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Directors' Corner

Graham Crow, Deputy Director



Joining the team of co-directors at the Hub of the National Centre for Research Methods has been a very interesting and challenging experience. I had previously been an associate member of NCRM and so knew something of the breadth of its activities, but it is only since becoming more

directly involved on a day-to-day basis that I have appreciated the full range of what goes on. Looking back through past issues of *MethodsNews* gives a good sense of this range, and this also helps one to gain one's bearings in the sometimes bewildering array of acronyms that abound in the research methods field.

NCRM's agenda is an ambitious one, not least because of the challenge of enhancing the development of the research methods agenda in ways that are of relevance to a very wide constituency. NCRM seeks to work with researchers at all career stages and in a variety of institutional settings, across the spectrum of methodological approaches and techniques, and in all of the social science disciplines. The diversity of this constituency means that events and activities bring together people whose paths do not usually cross but whose meeting can prove mutually beneficial.

Perhaps the best expression of this philosophy in action has been found at the Research Methods Festivals in 2004 and 2006 organised by Angela Dale and her Research Methods Programme team. These events were notable for their success in bringing together people from across the social science community, and in taking over the organization of the festivals NCRM will seek to maintain this tradition. The 2008 Festival is already booked to take place at St Catherine's College, Oxford from 30 June to 3 July. The challenge will be to demonstrate, once again, that together social scientists have the capacity to be much more than the sum of their individual parts.

The 2006 Research Methods Festival webpages will remain online for the foreseeable future, including presentations, papers and links to other useful sites: <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival/>.

Viewpoint

Stephen Baron is an Associate Director for the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and Coordinator of the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) funded by the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Funding Council

Capacity building as a social practice

Capacity building, both as a term and as a concern, has emerged largely in the last decade and has two main referents. The first, surface one, is a perceived weakness in the methodological skills of the social science base while the second, deeper and less articulated, questions the nature of that base itself. The two coincide in the area of quantitative methods which, to the non-social scientist, are the most easily understood as 'scientific' and in which there is paucity of capacity. How many ethnographers can choose qualitative methods over quantitative from a position of detailed knowledge rather than from a high level critique of 'positivism' - and how many social statisticians can respond to the challenges of indexicality and reflexivity?

One major response to these issues has been provision (e.g. short courses) to strengthen researchers' specific technical skills. Another has been to demand that doctoral students first acquire a rounded methodological competence at Masters level. These are necessary but not sufficient as they do not fully engage with what we know about learning as a social practice: it takes place when faced with challenges significant to the learner in the context of social relations which support the learning on an ongoing basis.

In the area of education, ESRC's TLRP Phase 2 capacity building strategy (2004-2008) and the co-terminous Scottish AERS are attempting to address questions of capacity building as a social practice. As the recent ESRC *Demographic Review* highlighted, education is both one of the largest clusters of social scientists in the UK and one which, due to the very different career trajectories of staff into academic life, has major challenges of capacity building. Both TLRP and AERS are time limited interventions which have had a major focus on sustainability from the start.

TLRP is seeking to address both sustainability and the social support for capacity building through working with relevant learned societies to support their self-defined sub-groups in developing capacity in context. For example, TLRP (<http://www.tlrp.org>) is working with the Universities'

Council for the Education of Teachers and the British Educational Research Association to produce research capacity building material tailor-made for staff entering higher education from professional practice. It is also working with the HE Academy similarly to support academics across disciplines to develop capacity to research higher education pedagogy.

AERS (<http://www.aers.ac.uk>) is addressing such issues through the formation of three research Networks on Learners; Learning and Teaching; Schools, Management and Governance; Schools and Social Capital. In each of these Networks there are three research projects in which an experienced Principal Investigator is responsible for recruiting and enabling the learning of a group of less experienced researchers. These three Networks are supported by a Research Capacity Building Network which is responsible both for short course provision and for producing Masters level training materials responsive to the needs of the research teams.

These initiatives attempt not only to address the surface issue of the methodological base of education as a social science, but to encourage relevant research communities to accept and even celebrate methodological diversity, and to be more assertive about the value of nuanced and tolerant definitions of 'science'. It is particularly pleasing that policy and practice communities in Scotland are engaging with AERS and TLRP in a Conference in November focusing on Learning, Equity and Transitions. Noticeably their starter papers reflect such diversity, calling for both large scale survey analysis and in-depth study of the processes through which inequalities are reproduced.

Focus on the Hub

What Research is Needed on How to do Research?

Nick Bardsley, Senior Research Fellow, NCRM Hub

NCRM has released a draft report on methodological research needs, on which members of the UK social science community were invited to comment. The report was commissioned by ESRC as an input to its strategic thinking on research methods and presented at a consultative seminar to the Social Research Association (SRA) 26 on September with invited comments by Malcolm Rigg of the Policy Studies Institute and Tony Munton from the Home Office.

