MethodsNews

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Newsletter from the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

New NCRM Explore site

David Martin, NCRM, University of Southampton

NCRM are launching some exciting new features on our website which we are calling 'NCRM Explore', including personalised content, and a new way of searching our extensive research methods materials. You can access them at www.ncrm.ac.uk/explore.

NCRM's website is eleven years young. During that period we have undertaken several major redesigns to reflect the ever-changing tools and styles with which our users are most familiar, as well as essential changes to the underlying technical infrastructure. Over the intervening years we have had the privilege of working with a huge and ever-growing range of social science researchers who have held grants associated with NCRM or contributed to our training programme and Research Methods Festivals. These activities have led to an even wider range of research papers, reports and training materials and a large database of events and publications. For seven years we also hosted the separate ESRC ReStore repository (now a part of the NCRM site), which collated and maintained online resources from other ESRC-funded research methods initiatives. We regularly email thousands of subscribers of our newletters and e-bulletins, quite possibly including yourself! All these riches present a challenge both to us and our users - how best to present and find all the stuff in which each individual is most interested?

In response to this challenge we are introducing NCRM Explore. This allows users to login and receive more customised content. In our first release it includes top recommendations from our recent publications, training courses, videos and podcasts, most recently visited pages and searches, as well as the ability to amend research interests and communication preferences. UK academics can login using their existing institutional details, in just the same way as for online journal access and other ESRC services such as the UK Data Service. Other users are able to create their own NCRM login details. The first time you login you will be asked to tell us about yourself and your research methods interests by selecting from entries in the NCRM research methods typology, with which we annotate all our publications and events.

Once logged in, users can still navigate everywhere else in the NCRM site and you don't have to be logged in to use our new and powerful Explore search tool which offers many innovations over our present search and provides features with which users will be familiar from other search engines. Users can opt to see best-matching options automatically completed as soon as they start typing. Before or after searching it is possible to filter on a range of NCRM-specific attributes, such as publications, events, items in the ReStore repository and then to further refine results for example by displaying just video or audio content. If you are logged in, we can even tailor these results based on your research interests and save your recent searches for future use.

Of course, we hope that users will see the value of logging in and telling us about themselves and their research interests because this will help us to further tailor web content and communications in future - we have exciting plans for online training materials and research outputs associated with our new projects and would much rather target this information to the NCRM users to whom they are of greatest interest, but some of these developments will only be possible once we start to build up coverage of interests and preferences for a good proportion of our users.

So why not give it a try now? If you're still not sure, watch the short video at http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/explore.

The value and place of qualitative research in science policy-making

Judith Petts, University of Southampton

This NCRM event was held at the British Academy on 27th October 2015. Key, contemporary questions around the role and value of qualitative research and evidence in policy-making, not least how it is valued relative to other sciences were discussed.

There is a fascinating tension between the widely appreciated understanding of the essential role of social science in policy-making - not least around complex, uncertain and contentious environmental and technological challenges - and the suspicion that evidence based on qualitative methods lacks the robustness of other sciences. Of course, no scientific method (or, indeed mix of methods) can be judged better or worse than another in isolation from the research or evidence question it seeks to inform and address.

The problem that evidence based on analysis of narrative, discussion and commentary can be regarded as inferior to that which provides statistical representativeness and reproducibility is not new[1]. Issues of quality are endemic across the spectrum of evidence categories: from experimental, through model based, epidemiological, observational and narrative[2]. It can feel like an 'uneasy truce' or even a 'cold war'[3] between the different sciences, sometimes resulting in qualitative research being accepted merely in the context of providing nuance for quantitative studies. Hence, social sciences are often included late in policy-making and research: as communication rather than evidence. To make the best of social sciences their contributions must be fully integrated at the beginning of enquiries.

