



In this Issue

- Directors' Corner
- Viewpoint
- Focus on the Hub
- Focus on the Nodes
- Other News
- Spotlight on Resources
- Spotlight on Events

Directors' Corner

Graham Crow, Deputy Director



The organiser of an event is not the best-placed person to comment on how successful it was, but I am confident that the most recent Research Methods Festival should be judged a success.

To begin with, it attracted delegates from across the social science community. The 700 people who gathered in Oxford to learn about and discuss developments in social science research methods came from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and the festival provided opportunities for delegates to venture into unfamiliar territories that conventional discipline-based conferences cannot. Delegates also came from all sectors of the social science research community. It was particularly pleasing to see so many social researchers and government researchers and a smaller number of people working in market research, indicating that attendance extended well beyond the core of academic social scientists. People from all career stages came, with research students making up over a quarter of delegates. And there was a welcome presence of international delegates.

Success can also be gauged by delegates' reported experiences. The best quantitative indicator of this is that 88% of delegates who completed evaluation forms will recommend the next festival to colleagues, compared to 3% who will not (the other 9% being non-committal). Qualitative comments on the evaluation forms included many along the lines of "All good! A chance to think", together with others which identified possible improvements. These include increasing the number of postgraduates exhibiting posters, and remarks relating to the booking process and to gaps in the programme relating to particular methods. These are acknowledged in the spirit that there is always room for improvement.

The previous festivals were always going to be a hard act to follow, but a great team effort produced a successful outcome in 2008, as well as much food for thought for the next festival in 2010.

Viewpoint

Richard Chalfen, Senior Scientist, Center on Media and Child Health, Children's Hospital Boston



During my recent visit to the UK, speaking with several visual researchers, I was reminded of one troublesome trend easily spotted over the past five years, one that I have labelled: "Bandwagon Participatory Media." I refer to tacking on a visual component (drawings, paintings, graphics, photographs, films/videos) seemingly as an afterthought: "And I intend to give cameras to my subjects and see what they do..." Reasons may vary including the need to remain trendy, the threat of missing something, the chance of becoming genuinely enlightened or, gain some sense of collaborative evidence.

This strategy has everything backwards – the implicit wisdom of knowing how to handle generated data seems easily violated or virtually ignored when it comes to adding some component of participatory visual media to a research agenda and associated protocol. After visual data has been collected, I repeatedly hear researchers asking: "What do I do with all this [visual] material? It's all really interesting – I just don't know how or why." Creating useable data, for uses beyond illustrative functions, needs more attention. Perhaps traditions underlying techniques of researching visual media have been overlooked.

A priority change is needed to generate projects that start with image production as a researchable problem. Michael Ball and Gregory Smith set the stage in 1992, claiming the value of creating ethnographies to support pictures (and picture-use) in contrast to designating pictorial media to support ethnographies. I am reminded of one criticism of photo elicitation methods, when PE discourse should be understood as socio-culturally variable speech event. Pictorial results of an invitation to make photographs or other pictorial media should be studied for a parallel set of variables and variations.

Having images the centerpiece of original research will encourage better models of description and analysis to match the problem and the data. The criticisms cited above could be easily diffused with more aggressive attention to production, content, use and functions of images as part of accepted visual research methods.

Focus on the Hub

Presentation slides available: 3rd ESRC Research Methods Festival, St Catherine's College, Oxford, 30 June-3 July 2008



The presentation slides for the 3rd ESRC Research Methods Festival are available for download.

The festival took place on 30 June - 3 July 2008 at St Catherine's College, Oxford. The programme included choices from 69 sessions that covered all aspects of developments in social science research methods. The festival delegates were social science researchers from all disciplines, all career stages, and all sectors.

For more information about the festival programme and to view the presentation slides, please see the festival pages at <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/RMF2008/festival/programme>.

New members of staff at the NCRM Hub



Patrick Sturgis joins NCRM as co-director of the Hub on 1 August this year. Patrick took up a new appointment as Professor of Research Methods in the Division of Social Statistics, at the University of Southampton on 1 May 2008. Prior to joining Southampton, Patrick spent seven years in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey. He is currently a visiting scholar at the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. Patrick's graduate training was as a social psychologist. His research interests now focus on the application of social psychological concepts and theories to aid our understanding of a broad range of social and political behaviours. Having started his career in social research in the Survey Methods Centre at the National Centre for Social Research, Patrick also maintains a research interest in different aspects of survey methodology, particularly on the measurement properties of commonly used survey questions. Initially, his role within the NCRM will focus on management and research within the Hub and coordination with the Nodes.