The draft report, compiled by Nick Bardsley and Rose Wiles, is a consultation exercise with the UK research methods community broadly conceived. Stakeholders' perceptions of where needs lie have been explored through semi-structured interviews, backed up with broader invitations to comment on the draft report. NCRM also conducted parallel consultation exercises through its six nodes. The preliminary findings show four areas to be particularly prominent in the eyes of stakeholders:

Policy Evaluation. Those with government research experience reported a need for innovative approaches to policy evaluation but equally the need for rigorous evaluation(!) of new approaches. Approaches they would like to see examined included Randomised Control Trials, Realistic Evaluation, action research and qualitative observational approaches. They saw a need for research into methods for community involvement

which enable participants to have a view on complex issues, by combining informative exercises with opportunities for comment. These included citizens' juries, marketing techniques and methods for interacting with hard-to-reach groups.

Mixed Methods. Research issues identified included whether mixed methods approaches are better than running parallel studies, and how to integrate qualitative and quantitative analysis so that 'the whole is more than the sum of its parts.' Integrated studies were seen by some as more expensive and time-consuming than single-method studies, with implications for project funding.

Comparative Research. In the field of survey research, our interviewees would like to see work on methods for question translation, mode effects in data collection and exploring the consequences of different sampling opportunities across countries. A challenge for collaborative international work was how to design-in comparability leaving sufficient flexibility for the research to be meaningful in its national context. Respondents also wanted to see development and critique of methods to unpack country or area effects; the work of Charles Ragin using logic-based methods was often cited.

Data Linkage. There is a wealth of administrative and commercial data that has a largely unexplored potential for social research. Technical issues concerning identification of specific biases and errors from linkage were outlined. Respondents thought practical concerns over data quality and data protection issues were equally worthy of attention. Issues surrounding data linkage were seen as particularly pressing.

The full list is much longer, and the report also contains sections on: longitudinal methods, spatial data analysis, survey methods, qualitative data collection and analysis, software development, interdisciplinary working, the identification and dissemination of good practice in research methods, issues in teaching and learning research methods and research synthesis methods. The seminar at the SRA was followed by a lively discussion amongst SRA members, an audience which comprises researchers from a broad range of organisations and disciplinary backgrounds. The report can be downloaded at <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/publications/documents/researchneeds-workingpaper.pdf>. NCRM look forward to working with the SRA again, and are currently planning a joint event on Data Linkage.

Focus on the Nodes

The **Methods for Research Synthesis (MRS) Node** is based at the Eppi-Centre, which is part of the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) at the Institute of Education, London. The node's programme of work is based on the understanding that, before making decisions in any area of policy or practice, it can be useful to review existing research in that area. If we want a reliable picture then we need to use appropriate methods to bring the research together.

Research synthesis, then, applies rigorous, explicit, and accountable methods to determine what we know, how we know it, and what more we might need to know. The products of research synthesis are sometimes called 'systematic reviews'. Led by a research question and a conceptual framework, systematic reviews follow methods that specify ways of

searching for, describing and appraising existing studies. Synthesis methods also include ways of analysing and interpreting groups of existing studies and ways of engaging a variety of stakeholders in the entire process.

Many approaches to research synthesis are currently being developed, variously aiming to aggregate numerical findings, develop theory from concepts, or both. The MRS node is working with others to create an integrating framework that accommodates a range of approaches to research, research questions, research designs and types of data.

One of the challenges is that there are relatively few people within the social science community with skills and knowledge about research synthesis and use. To address this, the MRS node has produced a range of courses and educational materials. The latest development is an MSc entitled 'Evidence for Public Policy and Practice' which was offered by London's Institute of Education for the first time in October of this year, building on three years' of masters-level teaching at the Eppi-Centre. Participants range from new researchers wishing to explore systematic methods for reviewing research, to senior researchers, policy analysts and managers from HEIs and Government Departments, many of whom are wanting to commission research reviews or establish policy around the production and use of research in their organisations.

Three of the MSc's modules can also be taken as short courses, with or without assessment for credit at the MSc level. 'Research synthesis for policy and practice' covers the history, theory and arguments around research synthesis and explores variations in approaches. Students apply and appraise methods at several key review stages. In 'Evidence for policy, practice and personal decisions' students explore methods for improving the fit between research and collective or individual actions and develop a critical understanding of mechanisms for supporting policy maker, practitioner and public involvement in research. 'Methods for research synthesis' equips students with an understanding of a range of integrative and interpretative approaches, from narrative reviews and meta-ethnography to statistical meta-analysis. These modules are complemented by a number of paid student work placements that will be available from January 2007. Further detail on the MRS educational programme is available from <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>.

Spotlight on Resources

Exploring Online Research Methods

Online research methods (ORM) are (usually) traditional methods of data collection adapted to use online. Methods ranging from questionnaire surveys to participant observation have been adapted for online use through tools such as email, websites and various software packages. ORMs provide great methodological potential and versatility for research in many areas of social science.

It has been suggested that use of these methods can mitigate the distance of space, enable research to be easily internationalised without the usual associated travel costs and can be valuable for researchers contacting respondents who



may otherwise be difficult to reach. Growth and impact of the internet has meant that use of ORMs has proven to be an increasingly alluring option for social scientists. However, there has been some variety across disciplines in the extent to which they have taken hold, and in the level of awareness of the theoretical, practical, and technical issues involved.

