

MethodsNews

Issue 17
November 2008



Directors' Corner

Jackie Powell, Co-Director



One of my final tasks before retiring was to co-chair a seminar on public involvement in social research. This event, reported elsewhere in this newsletter, prompted me to reflect on the way in which this issue has become increasingly prominent across the social science community and beyond.

Over the past decade or more, various methods and methodologies have developed with the potential to increase public involvement. For example, technological advances have facilitated the evolution of on-line methods and increasing use of visual data. There is growing interest in the development of 'deliberative methods', many based on approaches more traditionally employed in the context of community consultation and action. Growing pressure from service user groups across both public and voluntary sectors has also contributed to raising the profile of this issue, as have concerns from within the social science community about low response rates, increasing public distrust of research, and limited utilisation of research by policy makers and practitioners.

Whatever their origins – and there are many – questions about the nature and purpose of social research are raised. So often discussions are reduced to taking polarised positions in what might be framed as the 'rigour versus relevance' debate. The key questions need to be addressed less adversarially: 'in what ways', 'on whose terms' might we promote increased public involvement (in its many guises)? NCRM has a valuable role to play in facilitating discussion of these issues and generating conversations that enable both differences of view and possible areas of agreement to be explored. This was evident at the Research Methods Festival earlier this summer, where there were several sessions specifically devoted to the topic of public involvement. As someone with a longstanding professional interest in this topic, I look forward with interest to these continuing debates, albeit, with my departure from NCRM, as an active senior citizen.

Viewpoint

Les Back, Professor of Sociology, Goldsmiths, University of London



While it is a cliché to say that digital technologies and new media impact profoundly on our everyday lives, little attention has been paid to opportunities that digital photography, mobile sound technologies, CD roms and online publishing might offer the social researcher and the practice of research.

It is still the case that most social scientists view the research encounter as an interface between an observer and the observed producing either quantitative or qualitative data. Equally, the dissemination of research findings are confined to conventional paper forms of publishing and research excellence is measured and audited through such forms be it in monographs or academic journals. In social science the inclusion of audio or visual material in the context of ethnographic social research has been little more than 'eye candy' or 'background listening' to the main event on the page. The relatively inexpensive nature of these easy-to-use media offers researchers a new opportunity to develop innovative approaches to how we conduct and present social research. There are more opportunities than at any other moment to re-think the craft of social research beyond the dominance of the word and figure and our reliance on 'the interview' as the prime technology for generating 'data' often taking place across a table in particular place. The outcomes of the exchanges that are established are complicated and cannot be simply reduced to a particular affect or outcome.

More than at any point we have the potential now to do the craft of research differently, but while there are greater opportunities to re-imagine social research than ever before, the academy is becoming more conservative about where and what counts. "But is it sociology?" or "Is it academic enough?" they ask. It may be time to re-think how to situate ourselves and our commitments in relation to, not only what one is against, but also what vision of social research one might want to argue for. Our theoretical engagement needs to retain a connectedness to things, places and peoples, so that the referent of the realities that we want to enhance does not melt away or become obscured.

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Focus on the Hub

New NCRM EPrints archive now online



NCRM IT team has been working hard to make all NCRM outputs available in an easily searchable format, and now the EPrints archive is finally online.

The NCRM EPrints service is a single access point to all NCRM outputs: books, articles, working papers, reviews, reports, presentations etc. NCRM EPrints archive contains either the output itself, a link to it or in some cases just the bibliographic information. New and old outputs are continuously added to the database, so the archive is growing all the time. All presentations from the Research Methods Festival 2008 are already available in NCRM EPrints archive. Please take a look what we currently have in the NCRM EPrints archive

<http://ePrints.ncrm.ac.uk>

EPrints open source software

If you would like to find out more about the Open Access and institutional repositories with an EPrints platform please go to

<http://www.EPrints.org>

Social Research and Public Involvement: Colliding Worlds?

A seminar was held in London on 26th September to explore the issues and challenges of public involvement in applied social research. The seminar was organised jointly by NCRM and INVOLVE, an organisation which promotes public involvement in research. The seminar brought together social researchers working in a range of settings as well as user researchers and others involved with public involvement as advocates, facilitators and participants. The seminar was chaired by Professor Jackie Powell from NCRM and Angela Barnard from INVOLVE. Presentations from Roy Sainsbury from the University of York, Mary Kellett from the Open University and Richard O'Neill, a community campaigner and gypsy traveller, explored public involvement in social research from different perspectives.

