MethodsNews

Looking forward to the 7th ESRC Research Methods Festival

Rosalind Edwards, NCRM, University of Southampton

The 7th ESRC Research Methods Festival (RMF) is a great opportunity for everyone interested in understanding the numerous, tangled and ever-changing ways of looking at the world from social science perspectives. Every two years the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) organises this three-day event, full of seminars, activities and lively discussions about established and new methods used in social science research.

Each Festival attracts visitors from academia, government, charity and private sectors, hosts a wide range of speakers and covers interesting methodological themes relevant to both emerging and established researchers. This year the Festival moves from Oxford to another beautiful historical city. The 2016 RMF will be held at the University of Bath from 5th to 7th July 2016. The main themes are: international knowledge exchange, cohort and longitudinal methods, analysis of complex data sets, pedagogy of methods, careers and skills development.

The *international knowledge exchange* theme sees expert social researchers from Africa, South and North America, Australasia and across Europe joining us at the Festival to discuss cutting-edge methodological developments. World leading international speakers will participate in sessions addressing, amongst other topical subjects: researching comparative urbanism, studying elites in Africa and achieving rigour through face to face surveys.

The *cohort and longitudinal method*s theme tackles methodological issues in collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data from individuals and households over time. Issues covered include the methodological challenges in administrative data linkage and in comparing data across and within longitudinal studies, combining social science and molecular genetic research to examine inequality and the life course, and the age, period and cohort problem.

Sessions in the *analysis of complex data sets* theme address a range of methods for tackling complex forms of data with linked and time dependent structures and associated issues. These include projects from the NCRM's own research programme such as methods for the assessment of quality of data collection in sample surveys, working across qualitative longitudinal studies, accounting for informative item nonresponse in biomarkers, and the anatomy of disclosure risk in linked population data.

The *pedagogy of methods* theme includes sessions that provide insight into the teaching and learning of advanced social science research methods. Find out whether statistics anxiety is a convenient myth, and consider the pedagogical underpinnings of learning about social science research methods.

The *career and skills development* theme provides opportunities for doctoral, early career and more experienced researchers to find out about new methods, and develop their methods and communication skills. The ever-popular 'What is…?' sessions will cover diary methods, action research, discrete choice experiments, policy evaluation, biosocial research, statistical eBook, mobile methods, big data, and mass observation. Festival participants will also be able work on honing their skills in reading and writing critically, expanding their methodological comfort zone, disseminating their research, and developing effective research proposals, as well as to attend an interactive workshop on making the most of media.

The Festival will also welcome distinguished keynote speakers, setting the tone for the event. Professor Jane Elliott (Chief Executive of ESRC) will talk about bridging the qualitative—quantitative divide in our approaches to 'big data'. Professor Andrew Gelman (Columbia University) will consider whether statistics can dig its way out of the paradoxical hole of creating a sense of certainty where none should exist. And Professor Emeritus Aaron Cicourel (University of California) will be in conversation with Professor Malcolm Williams (Cardiff) and other colleagues about the continuing challenges and relevance of arguments he first advanced in his influential book 'Method and Measurement in Sociology' (1964).

The 'festival' mood will be enhanced by a range of social activities such as PhD student poster exhibition, Festival reception, film screening and tours in the city of Bath.

Have a look at the full programme and book your tickets at www.ncrm.ac.uk/RMF2016.

It's all in the sample: report of the inquiry into the 2015 British general election

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In the months and weeks leading up to the 2015 general election, the opinion polls told a consistent story; the Conservatives and Labour were tied in a dead heat in the popular vote. This led media commentators, party strategists, and the public to focus attention on the likely composition of a coalition, rather than on a single-party government led by the Conservatives who, of course, ultimately won the election with a 6.6% lead over Labour and an absolute majority in the House of Commons. The expectation of a hung parliament in the final days and weeks of the campaign was so strong and widely held that the sense of shock and disbelief was palpable when the result of the exit poll was announced at 10pm on May 7th.

In response to these polling errors, the British Polling Council and the Market Research Society asked me to chair an independent inquiry into what went wrong in 2015. The inquiry has now published its report[1], in which it concludes that the primary cause of the polling miss was unrepresentative samples. The methods the pollsters used to collect samples of voters systematically over-represented Labour and under-represented Conservative supporters. The statistical adjustment procedures applied to the raw data did not mitigate this basic problem to any notable degree.

