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Director's Corner

Chris Skinner, Director



The increasing specialization of research, emphasizing depth over breadth, is frequently noted across most areas of research and the field of research methods is no exception. The Centre's research programme certainly does not sacrifice depth, but it

does seek to address methods which transfer across subject areas and disciplines and the structure of the Centre is designed to facilitate synergies and engagement across the field of research methods. Developments on our research programme were shared at our recent annual Centre meeting in Manchester, with around fifty staff and research students participating from across the Centre. Methodological diversity was evident: from Bayesian methods for combining data sources to deliberative methods for public engagement in policy making. Understanding of the diverse methodological foci was aided by an emphasis on the substantive contexts of the research, such as criminal careers, health care provision and school performance assessment. It was pleasing to see appreciative and constructive engagement across methodological perspectives without the critical edge of the discussion being blunted. It was also pleasing to see the impressive quality of both the presentations and posters, all led by researchers (mostly junior) working across the Centre - evidence of how the Centre is helping to build the capacity of the UK social science community to advance methodological developments. Such internal Centre meetings play a valuable role in developing the Centre as a whole, and complement other open meetings, such as the Research Methods Festival, where the Centre seeks to share its research and engage with the research community more widely.

Many of the projects funded under the Research Methods Programme have now produced Briefings reporting their findings and indicating where further information about the research can be obtained. These are now available on the RMP website at:

<http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications/>

Viewpoint

David Martin, Co-Director, NCRM



This ninth issue of *Methods/News* marks two years since the first NCRM Centre meeting in Southampton at which the newly-announced research node directors all met for the first time. It also means the ninth quarterly meeting of the *Methods/News* editorial team to review developments and scan the research methods community!

In addition to the research and training activities at each NCRM node, which have been highlighted in the 'Focus on the nodes' articles, the last two years have seen major assessments of research and training needs, undertaken by the hub team to help inform ESRC strategy on research methods investment. The centre has overseen the development of a considerable infrastructure for the support of research methods with the annual call for networks for methodological innovation, NCRM summer schools, the firm establishment of the biennial Research Methods Festival and a wide portfolio of commissioned research methods reviews and workshops, sponsored conference sessions and seminar series. The Centre's online presence includes a major database of methods events, a wide portfolio of materials from Centre events and is soon to include a searchable publications database.

ESRC is itself currently conducting a review of research methods initiatives, including NCRM and the Research Methods Programme. Reflecting on the role of a National Centre rather than a programme of separate research projects it becomes clear that a Centre, with its in-built collaborative structure across hub and nodes can act as a repository for knowledge, resources and project outputs in a way which is very difficult to achieve by other means. The Centre provides training and resources for researchers, a growing body of methodological research outputs and acts as a strategic contact point, both for the research methods community and as the basis for collaboration with other initiatives and organizations: looking back, it is apparent that NCRM is growing into something much more than the sum of its parts.

Focus on the Hub

Research in the Hub

Graham Crow, Deputy Director, NCRM Hub

The research interests of the hub team at Southampton are necessarily broad, as befits a group of people with diverse methodological orientations and skills, contrasting disciplinary backgrounds and affiliations (including economics, geography, philosophy, politics, social policy analysis, social work studies, social statistics, and sociology) and a wide range of current projects. Much common ground can be identified, under the broad heading of the social dimensions of research practice. One long-standing interest of Rose Wiles is in research ethics, and in particular the issues of consent and confidentiality. These interests are shared by David Martin, Chris Skinner and Caroline Young, whose work includes the study of privacy and confidentiality in the various stages of the research process from study design through data collection and analysis to the representation of findings. Nick Bardsley's interests also embrace research design, and in particular the issues raised by the methodology of behavioural experiments. This in turn links in with Chris Skinner's on-going engagement with the problem of non-response in survey methodology. Non-responders are one example of groups that present a challenge to researchers. Equally interesting challenges are presented by the difficulties of studying the older people who are the focus of Jackie Powell's research and the non-participants in higher education on whom Sue Heath's current project focuses. These are not new problems, but the ways in which they and similar challenges are tackled are continually under review, and this point informs Graham Crow's focus on the changing nature of the researcher-researched relationship. Current changes in the regulation of research ethics brings the connectedness of the research interests of hub team members full circle.

Data Linkage: Exploring the Potential

19 March, Royal Statistical Society, London

The Hub is convening this workshop in conjunction with the Social Research Association. Data linkage offers researchers the prospect of greatly expanded datasets at minimal cost, from both survey and administrative sources. This workshop will focus mainly on some practical aspects of linkage and examples of what it has to offer. Topics will include: how to access administrative data, work under way to construct a matrix of identifiers to facilitate linkage to administrative data and methodological challenges and developments. Speakers include Lars Nesheim (UCL), George Smith (Oxford University), David McLennan (Oxford University), Ben Hickman (LGA), Peter Elias (IER) and Iain Bell (DWP). Spaces are limited and the registration form can be downloaded from:

<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/events/2006/20070115/index.php>

Seminar series: controversies in qualitative research

The Hub is jointly organising a series of three research methodology seminars with the University of Southampton's Schools of Nursing & Midwifery, Education, Management, and the Southampton Research & Development Support Unit. These seminars will look at the disputes and 'hullabaloo' surrounding three qualitative approaches - action research, participatory research and biographical/narrative research - which are increasingly used in research on health, education, management and organisation.

