*
Reasons for separation, categorised			
Never in a relationship	7	5	12
General dissatisfaction with relationship	41	41	43
Money or financial problems	10	11	5
Family / parenting-related issues	23	**28**	**15**
Abusive behaviour	21	**17**	**30**
Found someone else / adultery / infidelity	19	**14**	**31**
Health and dependency issues	17	**21**	**8**
Issues over sex / sexuality	6	6	3
Other reason	5	5	5
No reason	9	9	9
Average number of separate reasons	1.94	1.96	1.89
Reasons by perceived 'fault' (categories not mutually exclusive)			
Fault of the ex-partner	46	43	52
Fault of the respondent	8	9	5
Non-fault reason	72	73	72
Base: all separated parents who have 1+ reason	*270*	*192*	*78*

Numbers in **bold orange** are $p<0.05$ on chi-squared test.

Table 4 shows the responses as to whose decision it was to end the relationship, with the sample split as per Table 3. Here, there are indications that respondents are reticent to say that their ex-partner controlled the decision to end the relationship, with only 17 per cent saying this compared to over half (56 per cent) saying that it was their own decision. The optimal mode is unclear. Face-to-face respondents appeared less likely to report that their ex-partner

was the decision-maker behind the separation (14 per cent compared to 25 per cent of web respondents), with more reporting it as a joint decision (24 per cent compared to 13 per cent).

Table 4: Whose decision to end relationship

	All	Mode (existing panel)	
		Face-to-face	Web
	%	%	%
Don't know	*	1	-
Refused	6	6	6
Base: all separated parents with a reason	*277*	*194*	*83*
Mainly respondent	56	**58**	**51**
Mainly ex-partner	17	**14**	**25**
Joint decision	21	**24**	**13**
Other	6	**4**	**10**
Base: all separated parents who have answered on decision	*253*	*175*	*78*

Numbers in **bold orange** are p<0.05 on chi-squared test.

What do we conclude?

The inclusion of questions in the UKHLS (and other surveys) on the reasons for separation, and who instigated the split, would be invaluable for family research, in particular studies into the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of separation. This experiment suggests that it is feasible to field such questions, either as face-to-face or online (with tentative evidence that face-to-face elicits more of the sensitive responses). However, it is concerning that only a minority of respondents cite themselves as at fault in the separation and, likewise, only a minority reports that their ex-partner instigated the separation. While, to some extent, this may reflect differential non-response among those who 'break up' the family home, it is also likely due to reticence to say either than they were at fault or that they were not the decision-maker in the separation. A useful next step would be to carry out some cognitive work to improve upon the trialled questions, with the specific aim of reducing social desirability bias.

5. References

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