Debbie Hunter took the post of the Centre Administrator in February 2008 and was immediately immersed into the organisation of the Research Methods Festival, which she saw through successfully. Debbie has considerable experience in working in the HE sector: Before joining the NCRM she held the post of the Administrator at the Centre for Research on Ageing at the University of Southampton assisting with the new Centre's set up and the recruitment of students for a new masters programme in Gerontology. She has also worked in the School of Mathematics managing the postgraduate students, the

University Conference Office and in Nursing and Midwifery arranging student work placements. Before her career in the HE Debbie worked in conference management and prior to that in Beauty Therapy.

NCRM at the RCUK Large Facilities Roadmap 2008

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) has been included in the 2008 Research Councils UK (RCUK) Large Facilities Roadmap.

The Roadmap provides a comprehensive picture of the major research infrastructures planned and under construction by the Research Councils, and the facilities that they and their research communities have identified as emerging opportunities for the future.

Professor Ian Diamond (Chair, RCUK) says: "The picture that the document presents is of a vibrant research base supported by a broad array of facilities serving a wide range of researchers, with in all cases the goal of maintaining and developing world class research capabilities for the UK. The Roadmap includes facilities for the physical and for the life sciences, for engineering, astronomy, environmental research, medicine, and the social sciences. These facilities include the familiar large physical installations, but increasingly they also take the form of novel distributed, networked resources that exploit advances in information and communications technology to underpin new collaborative modes of research."

To read the publication please go to <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/publications/lroadmap08.pdf>

Focus on the Nodes

Nicky Best, BIAS II node, Imperial College London

There has been much research activity in the BIAS node during the past year. Jassy Molitor and Chris Jackson (now at MRC Biostatistics Unit in Cambridge) submitted two methodological papers on graphical models for multiple bias modelling in observational data. The papers describe new methodologies for joint modelling of multiple datasets for studying exposure outcome relationships in the presence of hidden bias from unmeasured confounders and non-random selection. Application of their methods to two case studies in environmental epidemiology showed that the bias modelling had an important impact on study conclusions. Also at BIAS, Sara Geneletti completed a paper on Bayesian adjustment for selection bias which is accepted for publication in Biostatistics. Lawrence McCandless recently visited the node for ten months as a research associate from Canada and completed a project developing propensity score techniques to simplify joint modelling of multiple datasets when adjusting for multiple hidden confounders.

BIAS project staff had several opportunities to participate in conferences and workshops. In early June 2008, Lawrence McCandless attended a SAMSI (Statistical and Applied Mathematical Sciences Institute) workshop on meta-analysis in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. The workshop brought together researchers from around the world in order to discuss cutting edge ideas for the advancement of evidence synthesis analysis. The participants were involved in a range of workshop activities and focus groups on topics including statistical analyses for individual versus combined studies, and prior selection when faced with multiple datasets. Lawrence McCandless presented a poster on propensity score techniques based on his work at BIAS. The SAMSI workshop meshed well with the BIAS project activities because they both involve efforts to develop novel analysis techniques to improve the deficiencies of standard analyses by combining data of different types.

The BIAS node also recently ran a successful workshop on Bayesian modelling for researchers at the Office for National Statistics. Virgilio Gomez-Rubio presented work on Bayesian methods for small area estimation at the Government Statistical Service Methodology conference in June. He also lead one day workshops at Imperial College on small area estimation and making R packages of statistical software.

Other News

Call for e-Social Science Quantitative Node



The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) invites proposals for a Quantitative Research Node within the application strand of the NCeSS research programme.

The National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS) is funded by the ESRC to investigate how innovative and powerful computer-based infrastructure and tools, developed over the past five years under the UK e-Science programme, can benefit the social science research community. The Centre forms part of the ESRC's broader strategy to develop leading-edge methodological tools and techniques within the social sciences, to enhance the capacity to collect, link, access, share and analyse both quantitative and qualitative data resources. NCeSS has a distributed structure, with a co-ordinating Hub based at the University of Manchester and a network of research Nodes (currently seven) based at Universities across the UK. The first phase Nodes commissioned in 2004/05 are currently drawing to a close and the second phase Nodes are starting their work. The remit of the Nodes is to develop and pursue the NCeSS research programme and raise awareness of e-Social Science.

Closing date for proposal admissions is 4pm on Monday 29th September 2008. For further information and application form, please go to <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities> -> Current Funding Opportunities

Spotlight on Resources

Multilevel Modelling Online Course

Sacha Brostoff, LEMMA II node, University of Bristol

Many social phenomena are embedded in several levels of context, often influencing the outcomes we're studying. For example, some classes and schools are better than others, and these two levels of context will affect a pupil's attainment. And yet, common statistical tests ignore the context. Ignoring these levels of context leads to smaller standard errors in your results than there should be – sometimes giving the illusion of statistically significant effects when there are none. More than this – throw away the context and you could be denying yourself fascinating insights.