The seminars will be deliberately provocative. Two experts known for their challenging and stimulating contributions to the debates will start off each seminar and we are hoping that participants will join in with what promises to be a lively and engaging seminar. For details see the NCRM website: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/events/grseminarseries.php>.

Inaugural thoughts

Graham Crow, Deputy Director, NCRM Hub

One of the things that come with professorial promotion is the expectation that an inaugural lecture will follow. Preparing one of these lectures presents a number of challenges. One is that they are expected to be delivered to a mixed audience of academics and interested lay people who have no expertise in the field. Another is that they are expected to say something new whilst also taking stock of a career to date. And a third is that they are expected to be engaging. My response to these challenges was to borrow (and slightly modify) as my title an intriguing question from Alan Garfinkel, 'If Sociology is the answer, what is the question?', and then to consider a series of questions that sociologists and other social scientists put centre stage: Who are 'we?', Can we live together?, Who gets what?, and How do we know that? The fact that these questions (or variants of them) are hardy perennials is an indication of their centrality, even if they cannot be answered once and for all, but have instead to be kept constantly on the research agenda. The gist of the lecture was that unless researchers ask good questions, they are unlikely to generate worthwhile results. The lecture concluded with the suggestion that Sociology is the answer to the question, 'Which discipline should you be sure to consult when looking for good, though-provoking questions to pose in order better to investigate and to understand the nature and dynamics of social life?'. At the end of the lecture there was time for questions from the audience, but none was forthcoming until we had adjourned to a more informal setting.

Focus on the Nodes

Plenty has been happening at the BIAS node since our first report in the NCRM newsletter more than a year ago. First of all, Dr Nuoo-Ting (Jassy) Molitor has recently joined the node and she will be working on multiple biases models and their application to the Millenium Cohort and National Births Register data sets. Sara Geneletti has also been working on multiple bias modeling, focusing on methods for detecting and adjusting for selection bias; she presented some of her work at an evidence synthesis workshop in Cambridge in September.

A paper titled 'Improving ecological inference using individual-level data' by C. Jackson, N. Best and S. Richardson has recently been published in *Statistics in Medicine*. The paper describes a new class of statistical models for combining ecological (or aggregate) data with individual-level data. These can reduce the biases associated with ecological studies and increase statistical power, and they quantify the improvements gained in various situations. The WinBUGS code used in the paper is available at the Node's website <http://www.bias-project.org.uk>. A second paper describing the application of

these methods to the investigation of individual and contextual effects of socioeconomic factors on ill health is under final revision for the Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A.

In addition, several other software components developed by the node are available on our web site. One is an R package (Ecoreg) which implements models to combine individual and aggregated data and another is an R package (SAE) for Small Area Estimation. The later package includes a vignette with some worked examples on the use of different Small Area estimators.

Members of the Node have participated in several meetings to disseminate results, including the ESRC Research Methods Festival celebrated in Oxford, where Nicky Best gave an Introduction to Bayesian inference and computation for social science data analysis and Chris Jackson presented some results on his work on the synthesis of individual and aggregated data sets. Copies of talks and posters presented by node members are available on the node web site.

The Node ran an introductory course on Bayesian analysis using WinBUGS at Imperial College in September, which was very popular and attracted participants from many fields including Social Sciences. The course will be re-run again on Jan 31 and Feb 1 2007 in Cambridge, and is already fully booked. Nicky Best also attended a meeting with the LEMMA node in Bristol to discuss development of on-line training materials, and it is hoped that BIAS can contribute some examples on Bayesian modelling to web-based resources that LEMMA are developing.

Other News

News from RDI

A second round of projects has been funded by ESRC's Researcher Development Initiative. RDI was established by the ESRC Training and Development Board. It aims to contribute to the development of a training infrastructure in the social sciences at national and regional levels, available to social scientists across the life-course.

In its first round, RDI funded a number of projects devoted to new and advanced methods of social research. Second round projects include more specific regional and disciplinary foci. Round 2 projects are listed below. More detail on all RDI projects can be found at <http://www.rdi.ac.uk>.