This conclusion was arrived at partly by elimination of other possible causes of the errors. The inquiry was able to exclude the possibility that postal voters, overseas voters, and un-registered voters made any detectable contribution to the polling miss. The ways that pollsters asked respondents about their voting intentions was also eliminated as a possible cause of what went wrong.

There was weak evidence of a very modest late swing to the Conservatives, although this can have contributed – at most – around one percentage point to the error on the Conservative lead. The widely held view that the polling miss was due to deliberate misreporting -

'shy Tories' telling pollsters they intended to vote for other parties - is difficult to reconcile with the results of re-contact surveys carried out by the pollsters and with the two random surveys undertaken after the election. Differential turnout by party was also pointed to after the election as a likely cause of the errors; so-called 'lazy Labour' supporters telling pollsters they would vote Labour but ultimately not turning out. However, data from a number of sources showed no support for this making anything but a very small contribution to the polling errors.

In addition to ruling out other possibilities, the inquiry found direct evidence that the poll samples were unrepresentative. A key assumption of quota sampling – the procedure used by all pollsters – is that, within each weighting cell, the vote intention should be the same in the sample as it is in the population. The inquiry found that this assumption was violated. The inquiry also compared the polls to 'gold standard' probability surveys: the British Election Study and the British Social Attitudes survey. These produced estimates of the Conservative lead that were close to the actual election result. The inquiry was also able to show that the poll samples were unrepresentative in other ways, for example, they under-represented voters aged over 74 and over-represented the more politically engaged.

A diagnosis of unrepresentative samples naturally leads to a desire to identify the cause of the unrepresentativeness. However, the inquiry refrained from advancing a causal 'story' to explain exactly how the samples ended up being biased toward Labour and away from the Conservatives. This was partly because the data considered did not support any such conclusion but it was also because the inquiry concluded that bias in the vote intention estimate is unlikely to be accounted for in any simple way.

Take, for example, political engagement which has been pointed to by several commentators as the cause of the problems in the poll

samples. The argument here is that the polls substantially over-represent the politically engaged and that this drives the bias in vote intention. The polls certainly over-represent the politically engaged, but how this relates to bias in vote intention is not so straightforward because the relationship between political interest and support for the main parties is not linear. Rather, it is the most and the least politically engaged who tend to support Labour, while people with a moderate level of political interest are most likely to vote Conservative. Thus, over-representing the politically engaged will tend to produce an over-estimate of Labour support but this will be at least partially compensated by under-representation of the least politically interested, who are also most likely to support Labour. And, indeed, the pollsters' early experiments with weighting their samples by political interest appear, thus far, to make little or no difference to estimates of vote intention.

Despite its limitations, polling remains the most accurate means of predicting election outcomes and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The report makes a number of recommendations for improving the ways that polls are conducted and reported. While these should reduce the risk of the 2015 polling miss recurring in the future, there will be no silver bullet – opinion polls will always be subject to random and systematic errors that are difficult to control. Stakeholders on all sides must be more realistic about the level of accuracy opinion polls are capable of delivering.

References

1 Sturgis, P. et al. (2016) Report of the Inquiry into the 2015 British general election opinion polls. http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3789/

Putting data science in the service of social science

Carl Miller, Centre for the Analysis of Social Media, Demos

The rise of social media has been important; that is no great revelation. It has wrought profound social change, buffeted our institutions and altered, for many of us, our way of life. New identities, dialects, cultures, affiliations and movements have all bloomed and spread across the digital world, and spilled out of it into mainstream public life.

Back in 2012, we at Demos could see that social media was changing research too. The transfer of social activity onto digital spaces was 'datafying' social life. Huge new datasets were being routinely created that we saw as treasure troves of behavioural evidence: often very large, in real-time, rich, linked and unmediated. It was a massive new opportunity to learn about how people and society worked.

Unlocking these datasets presented an enormous challenge. The sheer scale of social media data also meant that conventional social research methods couldn't cope. Powerful new analytical techniques - modelling, entity extraction, machine learning, algorithmic clustering - were needed to make sense of what was happening. However, the true challenge wasn't a technological one alone. It was how to deploy the new tools of data science in the service of social science. Getting better at counting people is not the same as getting better at understanding them.