"Multilevel Modelling" (MLM) is a collection of statistical methods (like regression on steroids) allowing you to enter levels of context into your analyses, and study them concurrently with your main variables of interest. It gives you accurate results (correct standard errors) so you can properly judge the effects of your variables, and also allows you to assess the impact that each contextual level has, so that you can answer questions such as "To what extent does a patient's treatment outcome depend on which hospital they are admitted to". MLM techniques are growing in importance, and top social science journals may soon be rejecting manuscripts that do not use them to allow for contextual effects.

The Centre for Multilevel Modelling, University of Bristol has released a free online course in multilevel modelling, for use by students and researchers for study, and lecturers for teaching. Many learners are shaky on core knowledge needed to understand MLM and use it, so the course starts from the basics of quantitative research. Each module is split into lessons, many with quizzes to help you judge progress. The materials train you to use the powerful MLwiN software, designed specifically for multilevel modelling. Instructions are provided for analysing the example datasets, and you can download a free training version of MLwiN. There are videos where you can see and hear the authors introduce modules, and a voting system where you can translate ideas you've learned to your own research, and be nosy and see how your circumstances compare to others'. The materials are designed for lecturers too – released under a Creative Commons licence to avoid IPR problems. Widely applicable "Concepts" materials are separate from "Practicals" - examples from particular disciplines and software which are likely to need adaptation to each lecturer's requirements. If you do adapt them we'd like to hear from you and possibly feature your versions on the course.

The materials are free to everyone, but require a quick registration. When logged in, what you click and type are recorded and anonymously analysed for the LEMMA research project – to find out what works in teaching MLM, and for what kinds of learners.

For more information please visit: <http://www.cmm.bris.ac.uk/lemma> or contact Hilary.Browne@bristol.ac.uk

Spotlight on Events

3rd ESRC Research Methods Festival, St Catherine's College, Oxford, 30 June-3 July 2008

Cathy Sullivan, London Metropolitan University & the SRA



Photo: Festival participants enjoying themselves at the evening reception.

The third ESRC Research Methods Festival convened by NCRM was a welcome personal first for me. Following over optimistically late booking for the inaugural event, and unavoidable commitments second time around I was quite determined to make this year's promising programme offer. As an applied social researcher and also teacher of research methods it proved to be, as hoped, a wonderful opportunity for inspiration and reflection on methodological issues, practice and pedagogy, creative space that is often lost in the hectic day to day patchwork of a lively new University.

It is challenging to highlight individual sessions or isolate personal favourites. There were sessions to suit every taste. These included a helpful What Is? series of straightforward introductions to tools and strategies: I spoke to more experienced as well as new researchers who benefited from these. Key themes preoccupying contemporary methodological debates were also reflected throughout the three days such as the issues around combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, public engagement and its impact and also interdisciplinary/cross disciplinary research.

Innovative developments were well represented. The session on Multi-Sensory methods was an exemplar, fascinating insights into creative and thoughtful research practice that is attempting to better understand the complexities of contemporary social experiences and at the same time communicate those research outcomes more imaginatively and effectively. What of teaching and writing about research methodology? This was a really interesting, vital strand within the festival where eminent authors shared the successes and challenges of producing effective textbooks, and research teaching and learning strategies and initiatives were explored. It was heartening to see two plenary speakers, US methodologists Charles Ragin and Kathy Charmaz contributing their expertise in methods teaching.

The NCRM organisers are to be congratulated for addressing the needs of a truly diverse audience, from professors and younger academics to professional research practitioners from government and other applied research sectors in what is the 30th anniversary year of the SRA, and many PhD and Masters students. One person's networking opportunity can always be another's source of anxiety, but this festival was marked by a notably friendly and relaxed atmosphere that made it easy to meet new people. The accommodation and catering were faultless. My only reservation was the inevitable frustration of parallel sessions, in an ideal world there would be slightly shorter sessions and fewer parallels.

What have I taken away from the experience? Lots of inspiration to follow up on ideas and developments discussed, including a date in my autumn diary to purchase Ragin's forthcoming 'Redesigning Social Inquiry'. Methodologically these are developmental and creative times in the Social Sciences. I also note the message from a University of Southampton initiative aimed at improving enthusiasm and uptake of quantitative methods by undergraduates and postgraduates, that carefully crafted and targeted intervention, with intensive staff resource, has a positive outcome. Finally, for me the research methods festival was a reaffirmation of a long held view that social researchers are, on the whole, one of the more amenable professional occupational groups.



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