- Training Researchers in Online Research Methods (TRI-ORM)
- Sociolinguistic Ethnography in a Changing Society
- ISSTI Interdisciplinary Masterclasses
- Advanced Research Training for Scottish Postgraduate Human Geographers (Kindrogan Consortium)
- Building Research Capacity in Social Work
- Writing Across Boundaries: Explorations in Research, Writing and Rhetoric in Qualitative Research
- The Royal Economic Society Easter School

- Scottish Programme for Advanced Training in Social Anthropology
- SRA Development Programme for Advanced Training for Mid-Career and Senior Social Research Practitioners
- Building and Strengthening Management Research Capacity in the North: The Northern Way Initiative
- Scottish Graduate Programme in Economics: PhD Training Sequence
- Scottish Social Survey Network
- Building Capacity in Visual Methods
- Training Researchers in Ethics and Ethical Practice in Social Science Research
- Residential Training Course for Postgraduate Students in Economic and Social History
- BERA/ESRC 2007 Residential Summer School

RDI will hold a conference on 6-7 February on 'Developing the Researcher.' One element of this conference will be a consultation on the shape of Round 3 of RDI. More information can be obtained by e-mailing info@rdi.ac.uk

The overall portfolio of RDI activities is intended to include a balanced mixture of online and face-to-face provision, training activities of differing lengths and degrees of intensity, and events available at regional or national level. The initiative is coordinated by Ray Lee, Professor of Social Research Methods at Royal Holloway University of London. He can be contacted at: r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk.

Spotlight on Resources



GEO-REFER



LIMMD and Geo-Refer: new online resources from RDI

NCRM, the Research Methods Programme and Researcher Development Initiative are all producing significant new online resources aimed at improving researchers' methodological skills. This quarter we have chosen to spotlight two projects within the RDI programme that are currently producing online resources on different aspects of data linkage.

The Linking International Macro and Micro Data (LIMMD) project is based at MIMAS, University of Manchester and provides training and support for researchers in the use of the inter-related survey and aggregate data resources that can be accessed through the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) International, particularly linking macro and micro datasets. The Geo-Refer project based at the School of Geography, University of Southampton is concerned to provide geographical referencing resources for social scientists. The website under development will allow the researcher to profile their own research needs and will then present customised and structured tutorials covering geographical referencing topics. Examples include how to link postcoded survey results to census data, how to find area boundaries and lookup tables and how to produce thematic maps of study results. Both projects include interactive one-day workshops with practical sessions, combined with online resources designed to provide an ongoing

resource for researchers and this combination of face-to-face and online delivery is an important characteristic of each. Although there are ambitious plans for the future development of the project websites, materials from the first workshops are now available online, so they are already worth bookmarking if your interests lie in data linkage methods.

LIMMD project <http://www.mimas.ac.uk/limmd/>
Next workshop: 25 April, Manchester.

Geo-Refer project

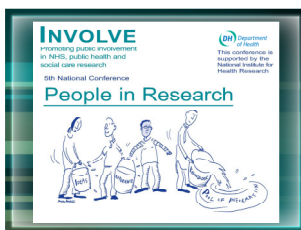
<http://www.geog.soton.ac.uk/geo-refer>

Next workshop, 30 May, Manchester. For further details, including workshop registration and enquiries, see the websites.

Spotlight on Events

Involve Conference, 6-7 September 2006, Hatfield

Sofie de Broe



INVOLVE's fifth national conference took place at the University of Hertfordshire in September 2006. It aimed to give a range

of people – members of the public, researchers, research managers and many other stakeholders – an opportunity to explore and discuss issues around public involvement in research, as well as to hear about the many research projects that involve members of the public.

INVOLVE's national conference is an event for everyone who is interested in supporting and promoting public involvement in health and social care research.

The 2006 conference ran over two days, and consisted of talks, workshops, posters and information stands. There was also a soapbox session where people could talk for three minutes about any aspect of public involvement that they felt strongly about. Nearly 400 people attended the conference.

The conference had 10 themed sessions (user led and user controlled research; tensions of involvement; identifying and prioritising research; communication and aphasia; clinical research;

engaging communities; developing strategies for involvement; evaluating the impact of involvement; children and young people). At the end of each session one key issue was highlighted for development over the next two years.

The abstracts of the conference and the conference report (INVOLVE, 2007) are available on the INVOLVE website <http://www.invo.org.uk/Conference2006.asp>

INVOLVE is a national advisory Group, funded by the National Institute for Health Research, established to promote public involvement in research, in order to improve the way that research is prioritised, commissioned, undertaken, communicated and used. We believe that the active involvement of the public in the research process leads to research that is more relevant to people and is more likely to be used. Research which reflects the needs and views of the public is more likely to produce results that can be used to improve practice in health and social care. We use the term 'public' to include:

- patients and potential patients;
- people who use health and social services;
- informal (unpaid) carers;
- parents/guardians;
- disabled people;
- members of the public who are potential recipients of health promotion programmes, public health programmes and social service interventions;
- groups asking for research because they believe they have been exposed to potentially harmful substances or products
- organisations that represent people who use services.

By 'involvement' we mean an active partnership between the public and researchers in the research process, rather than the use of people as the 'subjects' of research. Active involvement may take the form of consultation, collaboration or user control. The members of the INVOLVE Group include service users, carers, researchers, research managers and practitioners from both the voluntary and statutory sectors.

Further information can be obtained from the Involve website: <http://www.invo.org.uk>



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Methods

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