Despite the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Mark Walport, reaffirming the 'central contribution of the social sciences and humanities to informed decision-making by national governments and transnational organisations' (Times Higher Education, 22/10/15) tensions remain around the value and role of social science evidence. Ian Boyd, Chief Scientific Adviser of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, expressed some of these during this event, drawing on examples of policy-making dilemmas and emergencies that the Department has to respond to and the importance of the scientific method in this regard. In the Government's recent response[4] to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's call for a wider public debate on GM there was an insistence that science-based assessment of risks to human health or the environment must be the focus of the decision-making process. But social science methods could help to understand how to effectively frame communications on GM so as to encourage constructive public debate as to the acceptability or tolerability of different policy options. Roland Jackson explored the importance and experience of deliberative public engagement in this regard.

A failure to collate evidence as to the underlying framings of public responses lies at the heart of a number of societal challenges to technological development. Ultimately innovation may not be tolerated for perfectly logical reasons that have far less to do with concerns about potential risks than with disquiet about institutional motives and behaviours and perceived threats to things that people value[5]. Seeking to drive policy-making purely on an assessment of the physical risk (in itself often the subject of large uncertainties, ambiguities and indeed ignorance) will continue to be counterproductive.

Andy Stirling picked up this tension in observing[6]: 'problems of ambiguity arise when experts disagree over the framing of possible options, contexts, outcomes, benefits or harms. They cannot be reduced to risk analysis and demand plural and conditional treatment'. It is the power of Q2 social science that is essential in this regard: i.e. evidence approaches which mix complementary quantitative and qualitative methods – to understand the 'how' and 'why' of people's responses.

Qualitative social science must meet common quality criteria around transparency, clear match of method to question, open interpretation of accessible data, and potential for third parties to independently review evidence:

- The aims must be transparent
- The match of method to question has to be clear
- Interpretation of the data must be open in terms of the error and uncertainty
- Third parties should be able to review the evidence and arrive at an independent interpretation of the findings, and
- The data must be accessible

Importantly, social scientists who bring qualitative evidence into 'interdisciplinary deliberation'[7] of the sort essential to policy-making around global challenges must be open to challenge on their evidence. They must be sensitive to, rather than annoyed by, how their science is perceived and valued.

Video from this event is available on www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/video or on the NCRM YouTube channel.

References

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2 Hazardous Substances Advisory Committee (2015) Considering Evidence; The Approach taken to Hazardous Substances in the UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/452336/considering-evidence-hsac-approach.pdf

3 Veltri, G.A., Lim., R., Miller, R. (2014) More than meets the eye: the contribution of qualitative research to evidence-based policy-making. Innovation: the European J. of Social Sciences Research, 27(1): 1

4 House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (2015) Advanced genetic techniques for crop improvement: regulation, risk and precaution: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2014-15. The Stationery Office, London

5 Petts, J. (2014) Context matters to human perception and response. Chapter 9 in Annual Report of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, ibid

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Creative research methods: the story so far

Helen Kara, We Research It Ltd

Creative research methods are often treated as though they are new, yet people have always used creative ways of solving problems. We say, 'necessity is the mother of invention,' and indeed all research methods were invented once. Some research texts write of methods as if they are static and fixed, but this is far from the case.

Creativity is closely linked with problem-solving and with uncertainty, both key elements of research. Any research project is made up of hundreds or thousands of decisions and each decision holds space for creativity. Perhaps more surprisingly, there is also evidence of a close relationship between ethical decision-making and creative thinking[1].

So all research is creative. We talk about 'doing' research as if it was like doing the dishes, but I would argue that we make research as if it was like making a tapestry. Having said that, some research projects are more creative than others. Creativity in research can be stifled by regulations, constraints of time and budget, lack of knowledge, skill, or courage. Some of these factors are easier to influence than others, and perhaps the easiest is the knowledge factor. I have always used creative methods in my own research, wherever I was able to do so and it was appropriate for the work in hand. This is a crucial point: methods must flow from the research question, and should be those most likely to help provide an answer. Newly learned methods may seem very tempting to try out, but it is never good practice to be seduced by an attractive young method when an older, more familiar one would serve you better.

