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Director's Corner

Chris Skinner



Chris Skinner, Director

Welcome to the second issue of **MethodsNews** from the rapidly growing National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). Since the last issue, six 'Nodes' have joined us at the 'Hub' to make up the main structure of the Centre.

The Nodes are listed elsewhere in this issue and are still very much 'in preparation'. A current priority is recruitment of research staff (take note if you might be interested in joining us). Contracts with ESRC are not due to start until April and, although the Nodes will run some events this spring/summer, the Centre activities are not expected to be in full swing until the coming academic year.

We at the Hub met with the Nodes in January to talk about how we are going to work together. The breadth of experience and coverage the Nodes bring to the Centre makes for exciting opportunities for interaction and collaboration. This breadth will also be important if the Centre is to engage usefully with researchers across the social science community. Part of our mission is to help you, as researchers, strengthen and update your knowledge of the methods you already use. But we also aim to provide support for widening the range of methods used and here I think it will be important that we at the Centre are not out to promote any particular approach, but are able to provide balanced perspectives, helping in the rigorous use of methods across the spectrum.

The commissioning of Nodes, each with their own methodological focus, has inevitably left some gaps in the coverage of methods. We are currently working with ESRC to address this, for example, in relation to possible future support for comparative methods; methods of survey data collection and design and evaluation methods. We are supporting three short term projects on comparative methods

and will be focussing Hub training events in areas not covered by the Nodes.

I hope you will find items of interest in this issue. Do note our launch event on 21 June and think about joining us then.

Viewpoint: yet more meetings??

David Martin



The first meeting of the NCRM coordinating Hub with directors of the newly awarded Nodes was, for me, an exciting event which provided a new vision of the research activities of the national centre. For nine months now, the Hub team at Southampton has

been preparing for the operation of the full Centre but without knowing the composition of the entire team until very recently. People have asked what we have been doing for nine months, and one of my most common answers seems to have been 'going to meetings': I have enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in the commissioning of the new National Centre for e-Social Science, in addition to our extensive consultative meetings with many NCRM stakeholders.

On occasions I hold conversations in which colleagues (and even myself!) bemoan some example of an apparent lack of coordination between ESRC initiatives and wished that we had less meetings. Setting up a new multi-site national centre is far from straightforward but it is clear that our greatest opportunity for achieving strong returns on ESRC's investments to the benefit of social science is through coordination. Our aim is for NCRM to become the recognized first port of call for UK social scientists seeking research methods innovations, training opportunities and resources. One aspect of achieving this portfolio of services that really meets user needs is to engage in meaningful consultation,

so when you are invited to give us your views or attend a consultation meeting, please respond – it will help us to avoid those apparently disconnected initiatives and to deliver services that genuinely support your research.

Focus on the Hub

The Hub moves into a new and exciting phase of its existence with the announcement of the NCRM Nodes. However, since the last issue of *MethodsNews* we have been busy with various projects.

In late October 2004 the NCRM held a government forum with the Research Methods Programme (RMP), the ESRC and participants from a wide range of government departments. The main aim of the forum was to identify research, training and capacity building needs in research methods and to discuss how to address these needs via engagement and co-operation between government and the NCRM. The forum was very successful in identifying a number of opportunities for cooperation and subsequent meetings have been arranged to discuss how to take these forward. We will update you next issue on how these steps are progressing.

In December and January the Hub ran its first two training courses. Firstly, at the University of Oxford on Using PcGets in Time Series Modelling, presented by Prof. David Hendry and Prof. Hans-Martin Krolzig, and secondly, at the Institute of Education on Biographic-Interpretive Method (BNIM), presented by Dr Prue Chamberlayne and Tom Wengraf. You can find a review of the BNIM course by one of the participants in our *Spotlight on Events* section.

Excellent feedback was received from the first seminar in the Qualitative Research Methodology seminar series developed by Brenda Johnston, Susan Rogers and Helen Elsey at the University of Southampton. The first seminar was presented by Prof. Martyn Hammersley of the Open University on Ethnography. Transcripts from the seminar will shortly be available to view on the NCRM's website (www.ncrm.ac.uk). The next seminar will be on Case Study, presented by Dr. Rob Walker of the University of East Anglia, on the 3rd March 2005. For further details please see the NCRM website at www.ncrm.ac.uk/events/events.php.

The Hub has also announced the successful applicants from its first annual call for short-term projects. These projects comprise a series of events and related activities over a six month period. The focus of the call for this year was comparative research. The following projects have been funded, two will commence in April 2005 and one in October 2005. The call for applications for next year's round of short term projects will be issued in June 2005.

Cross-cultural and comparative research methods: the challenges of global social science

University of Sussex
Prof. John Holmwood

Qualitative cross-national research networks

University of London
Prof. Julia Brannen

Developing mixed mode methods in comparative social surveys

City University
Prof. Roger Jowell

Full details of the Hub's activities are available at www.ncrm.ac.uk

Focus on the Nodes

ESRC has announced the successful applicants from the commissioning for the NCRM Nodes. The following six Nodes will commence on the 1 April 2005.

