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25 Years of SOEP: Over 25 Years of Cooperation of SOEP's DIW Berlin Survey Group with Infratest Sozialforschung and Bernhard von Rosenbladt

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125

Jürgen Schupp

**25 Years of SOEP – Over 25 Years of Cooperation
of SOEP's DIW Berlin Survey Group with Infratest
Sozialforschung and Bernhard von Rosenbladt**

Berlin, August 2008

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at DIW Berlin

This series presents research findings based either directly on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) or using SOEP data as part of an internationally comparable data set (e.g. CNEF, ECHP, LIS, LWS, CHER/PACO). SOEP is a truly multidisciplinary household panel study covering a wide range of social and behavioral sciences: economics, sociology, psychology, survey methodology, econometrics and applied statistics, educational science, political science, public health, behavioral genetics, demography, geography, and sport science.

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25 Years of SOEP –
Over 25 Years of Cooperation of SOEP's DIW Berlin Survey
Group with Infratest Sozialforschung and Bernhard von
Rosenbladt

*by Jürgen Schupp**

In 2008, the longitudinal study SOEP celebrates a remarkable anniversary: its 25th survey wave. The SOEP, a panel of households, families, and individuals, is now a quarter of a century old. Since its inception, the fieldwork-based part of this ambitious, large-scale scientific project has been carried out under the responsibility of Bernhard von Rosenbladt at “Infratest Sozialforschung”: from the submission of the proposal in 1981, through the pretest phase, and through all waves of the survey up to the end of 2007.

I would like to take the opportunity of this celebration of 25 waves of SOEP to provide you with some examples that illustrate Bernhard von Rosenbladt's unique personal contribution to establishing and continuously developing the German Socio-Economic Panel. He deserves a chapter of his own in the history of SOEP, as he is one of the key figures who have made it what it is.

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The university researchers who initiated SOEP as part of the research unit Sfb3 “Microanalytical Foundations of Social Policy” at the Universities of Frankfurt and Mannheim chose DIW Berlin as a partner mainly for the practical purposes of long-term steering and management. The management of the survey has thus been based at DIW Berlin since 1983, where the SOEP’s founder and first director Hans-Jürgen Krupp was then president. And for more than 25 years, Bernhard von Rosenbladt has played a key role in the SOEP study: first as project director, later as division head, and since 1984 as Managing Director of what later became TNS Infratest Sozialforschung.

In general and especially here at the SOEP conference, the Socio-Economic Panel study tends to be associated primarily with the SOEP group at DIW Berlin. Over the last twenty years, the original Sfb3 research unit at the Universities of Frankfurt am Main and Mannheim have been gradually forgotten, although this study would have been inconceivable without them. Also too easily forgotten and having received far too little recognition since the outset are Bernhard von Rosenbladt and his team at Infratest Sozialforschung. Without them SOEP could never have achieved its present success.

The founder of SOEP, Hans-Jürgen Krupp, discussed Bernhard von Rosenbladt’s crucial role at some length in an essay on the SOEP’s history, which was recently published in English as SOEPpaper No. 75.

I hope that Ute Hanefeld and I have also underscored this point in our article in the quarterly DIW *Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung*, which just appeared in German. Gert Wagner also highlighted Bernhard von Rosenbladt's role in the sample's enlargement to the former GDR in a recent article printed in the *Vierteljahrshefte zur Wirtschaftsforschung* No. 3/2008.

I first met Bernhard von Rosenbladt personally in 1984, when I took on the job of survey manager, as it is called now, at DIW Berlin from my predecessor Christoph Büchtemann. He was a valued colleague and longtime friend of both Bernhard von Rosenbladt and myself, who died much too early in 2001.

Bernhard von Rosenbladt

What will ensure that Bernhardt von Rosenbladt's achievements for SOEP will never be forgotten? I would like to stress five major reasons in particular.

1. His wise business decisions.
2. His enormous organizational achievements in ensuring that the survey started on time each year, and that the data were always delivered to the SOEP survey group at DIW Berlin on time.
3. His stimulating ideas on survey methods.
4. His craftsmanship and professionalism in the yearly end-round of questionnaire design.