We established the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media that brought together social and policy researchers at Demos, and technologists from the University of Sussex with the explicit aim of confronting this challenge[1]. The first layer of the challenge has been the technology itself. The tools of big data analysis needed to be put into the hands of non-technical researchers: the subject matter experts who have long understood social science, and now needed to be able to do it in a new way. We built a technology platform, Method52, which allowed non-technical users to use a graphical user interface, and drag-and-drop components to flexibly conduct big data analytics, rather than be faced with a screen full of code[2]. Especially important was to make accessible a vitally important technique called natural language processing[3]. Coupled with machine learning, it is one of the crucial ways of understanding bodies of primarily text-based data (like Tweets or Facebook posts) that are too large to manually read.

However, any technology - even one that learns - is just a tool and the second layer has been to learn how to slot all the technology into a broader social scientific methodology. We've just concluded a major study with the pollsters Ipsos MORI, on how to use tools like natural language processing within a broader framework that stands up to social scientific scrutiny[4]. Much of this has been to develop a process of big data analysis that cares about the same things that social science cares about: the introduction of possible biases in how the data is sampled and collected; the non-representative skews in who uses social media; the danger of analyst pre-conceptions and bias in how the data is measured and handled; the difficulty of measuring at great scale the textured complex utterances of people in specific social contexts and the importance of interpreting the results in the light of the norms, cultures, languages and practices of social media itself[5].

But even beyond this, the third layer has been get social science to govern the whole endeavour: the questions that are asked, the implications that are drawn, how the research is used, and, of course, the ethical frameworks that control its use.

The big data revolution will not slow down, it will only gather pace. The scales of data will only increase, and the technologies and techniques to harness data are becoming more capable and powerful at a bewildering rate. To my mind, this means that social science - qualitative as well as quantitative - has never been more important. It has never been more crucial to point out the inherent difficulties in studying people in all their messy and chaotic complexity, all the pitfalls of reducing human behaviour into something that can be counted and aggregated, and of how understanding society doesn't stop with a series of raw metrics, however large they are.

Notes

1 More information on its work is available at: http://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/centre-for-analysis-of-social-media/

2 For more information on Method52, see Bartlett, J., Miller, C., Reffin, J., Weir, D., Wibberly, S., 'Vox Digitas' (Demos: 2014): http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Vox_Digitas_-_web.pdf?1408832211

3 For a further description of natural language processing, see Reffin, J., 'Why Natural Language Processing is the most important technology you've never heard of', Demos Quarterly 8, Sprint 2016, http://quarterly.demos.co.uk/article/issue-8/natural-language-processing-the-most-important-technology-youve-never-heard-of/

4 See 'the wisdom of the crowd', Ipsos MORI, https://www.ipsos-mori.com/ourexpertise/digitalresearch/sociallistening/wisdomofthecrowd.aspx

5 For more information on this work, see http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Road_to_representivity_final.pdf?1441811336

Further Reading

On the current work of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos, http://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/centre-for-analysis-of-social-media/

A technology edition of Demos Quarterly, Issue 8, Spring 2016, http://quarterly.demos.co.uk
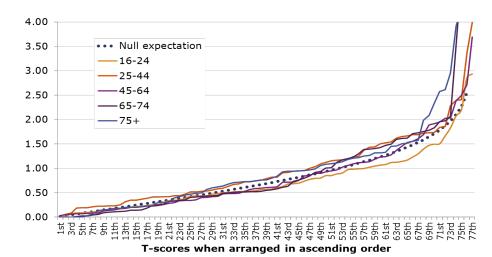
What is the impact of fieldwork effort on subpopulation estimates?

Joel Williams, TNS BMRB

Over the last couple of years, NCRM has worked with TNS BMRB to derive a general model of the impact of fieldwork effort on those total population estimates that are drawn from face-to-face random sample surveys. On the whole, the team has found only modest effects, suggesting that much of the expense entailed from repeatedly visiting initially unproductive addresses is unnecessary[1].

