

MethodsNews

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Directors' Corner

Rose Wiles, Co-Director, NCRM



Following Jackie Powell's retirement in September 2008, I have been appointed as one of the Hub's Co-Directors. Having worked at the NCRM Hub since the Centre started in 2004 in the role of principal research fellow I was very pleased to be invited to combine this role with the additional responsibilities of a Co-Director. My role will involve, among other things, co-ordinating qualitative activities across the Centre and undertaking the Hub's research agenda on innovation as well as continuing my own research in the fields of research ethics and medical sociology.

One of the activities I have been, and will continue to be, involved with in the Centre is NCRM's Networks for Methodological Innovation (NMI) scheme. This scheme enables networks of researchers to apply for funding to undertake events and activities, and to develop outputs, focusing on research methods with the aim of stimulating debate, developing ideas and building research capacity in relation to methodological innovation. Since 2005 the Centre has funded 11 NMI projects on a range of topics including comparative research, discourse analysis, surveys, social network analysis and archiving.

One of the recently completed projects, conducted by Chris High at the Open University, provides a good example of the ways in which these projects can build capacity in specific methodological approaches and enhance the quality of social scientists' methodological skills. This project focused on participatory video. In comparison with other participatory methods, this approach has not been widely used in the academic community. This network has brought together people from a range of disciplines and, through various events, meetings and online activities, has increased the number of researchers interested in and able to use participatory video in their research. An exploration of the variety of applications of participatory video has been a key element of this project. An important outcome of this project is the creation of a training curriculum for participatory video. I look forward to working with further such projects in the future.

Viewpoint

Mike Thelwall, Professor of Information Science, University of Wolverhampton



Ask not what you can do for Web 2.0, ask what Web 2.0 can do for you. Web 2.0 - the movement for informal user-generated web content like blogs, social network sites and YouTube videos - gives researchers new ways to communicate with each other and to find new online audiences. Initiatives like <http://www.test-tube.org.uk> and thousands of research blogs and Wikis are a testament to this. But I believe that the biggest advantage of Web 2.0 for social scientists is the window that it gives into the lives and opinions of a wide section of the public, particularly youth. This potential is not widely recognised or exploited, despite the relative ease by which it can be achieved. Two examples are given here.

To get a quick snapshot of public opinion on a topic, submit an appropriate query to a blog search engine like blogpulse.com to get a selection of recent postings and a graph of the volume of interest in the topic over the past six months, potentially revealing trends and peaks of interest. This takes only a few minutes and, whilst lacking the validity of a controlled random sample, can give up-to-date or retrospective insights into discussed topics or events, from the U.S. presidential elections and GM food to X Factor.

Similarly, an easy way to get insights into people's lives is via their declarations or exchanges with friends in the social network site MySpace. Simply Google *site:profile.myspace.com X*, where X is your topic of interest (e.g., health issues, recreation, music) to get a list of MySpace profile pages mentioning it (plus some spurious matches). The information gained is all in the public domain and may therefore generate fewer ethical issues than interviews or questionnaires. As such, it is particularly suitable for quick exploratory or pilot studies.

In addition to the above simple methods, there is an increasing range of more sophisticated techniques to exploit the explosion in online information. I think that many social scientists could benefit from finding ways of harnessing informal user-generated content to help their research.

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Focus on the Hub

New NCRM report: Assessment of the Training Needs in the UK Professional Social Research Community

NCRM researchers Dr Rose Wiles, Dr Nick Bardsley and Professor Jackie Powell have conducted a study into the research methods training needs of the social research community outside academia.

The findings of the report indicated a need for training in the methods that are commonly used in the applied or policy sectors. Research-related skills were also identified as an important area of training need. At the senior level, skills and/or training needs were identified in research management, both of projects and people, as well as in relation to communication with clients and research commissioners. Scope was also identified for increased collaboration between academics and practitioners in training provision.

To read the full report go to <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/490>

New staff members at NCRM in Southampton



Dr Sean Moley started in November 08 as the new Training & Capacity Building Developer. In his role he will focus on promoting and supporting TCB activities across the Centre. Sean taught science for six years at a secondary school in East London, after which he obtained a PhD in psychology. He has five years experience in working in teaching and research in HE, FE and private consultancy. Before joining NCRM he worked at the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.



