# ELSA long format economic activity and family history data management notes

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**Introduction**

The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)[[1]](#footnote-1) began in 2002 and surveys a representative sample of adults aged 50 and over resident in England (and their cohabiting partners). The third wave of ELSA data collection included a life history module follow-up conducted in 2007, and the data from all of these histories is available to download in a single datafile from the UKDS (SN5050). The aim of the project was to compare the employment and fertility histories from age 16 on reported in ELSA to the employment and fertility histories of two of the UK birth cohorts, the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70). The ELSA ‘life history’ file requires reformatting to construct an economic activity history in the person-spell format comparable with the other studies because it is a flat (person-level, wide format) file where each questionnaire loop consists of between one and three spells, stored under different variable name-stubs and with sometimes inconsistent variable naming conventions across loops. This note sets out the decisions taken in the data management process of turning the economic activity variables into a person-spell long format activity file and the births and partnerships variables similarly to separate person-child and person-partnership long format files. The three do files produce a final reshaped data file, each contain the ELSA respondent identifier and the life history non-response weight, along with the derived variables.

### Harmonisation of economic activity histories

The ELSA respondent was asked to recall every job lasting 6 months of more, and for each job spell whether this was full-time or part-time employment or self-employment as well as if there had been a switch from full-time to part-time work (or vice versa) within the same job, and if so when that switch occurred. Since the other studies treated full-time and part-time work as separate spells (even if for the same employer and in the same job) these needed to be split into separate spells. In addition, the respondent was asked to report what other activities they engaged in before, between and after their job spells. By contrast, the other studies only asked respondents to differentiate between full-time and part-time employment but self-employment was treated as a single category, regardless of weekly hours. Unlike the other studies, ELSA did not include ‘maternity leave’ as an explicit answer category. While some respondents spontaneously reported some spells as ‘Other – maternity leave’, there were so few spells recorded in this way that these were merged with the category ‘looking after home or family’.

* Full-time employment;
* Part-time employment;
* Self-employment;
* Education or training;
* Looking after home and family;
* Other activity;
* Retired.

ELSA asked respondents for the start and end years of each job spell, and by inference the start and end years of non-work spells between job spells. Since the NCDS and BCS70 recorded both start and end dates of spells, the same approach has been adopted for the long format ELSA activity file.

For any spells that did not include paid work, the respondent was able to give multiple responses to record what their activities were during the spell. Since respondents in the other surveys were confined to a single answer category for each spell the multiple response variables for statuses other than paid work were combined into a single variable for each loop. To do this a decision had to be taken on the priority order for which of a respondent’s multiple answers to ‘count’ for that spell of the single-coded variables. The answer unemployed (and looking for work) was prioritised over mention of education or training, followed by any mention of ‘looking after home, family caring’, followed by any mention of ‘retired’. Only if none of these three categories were mentioned was the spell assigned to the code ‘other activity’.

The prioritisation of unemployment and education activities over mentions of home and family care is not intended as a value judgement on the activities but an attempt to approximate the forced choice of a single ‘main’ activity which respondents in the other surveys had to take, the logic being that potentially claiming benefits as unemployed or being enrolled as a student may to the respondent prioritise these activities over unpaid care work at home. However, it should be acknowledged here that this is not unproblematic, especially for women (Dex & McCulloch, 1998). The logic of this prioritisation approach can be checked against the ELSA wave 3 main interview data, which for the current activity asked the respondent to both report all their paid work and other activities in the past month, and then to choose the one that “best” describes the current situation. Only a small number of respondents (45) reported being unemployed as one of their activities, but of those who did 64% chose this as their main activity. This compares with 15% of those (4,079) who mentioned caring or looking after the home and family as one of their activities choosing caring also as what best described their current status.

### Harmonisation family histories: Partners and children

ELSA asked for the start and end year for each cohabiting union the respondent had experienced: when the couple first moved in together, whether they married and if so the year of marriage or civil partnership and the date the relationship ended, if relevant. ELSA also recorded the reason for partnership dissolution. The long format file is a record of partners rather than partnership spells and thus does not record cohabitation and marriage to the same partner as separate spells, nor a transition from cohabiting/married to a living apart together relationship as a partnership dissolution (e.g. when the partner moved into long-term residential care).

ELSA collected the year of birth/adoption of children, and did not include a question on when children left the household (only whether the child had lived with the respondent for most of their childhood). The parenthood histories aimed to focus on children born to, or adopted by, the respondent because data on step-children’s co-residence histories are less complete unless the step-child has been adopted by the respondent. ELSA includes a question for each adopted child whether that child is the biological/birth child of the respondent’s current or former partner (i.e. an adopted step-child).

1. The ELSA study is managed by the following collaborating institutions: UCL Research Department of Epidemiology and Public Health; Institute for Fiscal Studies; NatCen Social Research and the University of Manchester, School of Social Sciences, with the data available from the UK Data Service:   
   Marmot, M., Oldfield, Z., Clemens, S., Blake, M., Phelps, A., Nazroo, J., Steptoe, A., Rogers, N., Banks, J., Oskala, A. (2017). English Longitudinal Study of Ageing: Waves 0-7, 1998-2015. [data collection]. 27th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 5050, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5050-14> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)