However, modest effects on total population estimates may hide larger effects on subpopulation estimates. Subpopulations will often be more homogeneous than the total population with respect to a target variable but that does not mean that the impact of fieldwork effort must also be smaller. In particular, (i) the correlation between response propensity and measured characteristics may be greater for a subpopulation than for the total population, (ii) the variance of response propensity within a subpopulation may be greater than for the total population, and (iii) some subpopulations have lower than average response propensities. Any of these factors may mean that fieldwork effort has a larger effect on some subpopulation estimates than it has on the total population estimate. It is usually very difficult to estimate the impact of fieldwork effort on subpopulation estimates because any systematic effects are confounded with substantial random sampling error. The Crime Survey of England & Wales (CSEW) is an exception: 35,000 interviews per year is large enough to separate out the effect of fieldwork effort for plenty of subpopulations, albeit recognising that the generalisability of any findings is limited due to topic specificity.

After a fall in the CSEW response rate from c74% to c70% in 2014-15, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) asked TNS BMRB to explore the impact of a lower response rate on the headline statistics that are published. To do this, we used data from 2012-14 and stripped out the interviews obtained after re-issuing initially unproductive addresses. This transformed the response rate from 74% to 66% and allowed us to obtain survey estimates that reflected a lower than usual level of fieldwork effort. Of course, putting in less fieldwork effort is not the same as what happened in 2014-15 when TNS BMRB put in the same amount of effort but obtained a lower response rate! However, it is reasonable to assume that less effort or equal effort but lower success would result in a similar responding sample.

T-scores when arranged in ascending order

Before describing the results, it is worth noting that reissuing initially unproductive addresses is a disproportionately costly element of fieldwork. Per-interview pay rates are very high, reflecting the difficulty of getting these interviews. While interviews at the original issue stage are obtained after an average of 3-4 visits to the address, interviews obtained at the reissue stage are obtained after an average of 15-20 visits in total. It is reasonable to question the proportionality of this activity even without addressing the impact on the survey estimates themselves. So why are initially unproductive addresses reissued? The most accurate answer is that it allows fieldwork agencies to meet contractual response targets and avoid financial penalties. Naturally, the cost of this work is passed on to their clients which means – for government research - the taxpayer foots the bill. Consequently, the value of all this extra work needs to be obvious.

After discussion with ONS, we identified three variables defining subpopulations. These were selected because of the apparent variability in response rates between each sub-population. The variables were (i) age group, (ii) ACORN category (a five-category postcode segmentation based on multiple sources), and (iii) housing tenure. ONS wanted us to look at all the key published estimates: a mixture of (i) prevalence/incidence of crimes, (ii) behaviours, and (iii) reported attitudes. In total, there were 77 variables (across 37 questions) and, while not a random selection, there are variables from most of the 'ask all' modules within the adult questionnaire.

To obtain subpopulation estimates before and after the reissue stage, we post-stratified the sample each time as would be ONS standard practice. We also standardised the differences between the estimates before and after reissuing, allowing us to summarise across groups with different sample sizes and across variables with different measurement properties. Prior work demonstrated that these standardised differences – t scores - should broadly follow the theoretical t-distribution if the reissue stage made no systematic difference to the estimates. In summary, the limited impact of fieldwork effort suggested by the general model appears to also be true for the subpopulations assessed for this study and for this survey. It is unclear how transportable these findings are to other surveys and other subpopulations but they are unlikely to be unique. As an example, the chart [above] shows the distribution of t-scores for each age group against the null effect t-distribution. The same pattern was found for the other subpopulations covered by the study.

Assuming these findings are generalisable to some degree, it is hard to argue on statistical grounds for committing funds to re-issuing initially unproductive cases. However, research commissioners like high response rates for non-statistical reasons too: they provide public credibility, an intangible that is worth a lot to them. Nevertheless, even while accepting this is important, it seems to us that targeting specific response rates ends up larding surveys with cost and puts them entirely out of reach of many research buyers. Paradoxically, a less macho approach to response maximisation might ultimately protect the random sample method and perhaps should be more vigorously promoted by both statisticians and the industry at large.

Notes
1 See http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3771/ for a working paper describing this project in detail.

Implementing mixed mode surveys in Europe: opportunities and challenges

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Sami Nevala, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights[1]

In February this year the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) hosted a meeting with survey research experts from different countries and backgrounds. The purpose was to discuss the possibility of developing a new EU-wide survey on fundamental rights and discrimination using a mixed mode approach.