Workshop sessions involved participants exploring issues around why public involvement in social research might be useful and how such involvement might be facilitated. A number of challenges for social researchers emerged from these discussions including issues of research quality and conflicting agendas between researchers and the public. Nevertheless, there was considerable support for taking forward the agenda of public involvement. Peter Beresford from Brunel University closed the seminar by drawing conclusions from the day. He highlighted the growing interest in the public involvement agenda among social researchers but warned against the assumption that such progress would inevitably continue and stressed the need for on-going dialogue. A report of the seminar will be available on the INVOLVE website

<http://www.invo.org.uk> in the next few weeks.

New Visual Research Methods papers available

Two new papers on visual methods have been published on the NCRM Methods Review Paper series: Introducing Visual Methods (Prosser and Loxley) and Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research (Wiles, Prosser, Bagnoli, Clark, Davies, Holland and Renold). They have already generated a lot of interest.

To view and download these papers please go to

<http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/outputs/publications> and the papers are in Methods Review Papers.

Focus on the Nodes

Learning Environment for Multilevel Methodology and Applications - LEMMA II

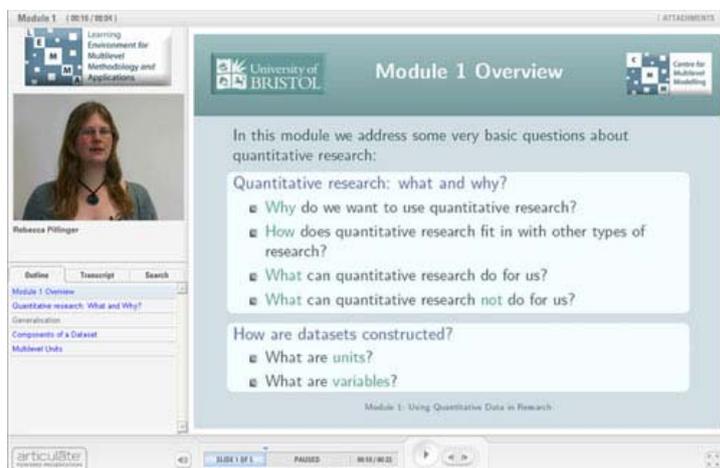


Learning Environment for Multilevel Methodology and Applications II

LEMMA Online Learning Environment has been up and running since April 2008, and now have over 550 registered users. New materials that are to be added soon include modules

on the analysis of single-level and multilevel binary response variables, and a piece by Harvey Goldstein on the use of performance indicators in education.

Researchers at LEMMA II are continuing to develop the online course on Multilevel Modelling and have recently added video presentations to accompany modules "Using Quantitative Data in Research" and "Introduction to Quantitative data Analysis".



A view of LEMMA Online Learning Environment

LEMMA II have also published a series of slide presentations with voice-overs on the website:

- 1)Residuals - An Introduction
- 2)Measuring Dependency
- 3)Covariance and Correlation Matrices

To listen to these and other audio/visual presentations go to www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/learning-training/videos/index.shtml

LEMMA II will be trialling several new workshops in 2009, the first of which is entitled 'Multilevel Modelling of Discrete Response Data' which is taking place in January 2009. This is an intermediate level workshop, which provides an introduction to multilevel modelling of discrete (categorical and count) data. Another new workshop entitled 'Research workshop in Multilevel Modelling' will be taking place in Bristol on the 7 – 9th September 2009. This workshop is designed for researchers who have some experience of multilevel modelling, but now wish to apply it to their own data. This is an intensive workshop which aims to take researchers to a point where they have the skills and confidence to specify multilevel models appropriate to their research questions, to estimate models in MLwiN, and to interpret the results. By the end of the workshop, participants should be capable of producing a publication-quality research paper using multilevel modelling.

In addition to the new workshops, Prof. Harvey Goldstein and George Leckie have recently presented a two-day training course on Multilevel Modelling at the Royal Statistical Society. This course is designed to give participants a solid grounding in the theory and application of multilevel models. Prof. Fiona Steele and Prof. Harvey Goldstein will be running another of these in November 2009.

Details of these workshops, and others, can be found at: <http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/MLwiN/tech-support/workshops>

For more information about LEMMA II node of NCRM, please go to <http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/research/Lemma/2.shtml>

New MLwiN 2.10 Beta (8) available

MLwiN 2.10 Beta is now available to buy or you can upgrade for free if you already own a license for any previous version of the software. Three main new features include: improved model specification interface, a new *bespoke predictions* window and surface plotting routines.

You can now upgrade to MLwiN Beta 2.10 (8) (Vista-compatible) for free if you own an existing MLwiN software licence, or are a UK academic and are eligible for a free download. Subsequent MLwiN 2.10 Beta versions can then be upgraded by you directly for free once you have purchased or downloaded. For further information please go to

<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/>

Spotlight on Resources

Survey Resources Network

November 1st sees the launch of a major new ESRC investment in survey-related resources – the Survey Resources Network (SRN). The SRN brings together a consortium of academic researchers and survey practitioners from the University of Essex, the London School of Economics, the Institute of Education, the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), and the University of Southampton. International input comes from Professor Bob Groves (University of Michigan) and Katja Lozar Manfreda (University of Ljubljana). The network will be led by two co-directors, Professor Peter Lynn (University of Essex) and Dr Bob Erens (NatCen).