Nicky Jackson started as the NCRM Administrator in November 08. In her role Nicky will focus on the administration of the hub, and ensuring efficient coordination and communication across the Centre. She has been working in the higher education sector for nine years and her most recent position before joining NCRM was as Timetabling Officer at the University of Southampton.

Methods review: Conducting qualitative research with people with learning, communication and other disabilities

This methodological paper by Professor Melanie Nind reviews the research literature and discusses the issues that arise in conducting qualitative research with people for whom traditional methods of qualitative research might present challenges for researchers. The focus is on children and adults with learning difficulties, communication difficulties or other disabilities such as autism with associated complex challenges in communicating, understanding and taking part in qualitative research.

To read this Methods Review paper (No 012) and to browse other working papers, methodological reviews and reports go to <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/outputs/publications/>.

The NCRM EPrints service is a single access point to all NCRM outputs: books, articles, working papers, reviews, reports, presentations etc. Take a look at what we currently have in the NCRM EPrints archive in <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk>

Focus on the Nodes

Simulation Innovation - SIMIAN

SIMIAN

Simulation Innovation: a Node

When is a research method new and when is it "more of the same?" If a method is innovative, what does this imply about how it should be developed, evaluated and

applied? Agent-based social simulation (ABSS) is a novel method for developing and testing social theories. Two other approaches are widely known. Narrative descriptions of theories are rich and flexible but often allow gaps and inconsistencies. Mathematical theories are rigorous and precise but require strong simplifying assumptions for analysis. ABSS represents social theories as computer programs (rather than narratives or equations) providing a "third way" for social science.

You can learn a lot about novelty by the resistance it encounters. Rejection of innovative methods can involve the "disappearing past". In a few years, new methods are expected to meet criteria that existing methods took far longer to achieve or even formulate. Should we compare the present state of ABSS with statistical analysis today or in the 1920s? Another variant is to judge simulation by its ability to use existing data, collected with other goals and methods in mind, to deliver surprising results. Statistical analysis certainly doesn't do this with qualitative data or vice versa! In fact, being able to use data "off the shelf" is more a feature of normal science than genuine novelty. Finally, there is the "nice but useless" gambit. However a new research method is applied it remains, mysteriously, "not sociology" or "not economics".

The SIMIAN node of NCRM aims to tackle as many criticisms of ABSS as possible using integrated research, training and outreach. Some will be addressed by substantive research building demonstrator projects with broad social science interest, others by using these demonstrators to develop methodologies, for example, for synthesis of theories, systematic use of existing research and collecting appropriate data by novel techniques. SIMIAN will develop and consolidate training to ensure that anyone from the curious novice to the experienced researcher can develop their skills. Introductory and intermediate courses have already been held successfully and the first advanced course took place on 21 January at the University of Surrey. SIMIAN will also hold outreach activities at venues across academia, industry and government to try to build better shared understanding about the problems these sectors face and what ABSS can do to address them. In this way, we hope that decisions to use the method will become equally well informed.

To find out more about SIMIAN, please go to <http://www.simian.ac.uk>

Other news

Analysing Developmental Change Workshop

31 August 2008, St Catherine's College Oxford

How do we broadcast the aims, methods and results of work of the Centre to the various social science constituencies?

Members of the Lancaster-Warwick node combined forces with the Developmental Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society to run this workshop at St Catherine's College Oxford on a rainy August afternoon. The course was expected to attract mostly PhD students and new postdocs, but to the organisers' surprise the meeting was top heavy with professors, two of whom came from Holland and Denmark especially for the event.

As the first workshop conducted jointly by the Centre and the Society, the focus of two of the papers was general issues involved in longitudinal data analysis. Charlie Lewis talked about *Why are longitudinal studies crucial for developmental psychology?*, while Brian Francis gave a very practical introduction to the statistical procedures for modelling longitudinal data. His talk entitled *Modelling individual and group trajectories in longitudinal data* used examples from developmental studies to introduce psychologists to approaches that they do not usually use. Finally, Ivonne Solis-Trapala's talk on modelling discrete data in longitudinal studies introduced some of the complexities of models that are alternatives to the generalized linear model. She introduced the participants to Generalized Estimation Equations to underline some of the applications of advances in statistical theory.

Discussion that followed from the workshop suggested that this constituency is keen to learn about techniques that are not usually used by the psychological community. The request was made for follow-up workshops that go into specific techniques in detail and introduce participants to specific software to implement these approaches.