Mixed mode surveys combine different ways of interviewing people, such as face-to-face, telephone or web. These can be combined concurrently, thus giving the respondent the possibility of choosing their preferred mode, or sequentially. The latter approach is the most popular in practice. The typical design starts with a cheaper mode, such as web or mail, followed by interview attempts with non-respondents using a more expensive mode, such as face-to-face. By using mixed modes in this way, researchers typically hope to achieve cost savings while maintaining the quality of the survey. An indication of the increased interest in mixed mode designs both in academia and among survey practitioners is the large number of presentations and sessions on this topic at the most recent European Survey Research Association conference, in Reykjavik, and the experiments carried out by the European Social Survey and Understanding Society.

Although mixed mode surveys have the potential to save costs, numerous questions remain. Is the data quality really the same as in a single mode approach? How much money does it save? In what conditions can it lead to biased estimates? These issues become even more complicated in multi-country surveys, where differences in the implementation of the mixed mode design can introduce bias to country comparisons. As such, survey practitioners have to consider a number of different aspects when implementing mixed mode designs across countries.

Firstly, the modes used should be as similar as possible. For example, previous research has shown that people tend to answer questions more honestly in self-administered modes, such as web or mail surveys, than in interviewer-administered modes, such as face to face or telephone. This means

that implementing a sequential web and face-to-face design may be problematic as answers might be different between people due to the mode in which they answer. This issue becomes even more complex in a cross-cultural context. For example, if the percentage of people answering by web is very different in the UK and Romania, then comparison between them on the questions of interest can be biased.

These differences also stem from a second challenge, which relates to implementing a survey design in a similar way across multiple countries. The way in which the design is applied can be heavily influenced by the data collection agency and by the common practices in each country. An example is the availability of sampling frames. Here, countries vary considerably in the type of frames available, from individual level registries to postal address frames or to the absence of such frames entirely, for example in Greece or Portugal. This will influence the possibility of using certain modes. For example, if no household or individual registry is available then people cannot be recruited to the survey using invitation letters without a separate enumeration stage which adds to the costs of the survey. Additionally, the quality of sampling frames can differ significantly leading to country differences in coverage, even when the same design is implemented.

At the meeting in Vienna, the use of web surveys received considerable attention due to some of their apparent strengths, such as lower costs and lower social desirability effects. Also, internet penetration has steadily increased in the EU Member States, and is expected to continue improving in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, a number of limitations are also obvious, such as the lack of a sampling frame that could be used to directly recruit respondents to an online survey as well as the exclusion of people who do not have access to the internet. Here, once again, using a mixed mode approach could tackle some of the issues. For example, mail invitations can be used for the web survey. Additionally, non-respondents can be interviewed using an alternative mode, such as face-to-face. Mode effects related to combining web data collection with face-to-face interviews could be partially

addressed by including a self-completion component as a part of the in-person interview, which is more similar to the web survey questionnaire.

So one might ask, what was the conclusion of the meeting in Vienna? To mix or not to mix? At this point there is no clear answer, with different countries having variously applied mixed modes. The implications of using mixed modes must be looked at with respect to both their advantages and possible disadvantages. Here, it has to be acknowledged that many EU-wide surveys – on which a proportion of Eurostat data is based – currently employ different modes and sampling frames for their data collection across countries, which is not always critically reviewed. In this case FRA has the advantage of considerable flexibility in developing a new survey and the possibility of centrally managing it. Their experience with implementing a mixed mode survey across Europe will bring important insights in this field.

Notes

1 The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and its content does not necessarily represent the views or position of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

Is the educational 'what works' agenda working?

Maria Pampaka, Julian Williams, University of Manchester, Matt Homer, University of Leeds

Knowing 'what works' in educational contexts, as in any of the social sciences, has always been problematic both in theory and in practice. The central idea from the wider 'what works' debate is about using evidence to make better decisions, giving rise to a call for evidence-based practice, which is primarily linked to the use of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) to 'test' interventions and measure their efficacy. Interest in whether the 'what works' agenda is working has led us to edit a special issue[1] on the theme for International Journal of Research & Method in Education. The strong response to the call for papers necessitated the issue becoming a double issue with considerable interest for methodologists.

In the UK, the education focus has been 'Improving education outcomes for school-aged children' led by Sutton Trust/ Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) and influenced by Ben Goldacre and the 'nudge unit'[2]. In the US, the Department of Education[3] has tried to accumulate and use findings from supposedly high-quality research to answer the question 'What works in education?' aimed at providing educators with the information they need to make 'evidence-based decisions' via the 'What works Clearinghouse' (WWC). Such ideas have been rehearsed in previous decades[4] with a strong history of opposition too, including from Biesta (2007)[5], Hammersley (2005)[6] and Thomas (2012)[7].