5. Last but not least, his personal enthusiasm and continuous efforts to improve the quality of the survey.

Bernhard von Rosenbladt as a Businessman

At a very early stage of SOEP's life, Bernhard von Rosenbladt prepared the groundwork to ensure an adequate supply of resources for "the panel" in Infratest's larger economic and social research branch. Infratest was successful in the original tender, which covered carrying out the panel survey and compiling and checking the data as a "cooperation institute" to Sfb 3. From 1984 on, Bernhard von Rosenbladt was also a member of the management board of Infratest Sozialforschung, while continuing to hold material responsibility for the SOEP project, which he had acquired as a major task of the "Sozialforschung" (social research) division. From our standpoint, his membership on the management board gave him the necessary authority to represent SOEP successfully, even in difficult negotiations within the large Infratest company and with the Berlin group.

Moreover, he succeeded in gradually building up a project group within Infratest Sozialforschung—actually quite analogous to the SOEP survey group at DIW Berlin—that would take on primary responsibility for SOEP and thus for developing processes far different from those traditionally used in market research. This group worked in close cooperation with the planning group in Berlin to develop customized

processes and solutions. These were essential for the long term success of such an ambitious longitudinal survey.

The early “institutionalisation” of the SOEP team at Infratest Sozialforschung in the early 1990s as a working division, which made the project a single fully fledged division on equal footing with the labour market, income, education, family and policy research divisions, was, strictly speaking, an internal structural break in the organization of Infratest’s social research division. And, by the way, this happened much earlier at Infratest than it did at DIW Berlin, where the SOEP group only became an independent department in 2003. All the other departments at Infratest, as well as at DIW Berlin, were and are defined by their relatively broadly based thematic focus, making their work on individual studies more diversified than in the case of SOEP. In sum, the SOEP groups at Infratest as well as at DIW Berlin are very special units-- this does not always make life easy for SOEP in its larger institutional contexts but mirrors the size and complexity of a long-running panel project.

The early independence of the SOEP group in Munich was only possible because, along with a lively core group of highly motivated staff members, Bernhardt von Rosenbladt was not only an enthusiastic project director but also an effective leader. All the staff members of SOEP in Munich were deeply committed to “the panel” and they worked and still work with great enthusiasm to ensure its quality,

cooperating constructively to find practical solutions to the wide variety of challenges which are to be faced when setting up and consolidating an ambitious panel survey like SOEP. All our colleagues in the Berlin SOEP survey group who work with the Munich team in various fields are highly appreciative of this.

Rosenbladt combined a profound interest in the subject matter and results of the study with infectious enthusiasm for the idea and farsighted strategic planning; he also showed great courage and persistence. This was evident in his economic activities and in his approach to methodological and conceptual questions. The former appeared to be vital not only in the more than difficult financial situation during the early years at Infratest, when SOEP made major internal annual losses—as we recently learned from Munich—up to a seven-figure D-Mark sum. It was certainly not the last time that Bernhardt von Rosenbladt showed exceptional courage in making investment decisions. More than once, he allowed the work on a main panel wave to start at Infratest even without a formal commission, i.e., contractual basis. One example is the end of the year 1988, when a difficult conversion to a new funding line for SOEP was under way, and later again during the SOEP’s enlargement to include East Germany in summer 1990.

Bernhard von Rosenbladt as a Social Scientist

I cannot enumerate here all the many great innovations that have found their way into SOEP in the course of 25 years. They include six new sub-samples since 1984, half a dozen new special questionnaires with a large number of new major themes and many new questions in all the different kinds of questionnaires.

I would like to mention some major practical innovations in the survey that rarely receive acknowledgement in scientific papers. They have been selected and are presented here especially to mark the personal contribution that Rosenbladt has made to the permanent development of the SOEP.

SOEP's question programme. Every year, when the survey instruments for the next SOEP wave are agreed upon between Berlin and Munich, all of the questions are reassessed in principle—and to ensure faithful replication of the longitudinal study only between 10% and 15% are revised. Bernhardt von Rosenbladt always insisted on putting forward his own suggestions for the sequence of the indicators to be surveyed in each case, and his suggestions would always take account of the restrictions imposed by the double-sided graphic layout and the need for the time references and the themes to be at least halfway analogous to the logic of a “normal conversation”. He also

always bore in mind the need to prevent possible pitfalls for the interviewers and the people they were interviewing.

Let me recall here that in the beginning of SOEP, the primary means of communication between Munich and Berlin was the telephone.