If you have any ideas or research needs that you feel that such a workshop might address within developmental psychology, please email Charlie Lewis c.lewis@lancaster.ac.uk.

Spotlight on Resources

ESDS International



Jointly-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Joint Information Systems Committee, the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) is a national data archiving and dissemination service operating from four key centres of expertise: Mimas; The UK Data Archive (UKDA); The Institute for Social and Economic Research; and The Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research.

As one of ESDS's specialist data services ESDS International provides UK academics and researchers with free access and

support for a range of regularly updated international macro and micro data series and surveys. Since its launch in 2003, the service has witnessed an astonishing growth in usage by the international data community and now records a monthly average of over 8500 macro data access sessions by 1100 unique users from over 80 further and higher education institutions.

The Data Portfolio

The acquisitions strategy deployed by ESDS International has enabled the service to reach agreements with intergovernmental organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the International Energy Agency, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and the World Bank to provide academic users with free access to major international statistical databanks that collectively chart over 50 years of global social and economic change, providing a uniquely valuable resource to the teaching and research community.

Over 30 aggregate datasets are available including the World Bank's World Development Indicators, the IMF's Direction of Trade and International Financial Statistics, and the International Energy Agency databases. The coming year will see the enhancement of the data portfolio with the addition of the United Nation's Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade). Micro data available include the Eurobarometer Survey Series, European and World Values Surveys, the European Social Survey and Latinobarómetro.

Supporting the user and recent initiatives

As well as providing access to the data, the service runs a dedicated help desk, produces comprehensive support materials and teaching and learning resources, runs introductory courses on international datasets and holds an annual conference on issues relating to international data research. Over the last year the service has launched its *Case studies of international data use* initiative, which enables users of ESDS International to submit an outline of their research question, data sources, methods and key results to the service. This is then edited and if published on the website the user receives a £50 Amazon voucher. As well as highlighting the diverse use of international data in research and teaching it allows the service's users to showcase their work and enables others in the international data community to see interesting examples of current research. This initiative has proved to be very popular, eliciting feedback from a diverse user community. 2008 also saw the launch of *Countries and Citizens: Linking international macro and micro data*, a comprehensive set of e-learning materials designed as a self guided teaching resource containing extensive information on each topic, examples, teaching datasets and step-by-step hands-on activities.

ESDS International data service website:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/international/>

Current case studies are available at

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/international/casestudies/>.

Elearning materials:

<http://www.esds.ac.uk/international/elearning/limmd/>.

Email: international@esds.ac.uk

JISCMail: esds-international

Spotlight on Events

NCRM Autumn School, Southampton, 12-14 November 2008

Dr Victor Gekara, Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC), Cardiff University

The 2008 NCRM Autumn School was held on 12–14 November in Southampton. The diversity was evident in the gathered participants: academic background, age, methodological inclinations and institutional affiliation aptly reflected the complex wealth of “the school of social sciences”. The fact that although we might be working in different parts of that school and using different tools of enquiry, we have a lot in common and can benefit greatly from sharing our diverse experiments and experiences with methods.



Photo: Professor Phil Cowley from Government Social Research Unit (HM Treasury) gave an insightful presentation “Communicating with Government; Some dos and don’ts”.

The choice of venue – the Jury’s Inn, right in the middle of a round-about with its many entry and exit points intricately designed, could not have been more symbolic of the stage at which we, social scientists, currently are with regard to the plethora of questions about methods and methodology. Questions such as, what is methodologically appropriate? What should be considered valid sources of data? Are we ready to take a leap into the future of internet research? All these issues and many more were raised in the various thought-provoking presentations and the discussions they triggered. It was also symbolic of the academic environment of complex choices in which beginning researchers, such as those gathered, had to navigate as they develop their careers, choices such as whether to keep driving round the methodological round-about or take one of the many exits and explore the methodological city beyond.

Perhaps an even wealthier aspect of the Autumn School experience was the socializing and networking among the many friendly, youthful and enthusiastic participants through which the debates were carried beyond the boardroom to the restaurant and the hotel bar downstairs. For me this was very important because an opportunity was created for planting the seeds for future deliberations and possible collaborations. The initial success of this process, in my view, is evident in the fact that a large group of us have been in touch since with the promise to keep in touch. All this was possible because of the diligent work of the organizers of the event and I must say that if the opportunity arose for me to attend another of the NCRM Autumn Schools at the round-about, the difficulty of locating the parking lot beneath the building will definitely not deter me!



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