Discussion continues about what evidence should entail and the balance, integration or synthesis between RCTs and other (qualitative and quantitative) approaches. There remains unresolved debate about

performativity, effectiveness, equality, equity, bridging gaps (social class, gender, ethnicity, etc), assessment, improvement, and causality, and the best methods for investigating these. The special issue became a platform for discussing methods/ methodologies to contribute to this debate and thus towards working solutions.

The dominant theme in submissions for the issue was related to impact evaluations and educational RCTs, along with systematic reviews and meta-analysis. Another theme was effective communication and dissemination to reach maximum impact with the relevant stakeholders. The relatively orthodox 'what works' approaches engage with the validity and reliability questions along with advancements in analytical approaches especially regarding clustering of participants, which is common in educational RCTs, by presenting how technical improvements related to Cluster randomised trials (CRTs) and partially nested RCTs might help make the approach 'work better' in practice.

Other papers in the first part of the special issue question the so-called, superiority of RCTs as the norm for 'What works' suggesting that some kind of integration with other approaches would be beneficial, boosting RCTs with implementation-specific measures or through integration of experimental and improvement science. Issues around the involvement of research participants (mainly teachers) in both research studies and reviews emerge as relevant to establishing what works as well as for the impact agenda (e.g. of Economic and Social Research Council). None of the contributions, however, focus explicitly on the learners'/students' agency. In fact, previous work, has questioned the impact

of current testing/assessment practices and proposed the measurement of 'alternative learning outcomes'[8], including attitudes, dispositions, and aspirations which need consideration to capture the complexities of teaching-learning relationships. These issues will be pursued more vigorously in the second part of the special issue (39(4)) addressing 'what works' from more robustly critical perspectives. Other methodological issues to be addressed in Part 2 include debates around inference, measurement issues dealing with missing data and imputation techniques, single case studies and longitudinal designs. We welcome responses and views on any of these issues being debated among education researchers but which affect the wider methods community.

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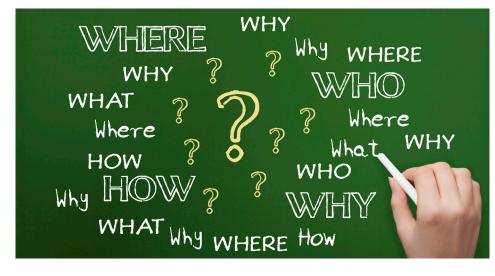
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'Operationalising' reflexivity - qualitative ethics in practice

Martin Tolich, Associate Professor in Sociology, University of Otago

Inspired by Guillemin and Gillam's[1] now classic article on reflexivity that introduced the seminal distinction between procedural ethics and ethics in practice, Tolich's[2] edited volume Qualitative Ethics in Practice (QEiP) fleshes out one part of the ethical binary. Guillemin and Gillam characterised procedural ethics as a constant, a one off best-guess as to what the ethical issues in a project might be. On the other side of the binary, ethics in practice are identified as being a recurrent, a perplexing problem for iterative, informant led qualitative research. Big ethical moments, they predicted, were likely to materialize in the field, often at odds with the ethical considerations listed in formal procedural ethics review. Their solution was reflexivity, yet as a novice researcher (at the time) this left me wanting more examples of how researchers both recognised and then addressed big ethical moments.

Mauthner et al.'s[3] edited volume Ethics in Qualitative Research is a reservoir of diverse ethical moments found routinely in qualitative research. They ask, what does a researcher do when they notice a pornographic imagine on the wall of foster parents they are interviewing? Is this image reportable or is the researcher locked in researcher mode answerable only to the principle to do no harm? Equally perplexing is the contradiction posed for researchers who fake friendships to secure an interview leaving the substance of the friendship ambiguous. Guillimen and Gillam's reflexivity solution assumes novice researchers have the resources to work through these immediate problems, but they don't.