Discussions with Bernhardt von Rosenbladt generally took place in the (very) late afternoon and often lasted over an hour. And keep in mind: in the early years, the quality of fax transmissions was still too poor for communication to coordinate the survey instruments. Internet connections between Infratest and Berlin did not yet exist and the “normal” mail could take three days. Thus, we often sent the results of our telephone conversations back and forth by special delivery (*Eilbote*) to our home addresses. Thus the postman would often ring my doorbell shortly before six in the morning on the next working day, waking up me and all my housemates.

I would like to list some of the perhaps less striking and less visible innovations contributed by Bernhard von Rosenbladt that have played an essential part in SOEP’s lasting success. It is no longer necessary to talk about the big innovations like the subsample for East Germany or the inclusion of behavioral experiments because these innovations are well known, and papers co-authored by Bernhard von Rosenbladt have been published on these topics. Yet a number of survey innovations have been largely ignored in the documentation, as they have often being taken for granted alongside the more spectacular innovations.

(Assistant) interpreter to accompany the (main) interviewer. One such innovation was allowing an (assistant) interpreter to accompany the (main) interviewer to households where the household head is not of German origin as it was particularly frequently the case in the so called foreigners sample drawn in 1984 (sample “B”).

Infratest (as any other fieldwork organization, including official statistics) did not have a sufficiently large staff of interviewers with foreign language skills to conduct face-to-face interviews throughout Germany. And Infratest was not in a position to create such a staff solely for the SOEP B sample. So a “workable compromise” was needed. It was agreed that “where there were evident language problems, the interviewers could bring a ‘companion’” with a knowledge of the language in question, “to open the door”, so to speak. Most important: the interviewer could have the costs of hiring such an expert reimbursed. This enabled SOEP interviewers to incorporate households without a good knowledge of German as permanent participants in the SOEP study.

New Questionnaires. An extremely important practical innovation was that of using the “green” and “blue” covers for the different questionnaires for persons being interviewed for the first and second time. Bernhardt von Rosenbladt was very keen to see this done, and it was carried out after just x waves. The introduction of the green and

blue versions was the key to reducing the growing complexity of fieldwork logistics to such an extent that later sub-samples could be easily integrated.

Biography Questionnaire. Another early project to which Bernhardt von Rosenbladt was deeply committed (and which also initially involved additional costs) was combining the retrospective information that formed a “major focus” of the personal questionnaire in the first three waves into a special biography questionnaire specifically for the relatively low number of persons interviewed for the first time each year. It became very important when new sub-samples were added a short time later.

The “GDR Panel”: SOEP C Sample. The rapid creation of a panel in the German Democratic Republic, which ultimately formed the first wave of the East German SOEP sample, is an particularly outstanding example of SOEP’s flexibility, which extended even beyond guaranteeing continuity and far-sightedness in its mission. To rapidly launch the first wave of a major survey in the former GDR in June 1990, even before the economic and currency union, was a bravura act in Bernhard von Rosenbladt’s professional life. The subsample C deserves to go down in the history of SOEP as a true kind of adventure which is possible only in times of rapid transitions.

Subsample C was an adventure because firstly, nobody had experience with the quality of the sampling frame in GDR. Secondly, it was uncertain whether a sufficiently large number of interviewers could be recruited who could cope successfully with a large number of qualitatively demanding face-to-face interviews, and whether they could be recruited and trained in a very short time. As we knew from practical experience, such concerns concerning the quality and quantity of interviewers can prove to be the Achilles heel of any face-to-face survey.

It is highly questionable whether this innovation could have produced its sustained success without the “pragmatic optimism” of Rosenbladt, which was founded on a rich base of professional experience. As director he was responsible for testing the quantitative and qualitative resilience of the new joint venture between Infratest Sozialforschung, Munich, and the new Infratest branch in Nalepastrasse in Berlin (which was Infratest Burke Berlin incorporating the former sociological research department of the GDR’s state radio station).

The introduction of the new CAPI survey technology. There were changing constellations of interests on the introduction of CAPI between Munich and Berlin. At the start of the discussion in the mid-1990s, the Berlin group first stepped up pressure on the survey institute to make this new technology available for SOEP, while Bernhardt von Rosenbladt was rather inclined to put a brake on this new technology

which was not well established within the Infratest company. After the initial discussions in the SOEP Advisory Board and the rapid training of many Infratest interviewers in the new survey technology, however, Rosenbladt suddenly became very enthusiastic about the idea of converting to CAPI. In the SOEP group, however, skepticisms suddenly emerged over possible “mode effects”, with the majority wanting to hold back, fearing the risks of uncontrolled changeover. However, it became apparent that the conversion could be tested in an initial supplementary sample. The controlled introduction of CAPI by means of a truly experimental design was Rosenbladt’s idea: each interviewer had to carry out both CAPI and PAPI interviews to enable possible interviewer effects on the changeover to be analyzed and controlled.

