

**October 7-8, 2013 Meeting of the Social Observatories Coordinating Network (SOCN):
Summary Report**

Prepared by Sandra Hofferth and Emilio F. Moran

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List of network members:

J. Lawrence Aber, Psychology, New York University
Henry E. Brady, Political Science, University of California at Berkeley
Susan Cutter, Geography, University of South Carolina
Dalton Conley, Sociology, New York University
Catherine Eckel, Economics, University of Texas at Dallas
Barbara Entwisle, Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Darrick Hamilton, Economics, New School for Social Research
Klaus Hubacek, Geography, University of Maryland
John Scholz, Political Science, Florida State University

Co-chairs: Emilio F. Moran, Anthropology, Michigan State University, moranef@msu.edu
Sandra Hofferth, Family Science, University of Maryland, Hofferth@umd.edu

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Present: Sandy Hofferth, Emilio Moran, Catherine Eckel, Klaus Hubacek, and Darrick Hamilton, Barbara Entwisle via Skype. Because the government was closed, Cheryl Eavey, the Program officer, was unable to attend; however, Myron Guttman, former Associate Director of NSF for SBE, joined by Skype. Chris Bachrach participated on October 7 in the afternoon.

The meeting discussed current activities, potential pathways to move forward in developing observatories, including developing partnerships, and progress on a paper describing the observatory initiative.

I. UPDATES

In the first morning session network members provided updates of their activities since the May meeting and discussed various ways to disseminate network activities – e.g., newsletters, listserves.

Presentations at Annual Meetings. No network members have presented since May. However, presentations are lined up at 1) the American Anthropological Meeting in Chicago in November 2013, 2) the Population Association of America Annual Meeting in May 2014, 3) the American Geographic Association in April 2014, and 3) the American Sociological Association Annual meeting in August 2014.

The Global Science Forum of OECD commissioned a group chaired by Peter Elias and Barbara Entwisle to produce a report, *New Data for Understanding the Human Condition: International Perspectives (2013)*. Barbara and Peter are seeking funds from OECD for study of ethical issues in combining new sources of international data. It would be complementary to SOCN work.

Sandy updated information about SOCN on the website. Since Chris Bachrach posted a white paper on Population Health in the summer, several academics have requested permission to post, but no new papers have been submitted. There is a 1-pager available and a short paragraph for writing stories/newsletter pieces about SOCN.

Sandy reported on several developing collaborations: 1) She has been in contact with Bob Hauser (DBASSE/NAS), who is leading an effort to develop a new survey on social mobility. The NAS convened a workshop in June 2013, and again in August, and have continuing discussions to develop this national survey. They are funded by an NSF Building Community and Capacity grant (BCC). Sandy talked with Tom Plewes, director, Committee on Population, subcommittee of the Committee on National Statistics. Henry Brady, a member of our network, participated in these workshops and presented a paper on political science perspectives. Sandy participated in a conference call in August and gave a short overview of what our network is doing. This group appeared to be enthusiastic about collaborating. They could be a partner or possibly develop an observatory site but more conversations are needed. They have been more interested in national samples, but not yet in the place-based approach we are taking. Because of our interest in social mobility, Sandy is going to follow up. The academic effort is being led by sociologists Matt Snipp and David Grusky. 2) She has been working with Christine Bachrach, who previously directed the office of Behavioral and Social Science Research at NIH and is now leading a group of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholars, to ensure that there is a focus on health in the observatory structure. Her partners include leaders in the population health field. Henry Brady presented to her network in the Spring. Chris described her network and some ideas for moving forward. As a first step, SOCN members might be able to connect with health colleagues in their respective regions of the country.

Emilio was asked by the DBASSE committee to speak with them about SOCN. He will be giving a presentation at the end of April/beginning May to this committee. A story for the anthropological newsletter about SOCN, the presentation at the annual meeting, and the website has been published on their blog site.

Catherine and colleagues put in a proposal for the interdisciplinary behavioral/social science (IBSS) competition at NSF. The theme of the proposal was to exploit the infrastructure and the relationships that they had in place in a neighborhood – health, financial, etc. Five subprojects were submitted as one proposal. Essentially the theme was “decision making by poor people in context of the neighborhood.” . The proposal was rejected in that it didn’t have a unifying research theme. The research proposal was about the neighborhood, but it wasn’t about a single factor. The reviewers expected a more traditional research proposal. The proposal may not have been explicit in the notion of social observatories and that the idea wasn’t clear that creation of social observatories was an NSF priority.

Derrick was just added to the GSS advisory board. The GSS is interested in gathering more information on characteristics of places, particularly schools. Derrick reported that they have an open competition for proposals for panel topics. Barbara has previously been on their advisory board previously. Based on funding restrictions there may be a merging of several GSS efforts. The SOCN needs to keep track of this and watch for collaborative opportunities.

II. PLANS FOR DEVELOPING PILOT TESTS OF THE OBSERVATORY STRUCTURE

The network reviewed the announced opportunities at NSF and their fit with a pilot strategy. Who is planning to submit to which competition? What are different modalities for the pilots? Should we start planning submissions for pilots under cyber infrastructure opportunities?