In early 2012 I was considering how to address a particularly complex research question, and I began to think I might not have enough tools in my methodology box. I went looking online for a book on creative research methods. Surely, I thought, someone must have written one by now. It would be really useful... I searched and searched, until a realisation crept over my skin and into my brain: if I wanted to read that book, I was going to have to write it first.

As usual, writing involved reading. Lots of reading. I read over 800 reports of research, in journals and books; about 500 made it into the book, and just over 100 were showcased as examples of creative research. As I read, I slowly came to understand that creative research methods could be conceptualised under four broad headings: arts-based methods, research using technology, mixed-methods research, and transformative research frameworks.

Arts-based methods include visual and performative arts, creative writing, music, textile arts and crafts – pretty much any art form can be used in the service of research. In fact, the arts and research are closely linked, as artists of all kinds use research in support of their work. And arts-based methods, like all creative methods, apply to both quantitative and qualitative research. One of my favourite examples is that of a mathematician researching hyperbolic geometry, i.e. the geometry of frilly things like lettuce and jellyfish. Male mathematicians had tried and failed to model this for centuries, and it wasn't until the American mathematician Daina Taimina was musing on the problem while crafting that she realised it could be done using crochet. I recommend her TED talk.

As researchers, we all use technology, and have done for centuries. But technological advances offer new opportunities. We can now use apps, mash-ups, data visualisations, APIs – though while this proliferation excites some people, it is daunting for others. Some fear that technology will change their research practice, and it will, though this seems to me not a cause for fear, but for care and thought.

Mixed methods is perhaps the most well established area, with dedicated books and journals. But the potential – and the risks – of mixing methods are still not understood by most researchers. People often think in terms of gathering data using both quantitative and qualitative methods, but there is so much more scope for mixing, from using different theoretical perspectives to inform the same piece of research to multi-media presentation and dissemination.

Transformative research frameworks include participatory, decolonising, activist and community-based research. These are frameworks designed to reduce power imbalances within the research process and, ideally, to affect structural inequalities more widely. They are challenging to implement, requiring more time and other resources than more traditional frameworks for research, but when used well they can indeed transform aspects of our society for the better.

Of course these four areas are not mutually exclusive. There is exemplary research using them all, such as the work of Ashlee Cunsolo Willox and her colleagues in Canada[2]. They worked within a decolonising community-based framework to investigate the effects of climate change on Inuit people in Rigolet, a small settlement in northern Labrador. The method was digital storytelling, developed in week-long workshops which involved discussion, concept maps, interviews, art, music and photography.

Creative research methods, particularly en masse, can seem quite intimidating. Not every researcher can – or wants to – plan their project diagramatically, gather data from social media, conduct metaphor or life course analysis, and disseminate through a multi-media arts installation. But there are two key take-away points. First, any non-research skills you have may be useful in the service of research. Second, if you want to expand your methodological repertoire, you can do so one step at a time.

References

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The NCRM first International Visitor Exchange Scheme fellowships

Tarani Chandola, NCRM, University of Manchester

The NCRM are pleased to announce the results of our first International Visitor Exchange Scheme (IVES) competition. Applications for visits to the UK by leading researchers in social science methodology were invited, along with early and mid-career researchers to visit centres of methodological expertise in the social sciences abroad. A summary of the successful applications are below and events related to the visits will be held throughout 2016. So please keep an eye out for some of the innovative methodological events that will be developed through the NCRM IVES fellowships.

Dr Mick Couper, an expert in survey research methodology from the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan will be visiting the Institute for Socio-Economic Research (ISER) at the University of Essex. He will work with Dr Annette Jäckle on the use of new technologies for data collection, such as new mobile and digital technologies, in longitudinal surveys such as Understanding Society. Large scale social surveys are increasingly interested in using new technologies to complement their existing questionnaires. Using new technologies could provide data on new topics, at a cheaper cost, and potentially with fewer errors. However, only a few surveys have trialled data collection using new technologies. They will work on research addressing some of the barriers to the incorporation of new technologies in data collection around:

• concerns about how respondents react to requests for data collection using new technologies and whether this will affect response rates to the main questionnaire,
• limited survey budgets that do not allow for development and testing,
• a lack of a theoretical framework to guide the understanding of potential error sources in data collected using new technologies, and
• a lack of guidance on best practices for data collection using new technologies.