Learning Environment for Multilevel Methodology and Applications (LEMMA)

University of Bristol
Prof. Kelvyn Jones, Dr Sally Thomas and Jon Rasbash

Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: Innovation, Integration and Impact (QUALITI)

Cardiff University
Dr Amanda Coffey, Dr Chris Taylor, Prof. Paul Atkinson, Gareth Rees, Gareth Williams and Sara Delamont

Bayesian methods for combining multiple Individual and Aggregate data Sources in Observational studies (BIAS)

Imperial College, London
Dr Nicky Best and Prof. Sylvia Richardson

Developing Statistical Modelling in the Social Sciences

Lancaster University and University of Warwick
Prof. Brian Francis, Dr Damon Berridge, Prof. John Copas, Prof. Peter Diggle, Prof. David Firth, Prof. Charles Lewis, Prof. Roger Penn and Prof. Keith Sothill

Multi-Dimensional Methods for Real Lives Research

University of Leeds
Dr Jennifer Mason, Dr Sarah Irwin, Dr Bren Neale, Dr Nick Emmel, Dr Frances Hodgson, Dr Jon Prosser, Prof. Louise Ackers, Dr Mark Birkin, Prof. Lynne Cameron, Prof. Josephine Green, Dr Brendan Gough and Prof. Carol Smart

Methods for Research Synthesis Programme

Institute of Education, University of London

Dr David Gough, Dr Sandy Oliver, Ms Angela Harden and Mr James Thomas

The NCRM will be hosting a launch event on the 21 June 2005 at St. Anne's College in Oxford, introducing the Nodes and presenting their current research findings. More details will be available soon from the NCRM website www.ncrm.ac.uk

News from NCeSS

Gillian Sinclair



NCeSS was formally launched in December 2004 by Prof. Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC, and Sue Duncan, Government Chief Social Researcher. Its

mission is to encourage the UK social science research community to explore the application of Grid computing and 'e-Science' to social science research problems. Since coming into existence in April 2004, the centre has recruited a team of seven staff based at the hub at the University of Manchester and one at the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex.

In December 2004, four NCeSS research Nodes across the UK were announced. These have funding for 3 years to take an in-depth look at the application of e-science to specific areas of social science research:

- Collaboration for Quantitative e-Social Science Statistics - Lancaster University
- Modelling and Simulation for e-social Science - University of Leeds
- Understanding New Forms of Digital Record for e-Social Science - University of Nottingham
- Mixed Media Grid - University of Bristol

A further set of Nodes will be announced later this year.

As part of NCeSS's remit to raise the social science community's awareness of e-social science and encourage it to get involved in shaping the research agenda, NCeSS is helping to organise a series of Agenda Setting Workshops, three of which have been announced, covering video analysis, quantitative methods and training and awareness. There is also an open-date small grants scheme to encourage experimental initiatives in e-Social Science.

This summer will see the First International Conference on e-Social Science held in Manchester (22nd-24th June) at which a range of papers, workshops and tutorials will be presented reporting on case studies of e-social science, applications, tools, methods and the impact of e-science on research.

Further details of the Nodes, the small grants scheme and all events, including the conference and Agenda Setting Workshops, can be found on our website www.ncess.ac.uk.

Spotlight on Resources

Louise Corti

The Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS)

The Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) is a national data archiving and dissemination service that came into operation in January 2003. The service is a jointly-funded initiative sponsored by the ESRC and the JISC. ESDS provides access and support for an extensive range of key economic and social data, both quantitative and qualitative, spanning many disciplines and themes.



ESDS Homepage

The ESDS is a distributed service, based on a collaboration between four key centres of expertise: UK Data Archive (UKDA); Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER); Manchester Information and Associated Services (MIMAS); and Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research (CCSR). These centres work collaboratively to provide preservation, dissemination, data enhancement, user support and training activities.

ESDS comprises a number of specialist data services that promote and encourage data usage in teaching and research across the following areas: large scale government survey data; longitudinal survey data; international macro

and micro data; and qualitative data. All four services have their own dedicated web site, help desk, JISCmail list, online

University's Institute of Education in January 2005, provided a useful introduction to the approach. It offered an opportunity to try out

data access and download services, a programme of promotional and training activities, and online support materials. Data and document enhancements to key ESDS data collections represent the main value-added work undertaken by the four services.

both the open interviewing technique (which requires a significant amount of 'unlearning', even for those used to more traditional in-depth interviewing) and the two track analysis of a person's 'lived life' alongside their 'told story'. We learnt about SQUINs (Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative), D-A-R-N-E text sorts (Description, Analysis, Report, Narrative and Evaluation) and 'future blind chunk-by-chunk panel interpretation'.

Data supported by ESDS is available via the UKDA web site where users can access study descriptions and online documentation, including questionnaires, free of charge and without registering. Registered users (Athens authenticated) can download and explore/analyse online a large and growing number of datasets via the web. Access conditions may apply.

The 21 course participants came from diverse backgrounds and had interests ranging from body image and racial identity to patients' healthcare experiences and community needlework archives. All were keen to find out how the BNIM might help them to obtain a deeper understanding of people's lives. Reaction to the course was generally very positive. The main reservations was the extremely time-consuming (and therefore costly) nature of the method, especially the micro-analysis of individual words and phrases. However, it was pointed out that the rich material obtained through biographic-narrative interviewing can be analysed in a variety of ways, and that even doing just one detailed case analysis could assist with theory generation.

ESDS provides both general guidance and a dedicated advisory service for data creators and depositors on research project management, issues of confidentiality and consent, and documentation of data for archiving.

Contact: help@esds.ac.uk
URL: www.esds.ac.uk

Spotlight on Events

June Statham, Reader in Education and Family Support at the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

NCRM Training Course: Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method, London. 13-14 Jan 2005

Biographic-narrative interviewing methods (BNIM) are attracting growing interest among researchers both in the UK and further afield. This two-day course, run by Prue Chamberlayne and Tom Wengraf at London

This was an enjoyable and stimulating two days, challenging and well presented, which left most participants keen to try out the method and perhaps to meet again to share experiences once they had done so. It offers a 'taster' rather than a full training (BNIM courses are normally held over five days or longer), but is an excellent way of finding out what this approach can offer, and of reflecting on the merits of different interviewing and analysis techniques.



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