The overall aims of the SRN are to co-ordinate the development of survey research methods in the UK and to enhance the quality of training, research resources, and knowledge dissemination in the field. The need for these activities stems from the recognition that survey data collection underpins most quantitative social science in the UK, while the quality of survey research is perhaps not always as high as it should, or could be.

Two of the primary resources through which the SRN will achieve these aims will be familiar to regular readers of *MethodsNews* – the Question Bank (Qb) and the Survey Link Scheme (SLS). Since 1995, Qb has provided students, researchers, and survey practitioners with an invaluable searchable archive of government and academic survey questionnaires. The SLS has an even more venerable history, having provided the UK social science community with an opportunity to observe survey interview procedures at first hand for over twenty years.

With the retirement of Professor Martin Bulmer in October 2009, Qb and SLS will move from their longstanding home at the University of Surrey, to be delivered through the SRN consortium. Qb will continue to be available in its current form (<http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk/>) until the new SRN service goes live in 2009. While retaining the core characteristics of these resources that made them so successful over the years, both QB and SLS will incorporate a range of exciting new features in their new forms. Watch this space for details!

In addition to the new Qb and SLS resources, the SRN will also coordinate the research projects funded by ESRC under the Survey Design and Measurement Initiative (SDMI). These projects address a range of important survey methodological issues including, but not limited to: nonresponse bias, the use of mixed modes, the application of new technologies in the survey process, household definitions and structures, and the validity and reliability of survey questions. The SRN will coordinate the dissemination of research outputs from the SDMI, including a one day conference in 2010, details of which will be provided on the NCRM website when they are available. More detailed information about the SDMI projects and their progress to date can be found at the programme website <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/methods/sdmi> .

Spotlight on Events

Vital Signs, Manchester, 9-11 September 2008

Jennifer Mason, Director, Realities



'Vital Signs: Researching Real Life' was the Real Life Methods Node's closing conference, held on 9-11th September 2008 in Manchester. Our aim was to stimulate dialogue about ways of researching retain the vitality of real life, and to feed some of Real Life Methods' most exciting ideas into that process. We were keen to draw together people from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, who all shared the broad aim of finding ways to research that do not wring the life out of things in the process of investigating or explaining them. We had a tremendous response to our call for abstracts, and had to be tough in our choices given that we were clear that the conference should stay small enough (160 people) to encourage real engagement and dialogue.

The result was hugely exciting, and being part of it felt like being carried along on a tide of something new and vital. What stands out for me now as I look back is the (still almost audible) buzz of ideas and collective energy. People are still telling us how they were inspired by what they saw, heard and participated in. That included our three superb plenaries, which each contributed something distinctive: Les Back (Sociology, Goldsmith's) who talked about researching with a 'radical humility', and the politics and practice that might be involved in

giving a critical attentiveness to vital life; Tim Ingold (Anthropology, Aberdeen) who made us confront challenging questions about 'what' as well as 'how' we research human life, developing the concept of the 'thing' as a 'going on' and life as a 'parliament of lines'; and Carolyn Steedman (History, Warwick) whose inspired stories about servants' poetry and the provenance of a 'pair of stays' gave us a tangible sense of how it is possible to follow lines of enquiry by creatively engaging with a whole range of life's traces, if only we take off our blinkers about what counts as evidence.

The plenaries were key anchors in the event, but innovative, ground-breaking and inspired approaches surfaced elsewhere at every turn and were just as likely to emerge from researchers at early career stages as the many 'big names' who were also present. Sessions like, for example, 'senses, evocation and histories', or 'real lives in the street', or 'life, death and the virtual' or 'nature and the social', ensured that the audience's senses, intellects and imaginations were equally stimulated and challenged. People have told us how they valued the 'friendly and supportive tone which meant people could engage effectively with ideas and each other' or the 'distinct lack of academic "chest thumping"'. Ultimately, this is what pleases me most – namely that we could reach such significant levels of engagement and sophisticated levels of discussion without 'intellectual cannibalism' as Les Back put it.

The 'tide' that Vital Signs was a part of will continue in all kinds of inspired work and new dialogues between researchers engaged in fascinating approaches to the broad aim of researching real life in vital ways. We hope our new Realities Node will be a key player in all of this and, in response to the many people who have asked us, the answer is yes, there will be another 'Vital Signs' – in 2010!

'Realities' runs from 1st October 2008 until 31st March 2011 and is based at the University of Manchester

<http://www.manchester.ac.uk/realities>



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