Dr Couper will also deliver an NCRM short course on some of these topics during his visit.

Dr Michelle Fine and Jill Bradbury will be visiting the Centre for Narrative Research, at the University of East London, hosted by Dr Corinne Squire. Dr Fine is from the Department of Social and Personality Psychology, The City University of New York, and is a leading force in participatory action research and social science advocacy. Dr Jill Bradbury, from the Psychology Department at Witwatersrand University, is the founder of Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation, a South Africa-wide network, with methodological expertise in the context of social justice. Some of the key debates in narrative research are around how 'participation' relates to varied narrative research approaches, such as visual, ethnographic, longitudinal, digital, and multi-modal methods. In addition, the links between narratives and social transformation are increasingly salient for social researchers focused on inequality, precarity, climate change, post-conflict, migration, transnationalism, and decoloniality. They will develop and facilitate:

• a two-day methodology colloquium at UEL with presentations on multidisciplinary perspectives on narrative methodologies, participation, and social transformation,
• a proposal for an edited book on narrative, participation and social transformation,
• an NCRM short course and two methods workshops addressing participation issues in narrative research, and in working in contexts of social transformation,
• the development of a new international network on innovative methods for participatory and socially transformative research.

Dr Helen Johnson, from the School of Applied Social Science, University of Brighton, will collaborate with poets (young slam/spoken word artists) to co-produce autobiographical poems of their experiences. Youth slam and spoken word (YSSW) is a form of poetry, which is delivered primarily in oral performance and helps young people explore and express their experiences. It is particularly popular in the US, where thousands of young people participate in YSSW groups and events and it is especially prominent amongst marginalised, inner city youth and is often used to explore difficult issues, such as sexist, racist and heterosexist prejudice. Dr Johnson will visit Prof. Claudia Mitchell at the Department for Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University, Montreal to develop:

• the 'poetic autoethnography' method for wider use, particularly amongst social scientists in the UK,
• a journal article, detailing the pilot project's methods and creative/academic outputs,
• a half-day workshop at the University of Brighton, aimed at social scientists; artist-practitioners and local organisations
• a short film, depicting workshop activities and sections of the final poetry performance.

There will be another round of IVES funding announced in early 2016 for visiting fellowships to start later in the year. Please look out for the announcement on the NCRM webpages www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Reflecting on the NCRM Autumn School:
"Radical Interdisciplinarity in the Social Sciences"

Sami Everett, Woolf Institute, Cambridge

The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) Autumn School on Radical Interdisciplinarity in the Social Sciences was the ideal place to consider some of the methodological complexities of my postdoctoral research project on faithbased social initiatives in Paris, with a focus on the concept and role of Trust[1]. I work within an international team of social scientists at the Woolf Institute, which itself transcends disciplinary boundaries. As such, different perspectives, positions and epistemologies matter to me, a great deal.

Upon admission to the Autumn School, the interdisciplinary scope of the term ´trust´ in civil society was accepted as a subject for discussion with my peers. The aim was to open up our individual and collective perspectives on the complexity of conducting radical interdisciplinary research.

Autumn school participants had a broad ranging disciplinary background often focusing on issues in their project-led postdoctoral research that can be approached from several vantage points. Some examples include: climate change, health (including food and well-being), community interaction and urban planning. In seeking to avoid various biases, including London-as-the-centre-of-knowledge, the organisers selected a majority of female presenters and delegates based notably in Scotland, whose heritage spans the UK and Africa. Such a mix of people might have more aptitude for the difficulties of interdisciplinarity.