Sandy circulated the Data Infrastructure Building Blocks (DIBBS) program announcement and the Building Community and Capacity for data-Intensive research in the SBE and in Education and Human resources (BCC) announcement.

The network discussed potential opportunities to submit proposals for pilot project. Whether to apply for pilot studies as a larger network of research, or to apply for individually-funded pilot studies and combine them later was discussed. Myron Gutmann joined the group via Skype and briefly described ongoing activities at NSF. Myron initially suggested reminding NSF of the importance of behavioral and social science research. He also suggested that there may not be a clear way forward on applying for pilot study funds, but to also be honest about the studies when applying for funds. Myron did suggest that some people working at NSF are committed to moving beyond the organizational phase for projects like SOCN, and that funding for pilot studies may well be available in the future. He did think that, given funding limitations, NSF may be re-thinking some of their data initiatives in the near future, making it uncertain exactly what their schedule and focus will be.

The major point of these discussions was that these pilots need to have a substantive scientific agenda. They can’t solely focus on data. Therefore, it would be important to further develop the major substantive concerns that were the focus of the original social observatories initiative. This led to the recommendation for the formation of several working groups of SOCN members. These working groups will focus on identifying potential partners, contacting other researchers to determine what type of work they’re doing, and working through how SOCN can tackle the working group’s theme. At the meeting, two main groups emerged: Social Mobility and Adaptation. Larry Aber, Henry Brady, Dalton

Conley, Barbara Entwisle, Darrick Hamilton, and Sandy Hofferth were identified as potential members of the Social Mobility group. The Adaptation group consists of Susan Cutter, Catherine Eckel, Barbara Entwisle, Klaus Hubacek, Emilio Moran, and John Scholz.

In the afternoon Chris Bachrach joined the group by Skype. With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health and Society Scholars program, Chris leads a group of academic faculty interested in population health. She has identified interested members from Yale, Michigan, UCSF, JHSPH, Columbia, Brandeis, American University, and Boston College.

As described in the population health white paper on the Social Observatories web site, population health research is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to characterize, explain and/or influence the levels and distributions of health within and across populations. Population health researchers view health as the product of multiple determinants at the biologic, genetic, behavioral, social, and environmental levels and their interactions among individuals and groups and across time and generations. The field addresses health outcomes, health determinants, and policies and interventions that link the two in efforts to improve population health and ameliorate health disparities.

A recent Institute of Medicine report (*Shorter Lives, Poorer Health*) and many other reports and studies point to social and behavioral factors as the leading causes of America's poor health. Research on these multiple interacting factors which lie "upstream" to disease onset and progression has been seriously hampered by data limitations. A national network of integrated social science data centers ("social observatories") could make unprecedented contributions to strengthening population health research and improving population health.

- a) The approach being developed by the observatories project is inherently multi-level. Existing plans already cover many of the independent variables that population health researchers consider significant as upstream determinants of health: environmental conditions,
- b) The local-but-national design of the project is also ideally suited to the needs of population health researchers for local data but linked to national policies and programs.
- c) The Affordable Care Act requires nonprofit hospitals to engage in community health planning; to make investments in the communities they serve; and to demonstrate results. Community partnerships would greatly facilitate more effective health policy.

III. PROGRESS ON ARTICLE DESCRIBING OUR PROJECT

The third major agenda item was discussion of the proposed *Science Perspectives* article.

Emilio has been communicating with *Science* Commentary editor, Barbara Jasny. At the present time the document is 5 pages and 2210 words long. Sandy received some comments from Bob Schoeni, Panel Study on Income Dynamics, and from Chris Bachrach, formerly director of OBSSR at NIH. They have significant ideas for designing panel studies and surveys and what our initiative could contribute. Two cautions need to be made. First, is that, given concern with increased access to data on many Americans through multiple sources, the word "observatory" may raise issues of confidentiality and

privacy. A second caution is that our effort cannot be understood as interfering with or replacing the National Statistical System. Katherine Wallman of OMB has expressed concern about such implications. Our efforts are complementary.

Barbara Entwisle suggested shortening the draft to 2 pages and submitting it as a Policy document instead of Perspectives. In reframing the document, she would describe the need to engage multiple disciplines in order to properly answer the questions of today; this idea needs to be introduced at the beginning of the document. Even if the data weren't necessarily meant for research such as proposed by the SOCN, this provides an important new opportunity. The available data from diverse sources need to be connected in order to tackle questions and problems in a large number of disciplines. Yet, all of this work needs to have a framework as to how the data sets will be integrated. The data would need to function as a national sample with localized information available within the national sample.

The second day of the meeting was devoted to a discussion of suggested revisions to the document that were made by Catherine Eckel. A draft version of a 5-page Perspectives article was completed on October 8 and circulated to the network members for comment and suggestions. Following the meeting, Barbara circulated an abbreviated 2-page version of the document that could serve as a Policy piece. Emilio was tasked with reconciling the versions and producing a final version to circulate to all.

The Meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m. on October 8.