What QEiP offers are multiple examples of big ethical moments demonstrating the reflexivity used by scholars when their best-laid procedural ethics go awry. Edwards and Weller's[4] story of Dan, an 18-year-old youth who volunteered to take part in a longitudinal study about growing up in England was, once analysed, earmarked to be archived. Interviewed at age 11 and again at age 14, on the third and final data collection phase four years later the researchers discovered that Dan

had tragically passed away. This was their big ethical moment: what should happen to Dan's earlier transcripts and tape as these had the potential to be Dan's parents' eternal heirloom retelling Dan's short life. The reflexivity process involved an existing reference group advising and weighing up the needs of the parents against the rights of Dan, who had shared candid thoughts about his family. Before reading Edward's and Weller's chapter you might consider how you would have addressed the competing needs of Dan's enduring privacy versus his parents' grief.

Dan's story is one of three chapters with big ethical moments that concerned death. Tolich claims death, by its nature, presents ethics committees with a big ethical moment which they mechanically treat as a "third rail" evoking a conservative designation of heightened vulnerability.

Emphasis on ethics in practice does not denigrate the important role played by procedural ethics. The chapter on the Belfast Project's storage of transcripts of interviews with the IRA and UVF at Boston College[5] demonstrates this. When an Irish police officer subpoenaed the transcripts the limits of confidentiality unravelled. Among other things, it was notable the storage of transcripts was not subject to procedural ethics. Had any ethics committee evaluated the information sheets given to donors this big ethical flaw in confidentiality would have been recognised.

Tolich's opening four chapters stake a claim that qualitative research is unique requiring its own set of ethical considerations and lexicon. For example, confidentiality has a precise meaning in qualitative research: the researcher knows what the participant said and promises not to tell others. However, as in the Boston College example, a subpoena can undermine any assurances. Yet in more everyday examples confidentiality can so easily be undermined. Confidentiality assurances given to employees in a small workplace (N=10) are easily undermined by internal confidentiality; when those internal to the workplace can identify others in the text.

Anonymity is a biomedical term needing discarding from the qualitative lexicon. Dan's transcripts, for example, can be archived but given the researcher knows what Dan said, Dan's transcripts can never be anonymised. At best they are confidential. If all identifiers are removed the data can be de-identified. Confidentiality and de-identification are useful qualitative terms, but anonymity is not.

Qualitative researchers urgently need a comprehensive ethics code devoted solely to qualitative research. Van den Hoonaard's[6] chapter, the making of the qualitative code of ethics in Canada Tri Council National Statement announces Qualitative Researches coming of age, itself is a big ethical moment.

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NCRM training and events

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is a network of research groups, each conducting research and training in an area of social science research methods.

NCRM brings together researchers from across the UK with a wide range of research methods expertise, at the frontiers of developments in research methodology.

NCRM disseminates innovations and developments in research methods through training courses and events and through other direct engagement with researchers, but also by cooperating with other organisations and initiatives with an interest in social science research methods.

NCRM was established in 2004 as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) strategy to improve the standards of research methods across the UK social science community. NCRM acts as a strategic focal point for developments in research, training and capacity building related to research methods, both at the national level and cutting across social science disciplines.

For more information about the NCRM and its activities please see our website www.ncrm.ac.uk

Critical Urban Ethnography: Place, People and Power, Dr Michaela Benson, 26 – 27 May 2016, Goldsmiths College, London

Online Research Ethics: Challenges and Opportunities, Dr Huw Davies and Dr Lisa Sugiura, 9 - 10 June 2016, University of Southampton

7th ESRC Research Methods Festival, 5 – 7 July 2016, University of Bath

Social Media as a Source for Research Data, Dr Katrin Weller, 27- 28 July 2016, University of Southampton

NCRM and ICLS Autumn School 2016, Prof Meena Kumari, Prof Tarani Chandola, 31 August – 2 September 2016, University of Manchester

Making and Measuring Impact, Dr Sarah Morton, 14 September 2016, Queens University Belfast

Introduction to Latent Class Analysis, Dr Alexandru Cernat, 15 - 16 September 2016, Queens University Belfast

Advanced Structural Equation Modelling using R, Dr Daniel Oberski and Dr Alexandru Cernat, 19 – 20 September 2016, University of Manchester

Case Histories in Qualitative Longitudinal Research, Prof Rachel Thomson, Prof Julie McLeod, Fiona Courage, 6 - 7 October 2016, University of Sussex

To find out more about our training courses and events and to register please visit www.ncrm.ac.uk/training. New courses are continuously organised and added to the database.

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