The definition of the word discipline itself would be a moot point[2] over the course of the Autumn School. In particular its ambiguous boundaries. Questions such as 'how does social anthropology differ from sociology?' and 'can a social anthropology and sociology department co-exist in the same institution?' were exposed in the introduction by Mark Elliot and Graham Crow. Moreover, the epistemological shift in the way society views research output and therefore funding bodies too, was given significant attention. Such a complex context was lightened by the mirth created around inaccuracies in the spelling of the noun 'interdisciplinarity'.

It appears that much "Big Issue" research, for example relating to crisis, inclusivity, and innovation[3], over which the social science spends a disproportionate amount of time, has been analysed by a multi-disciplinary approach. That is to say, different disciplinary perspectives separately feeding in to a given research project. But this is not the fusional nature of truly interdisciplinary work, which, by virtue of its co-production between scholars (which can be trans-disciplinary) should be created in tandem with actors outside of academia and requires all parties involved to have some basic understanding of the other's discipline. This includes their methodological toolkit and some form of empathy or a begrudging appreciation of it for the fulfillment of a greater public good.

From the multitude of personal and professorial testimonies, it transpired that communication, language, and respect, are tantamount to the good functioning of an interdisciplinary research project. Anne Murcott was refreshingly honest in her examples concerning the near impossibility of interdisciplinary dialogue (tracing projects from 1960s through to 1990s). She was not most sanguine about the prospect of such work yielding results of adequate quality. Among her explanations for this were the difficulties of organizing people when their constructed disciplinary identities repelled them. Nevertheless, despite these apparently intractable difficulties, the Food project that she directed would be at the forefront of interdisciplinarity[4]. Food is an example of a juncture point for social and natural science; the lines between which are more blurred than we might think.

Relatedly, the "West of Scotland effect" on mortality rates, explained Mhairi MacKenzie[5], is a social problem that has been most apt in capturing the input and intermingling of an interdisciplinary committee. Intriguingly, it appears that the "political attack" to which a broad cross-section of Glaswegian society has been subject from the navel gazing centre of "British" politics put the radical into Professor Mackenzie's project as it is a cause around which many different disciplines can cohere.

Interdisciplinarity is both a serious source of tension and a potential site of some scientific creativity. In order to bring about such creativity – which the more practical sessions by Laura Meagher and Anne Bruce allowed us to work through – the most important advice for scholars, practitioners, and civil society bodies engaging in research together lies in the maintaining of a common language, objectives, rigorous sharing and open-minded debate and discussion.

As mentioned at the beginning, ´trust´ as a group discussion theme opened up a space to discuss the challenges that researchers – and by extension like-minded communities – have, to confront the doxa of powerful groups that define disciplinary lines and their epistemologies, whilst actively partaking of them. Radical interdisciplinarity thus requires a state of mind in which one opens up; it is about realizing the extent of one's question and the acknowledgement of the limits of one's individual input. Together we found that in order for ´trust´ to be pertinent it must be tightly coordinated, polyphonic and inclusive as an interdisciplinary project and a broader social strategy: a most onerous balancing act indeed.

Notes

1 For more information see: http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/news/detail.asp?ItemID=729

2 among pre-course reading was this (http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/783/) insightful paper on the difficulties of defining a discipline

3 As defined by the European Union axes for 2020 research: ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/index.cfm?pg=funding

4 For more up-to-date work see: http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/the-handbook-of-food-research-9781847889164/

5 For a more in-depth description of Prof Mackenzie's work see the freely accessible Glasgow University on-line workshop overview: http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_42072_en.pdf

Variation within households in consent to link survey data to administrative records: Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study

Tarek Mostafa, University College London, Institute of Education

Longitudinal surveys face significant challenges due to the rise in survey costs, attrition over time, and non-coverage of the target population. A promising solution to some of these problems is survey and administrative data linkage. Administrative data linkage leads to shorter interviews, less respondent burden and an overall reduction in costs[1] in addition to the gain of valuable information on respondents. However, access to administrative data is restricted by consent. Non-consent occurs when respondents refuse permission to link their administrative records to their survey data. It results in smaller samples and possibly in sample bias if the likelihood of consent is related to the characteristics of respondents.