More innovations. I would like to mention several more innovations just briefly. They all clearly bear Bernhardt von Rosenbladt’s signature:

- Following Up of Non-Sample Members
- Introducing a “Gap Questionnaire” for “temporary drop-outs” who come back to SOEP
- Establishing “Refresher Subsamples” F and H
- Establishing subsamples for special subpopulations: D (Immigrants) and G (High Income Households)
- Infratest’s own coding scheme for open ended answers on occupation and industry

- Adjustments of the questionnaires due to the introduction of the euro
- Introducing a short individual questionnaire for temporal drop-outs
- Introducing the Youth Questionnaire
- Measuring instead of surveying by questions
 - behavioral experiments (on trust, trustworthiness and time preferences)
 - health measure by taking the “grip strength” competence tests

Bernhard von Rosenbladt as a Quality Manager

Bernhardt von Rosenbladt was always cautious with any integration of innovative methods or new themes into SOEP. The primacy of panel stability, despite all the eagerness to innovate, is a principle that Berlin and Munich fundamentally share. An important consideration here is that cooperation with those respondents who have participated in the SOEP main survey over many years should not be jeopardized unnecessarily by always being confronted with new and increasingly “sensitive” questions, and certainly not with instruments that are not fully developed. Careful preparation of the introduction of innovations into the panel is an essential pillar of “quality management” shaped by Bernhard von Rosenbladt.

Tribute

Bernhardt von Rosenbladt has helped to form and shape the longitudinal study SOEP in a unique and far-reaching way since the very beginning. His influence will continue to define the character of SOEP in the future as well. How would I sum up his achievements?

It was always part of the constructive division of labor between the SOEP groups in Berlin and Munich that even when innovative proposals had successfully passed through the “needle’s eye” in Berlin we could never assume that the proposals put forward would be summarily accepted for fieldwork and implemented. When I had sent our wishes on to Munich as the final results of our discussion in Berlin (and at the beginning of SOEP, in Frankfurt and Mannheim, too), Bernhard von Rosenbladt had the last say.

Bernhardt von Rosenbladt always exercised his role as critical advisor, as constructive co-designer and in case of doubt as “advocate of the respondents”, with the fervor of a passionate architect of questionnaires, regardless of whether the issue was a principle question of method and concept or a detail of instrument design. With his natural authority, he never shied away from giving unpopular negative feedback on the latest drafts from Berlin.

Through the many years of our cooperation I myself was not always exempted as a target of his open criticism, which could at times be merciless. But I willingly admit that I am increasingly satisfied, and I regard it as proof of the quality of my own ideas, when innovations pass the severe Rosenbladt scrutiny and are implemented more or less without change. Personally I have learned a great deal from more than twenty years of working with Bernhardt von Rosenbladt, and it may be that I have successfully adopted some of his skills. It is not only for this that I wish to take the opportunity today to thank him with all my heart.

Moving on!

Now that Bernhard von Rosenbladt has formally retired as project director at Infratest and handed over responsibility for the project to Nico A. Siegel, Rosenbladt has continued to act as critical advisor, and as a constructive and conscientious participant in the process, to the benefit of all those involved. One of the most challenging new kinds of measurement being considered for SOEP, the collection of DNA samples in a pretest, was already put forward by Nico Siegel. He has been very successful in running that pilot study. But he and we in Berlin are happy that Bernhard von Rosenbladt is still ready to give his advice — and in fact he had a lot to say about the sampling of DNA samples.

We would be deeply grateful if Bernhard von Rosenbladt would continue supporting us—in word and deed—in what is probably one of

the biggest challenges faced by survey research today: how to counter the decline in willingness to participate in the first survey (that is, not only the first waves of the panel but all the cross-section surveys) and help us to find effective and efficient practical solutions. We also hope that we will be able to draw on his advice in the future, too, on issues concerning the ethical limits to survey research, such as data on biomarkers.

Above all we send him our best wishes for the coming years, and we gladly grant him any amount of new leisure, with more time to spend with his family. On behalf of all our former and present Berlin colleagues, especially including Gert Wagner, I extend our warmest thanks for the many years of close and harmonious cooperation!