Based on experience in their own research, Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor collaborated with University of Leicester colleagues Jane Wellens, Tristram Hooley and Rob Shaw to develop a practical training package focusing specifically on the potentials and problems of ORMs as part of the ESRC Research Methods Programme. The team felt an online learning resource to be the ideal means of delivering training in ORMs, offering users choice over how and when to access the package, along with the flexibility to explore different content areas according to need, and prior knowledge and experience.

The package 'Exploring ORMs in a Virtual Training Environment' makes training in these methods widely available, and highlights potentials and problems that they bring. It provides:

- a high-quality self-supporting online resource to enhance understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of online research methods;
- self-contained modules addressing the use of online questionnaires, and virtual synchronous and asynchronous interviews;
- access to a wide range of good practice case studies;
- discussion of the ethical issues of online research;
- important resource links;
- comprehensive technical guidance;
- interactive exercises and learning activities;
- information about the project background including discussion of the social production and evaluation of the training package.

The package is available at <http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm>. Although the website is designed for self-study use online, a range of dissemination activities are planned to ensure that the package will enhance current training programmes for the research community and contribute to the body of research in ORMs and online learning. For further details, see the website.

Spotlight on Events

BSPS Conference, 18-20 September 2006, Southampton Caroline Young and Laura Staetsky

This report is written from the complementary perspectives of a social statistician and a demographer from among the 200 delegates. Both authors agreed that the thematic scope of the conference was impressive and demonstrated the enormous breadth of population studies as well as the challenges of research.

Parallel sessions covered all aspects of traditional demography from fertility and health inequalities to population geography and GIS. The overall theme was global migration trends, with three related plenary sessions. Juha Alho spoke of the possible impact of migration in slowing population aging in EU countries; William Clark addressed global migration flows and national

outcomes: how international migration transforms communities and economies of receiving and sending countries; and John Salt provided an excellent opportunity to learn more about international migration within the context of the UK. A number of challenging issues in demography were addressed, including migrant mortality and health adjustment, sex differentials in mortality, fertility transition in the countries of Former Soviet Union, analyses of cases of European fertility, and issues in measurement of mortality and inequalities in health and disease. Papers ranged from substantive accounts of migration issues in specific countries to methodological challenges such as the measurement of changes in health inequalities.

From a statistician's viewpoint, there were several highlights presenting research from the perspectives of local government, academia and ONS. One such strand focused on the difference between forecasting and projection models. P. Voss spoke about obtaining small area forecasts and incorporating geographic variables into models followed by P. Norman who told of the challenges of projecting small area estimates incorporating ethnicity. One of the Wednesday sessions provided a chance to learn about preparations for the 2011 census, including new questions and enumeration challenges.

We both agreed on the high standard of papers and the enthusiasm of presenters, which made for particularly enjoyable talks. There were also colourful posters for delegates to study during breaks - rich in content and very informative.

The Second NCRM Summer School, 'Working Across Boundaries: Interdisciplinary and multi-method research', 11-14 September 2006.

Katherine Davies, NCRM Real Life Methods Node

As researchers are applying themselves to increasingly complex questions, there is growing recognition that no single method or disciplinary approach can provide adequate explanations of the social world. Thus, the theme of the second NCRM Summer School: *Working across boundaries: Interdisciplinary and multi-method research* was timely and engaging.

The theme of interdisciplinarity was reflected in the participants who spanned thirteen disciplines

and included academic researchers, research students and lecturers as well as researchers working in government and independent organisations. This made for fascinating and challenging discussions throughout the four days.

Speakers were similarly diverse. We heard from Nigel Gilbert about his experiences negotiating the cultural differences between sociology and engineering and the potential pitfalls and rewards of problem-based research. Philip Davies, Deputy Director of the Government Social Research Unit, introduced a substantive research problem (based around evaluation of a new health promotion initiative) that participants worked on in small groups over the four days. Paul Roderick, John Mohan and Catherine Pope discussed challenges from their own perspectives on health research.

Other speakers, many of whom transcended disciplinary boundaries, shared their experiences of mixing methods. Alicia O'Cathain spoke about her research investigating researcher experiences of mixing methods and offered advice on planning the integration of data and communicating findings. Jo Moran-Ellis also talked about the challenges posed by integrating methodologies and the importance of making these processes visible. Kahryn Hughes shared her experiences of inter and multi disciplinary team-work in her research on social exclusion and Catherine Lyall offered advice on 'surviving' in an interdisciplinary environment.

The group project meant that participants experienced many of the same challenges and rewards as those described by the speakers. Practical sessions run by Jack Kneeshaw and Libby Bishop on analysis of secondary data and Kelly Dickson and Karen Bird on creating research questions helped us to work towards a research design. Most groups learned how difficult it can be to combine different perspectives and find a common language. Despite these challenges, the group work was enlightening and rewarding and I was struck by the open-minded ethos of the Summer School; all participants were eager to understand, appreciate and learn from one another's perspectives. Similarly, all enjoyed the social elements of the programme and the organisation by Sue Heath, Annabel Preston and others at the Hub was fantastic.



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