This study aims to advance our knowledge about consent by analysing adult respondents' behaviour when consenting to link their own administrative records in contrast to their behaviour when consenting to link someone else's records (i.e. the cohort member in the Millennium Cohort Study). These variations in consent behaviour have not been explored in the past. All previous studies focused on respondents consenting to link their own records but not those of other members of their household[2,3]. The paper uses data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and focuses on consent to link the cohort member's health and educational records and the main respondent's health and economic records (all consents are sought in wave 4 of MCS). The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

Do respondents behave differently when consenting to link their own administrative records in comparison to consenting to link those of their children?

Does respondents' consent behaviour vary according to the domain of consent, e.g. health, economic, education records?

What is the impact of interviewers on consent outcomes and can interviewer effects be separated from the impact of an interviewer's geographical assignment?

In summary, the findings show that main respondents behave differently when consenting to link their own records and when consenting on behalf of the cohort members. For instance, parents of children with high cognitive skills are more likely to consent on linking their children's educational records. In contrast, the child's cognitive skills do not affect the parents' likelihood to link their own health and economic records. Moreover, being a private person has a more significant effect on the MRs outcomes than those of the CM. When it comes to loyalty to the survey, respondents who have missed a wave in the past are found to be less likely to consent irrespective of the outcome. In contrast, partial evidence was found in support of the impact of past relationship with the agency holding the administrative data. Among the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, ethnicity was found to have the strongest impact irrespective of the outcome. Non-white respondents are less likely to consent. The cross-equation correlations measured through the multivariate probit models showed that the highest level of association is between outcomes sought for the same respondent (i.e. MRs consenting for linking their own records vs. MRs consenting for linking the CMs records).When interviewers' effects were included through the use of fixed effects models, the explanatory power of the models increased by 3 to 4 times. This indicates that the interviewers' characteristics and behaviour have a large effect on consent.

In terms of fieldwork practices, the findings suggest that it is possible to identify the respondents who are less likely to consent (ethnic minorities, respondents with higher privacy concerns, and respondents who have dropped out from the survey in the past). Interviewers have a strong impact on consent, therefore in the case of low consent rates, the matching of interviewers and respondents and the allocation of interviewers, with more survey experience, to difficult cases might improve consent rates.

The findings also indicate that the linked administrative data is likely to suffer from sample composition bias due to non-consent. This is of a particular interest for the MCS data users. For instance the linked MCS and educational records are likely to lose children with lower cognitive skills. Similarly the high and significant impact of ethnicity means that samples are likely to lose non-white minorities. Since ethnicity is highly correlated with educational, health and economic outcomes, the data contained in the linked administrative records will be affected by non-consent. However, the total level of bias depends on non-consent and on the extent of non-linkage (the failure to link data even if consent was given) which might alleviate or exacerbate the initial non-consent bias.

A full paper on this topic was published in the International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Mostafa, T. (2015). Variation within Households in Consent to Link Survey Data to Administrative Records: Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. International Journal of Social Research Methodology. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2015.1019264

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Consultation on training needs in advanced social science research methods

Gabriele Durrant, Rebekah Luff, Rose Wiles and Graham Crow, NCRM, University of Southampton

One of the initial roles of the Training and Capacity Building (TCB) directorate of the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM), was to consult and liaise with key stakeholders in the UK training landscape to identify current and future training needs in advanced social science research methods. Given the significant recent and forthcoming changes in the UK methods training landscape, the emergence of new data and methods and the NCRM starting a new round of a broad-ranging training programme we felt it was an appropriate time to take stock and to conduct a training needs assessment including a strategic review of advanced methods training in the UK.

The aim of this consultation has been to seek the views of the social science research community on current and future provision of advanced methods training in the social sciences. The focus has been on questions not only of where capacity may be lacking but also of how identified under-capacity should best be addressed and be strengthened. The report, which is available from the NCRM website[1], is intended to inform the content and delivery of the NCRM training programme as well as the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) advanced training strategy.

