Exploring the influence of others:
Modelling social connections in contemporary Britain[1]

Presentation at the Understanding Society Research Conference
24-26 July 2013 University of Essex

Professor Vernon Gayle[2], Professor Paul S. Lambert[3], Dr Dave Griffiths[3] and Dr Mark Tranmer[4]

Do birds of a feather flock together? Or do opposites attract? Between spouses and friends there are notable structural similarities. In countries such as Britain, two hundred years ago we would have expected that a farm worker would have married another famer worker. A hundred years later we could reasonably have expected that a coal miner's best friend would have worked in the same pit (and maybe even on the same shift).

In recent decades the forms that social interactions take have changed in many ways, but the patterns of similarity amongst spouses and friends persist. Nationally representative data show that a sizable proportion of bus drivers are married to cleaners, and we know that many academics are married to other academics. Multiple observations lead us to conclude that young Goths show a preference for friendships with other Goths, and that Christians often restrict their dating to others with the same beliefs.

It is reasonable to assume that individuals with the same social values, views and political beliefs are more likely to gravitate towards spouses and friends that are similar. But are these connections selected of similarity, or do connected people become more similar as time goes by? Consider the following simple illustration. If a man moves in with his vegetarian girlfriend, and she does all of the cooking and the shopping then we expect that his diet may soon become largely vegetarian. In this situation it is not initial similarity that has led to the outcome, but a process of assimilation (or dependency). If the same man avidly watches the Test Match, then we see no obvious reason to suspect that his girlfriend will become a cricket fan.

As a result of their design, datasets such as Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study) routinely collect information on other individuals who have connections with the survey respondent. These additional sources of data are often not exploited in analyses. In the presentation we illustrate how a number of groupings within the contemporary household can be identified. We then showcase how information on spouses and on other household members can be included in analyses of a series of outcomes (e.g. smoking, obesity, health, sport and voting). We conclude that the extra information that comes from other connected people is beneficial and improves our understanding of a wide range of things that are consequential in contemporary social life.