The broad-ranging consultation conducted during 2015 consisted of the following components, covering a range of target audiences across all career stages, sectors and geographic regions: 1. consultation with key ESRC and non-ESRC training stakeholders via personal interviews; 2. consultation with UK PhD students (both ESRC funded and others) via an online survey; 3. consultation with early career researchers via an interactive workshop supported by the ESRC Future Research Leaders scheme; 4. consultation with the professional social science research community via an online survey jointly with the Social Research Association (SRA) and 5. an audit of the use of NCRM training and resources.

The key findings include:

• Training needs and topics:

The following broad topics were highlighted across the different elements of this consultation and are consistent with work done by ESRC to identify capacity needs: big data/digital data as new forms of data (includes accessing, e.g. via crowdsourcing, storing, managing, handling and analysing such data, as well as issues of data security and ethics), biosocial data, new forms of longitudinal data and their analysis, survey methods, in particular interviewing and longitudinal data analysis, ethics, impact evaluation methods (both quantitative and qualitative), interdisciplinary research and mixed methods and methods for assessing research impact. Respondents also emphasised that core training in established areas should not be neglected in favour of the novel and that courses may need to be repeated at different time points and locations.

• Mode of training and training delivery:

Face-to-face training was identified as being by far the most important mode of training delivery. The development of online learning is changing the training environment, although as a complement to (rather than as a replacement for) face-to-face learning. There is perceived to be a clear need for high-quality online learning resources, although these require time, staff and financial resources to be developed to a sufficiently high standard. The consultation highlighted in particular the importance of blended learning that includes interactions, dialogue and discussion and where learners interact within a community of other learners. Pedagogy more generally is changing the learning environment because of increased awareness and application of the idea of active learning which has the potential to change how people learn (as distinct from what people learn). Masterclasses, one-to-one mentoring and learning from experts, working with students in in-depth ways and providing post-course support, as well as peer coaching.

• PhD students, early career researchers and training throughout the career trajectory:

The variability of time dedicated to training reported by holders of Future Research Leaders awards, and their difficulties in ring-fencing time for training was noted. Limited knowledge about the availability of training opportunities was identified as a barrier to take-up among some groups. Advice on training needs given to PhD students by supervisors and to Future Research Leaders by mentors offers a means of addressing some of these issues, although the extent to which individual needs assessment takes place appears to be variable. There is also a need for strategic thinking about how to upskill the large community of social scientists at later stages in their careers.

• Coordination across the UK training landscape in advanced methods:

Many of those consulted advocated some form of co-ordination of the training offered by key providers, such as Doctoral Training Centres (DTCs), Advanced Training Initiative (ATI) grant holders, NCRM, the Social Research Association (SRA), and others. One way of achieving greater coordination may be via a loose network of the various elements of the training landscape. The nature of such a network would allow facilitating and co-ordinating spaces for creative interaction across diverse training providers and users, across disciplines, across career stages, and across sectors. Though superficially attractive, disadvantages of a highly centralised training system were noted. Over-reliance on centralised control and direction risks stifling innovation around new forms of training and topics as well as hindering a fast and flexible approach to respond to changing needs that emerge over time.

Several key findings of this consultation support the results of previous NCRM consultations using different methods and targeting different groups, providing reassurance that the findings have indeed long-term relevance.

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Latest research methods audio and video

NCRM video and audio podcast series features a wide range of research methods related topics discussed by experts from NCRM affiliated projects and events.

Latest video:

Creative research methods; Helen Kara; December 2016

The value and place of qualitative research in science policy-making; Ian Boyd; November 2016

The value and place of qualitative research in science policy-making; Andrew Stirling; November 2016

The value and place of qualitative research in science policy-making; Roland Jackson; November 2016

The video is available on www.ncrm.ac.uk/resources/video or on the NCRM National Centre for Research Methods YouTube channel.

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