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Directors' Corner

Jane Seale, Co-director



I am really excited about joining NCRM and can see some real synergies with my own work. I am a psychologist by background and my research interests lie at the intersections between disability, technology and education. I am particularly interested in how

technology impacts on the lives and learning experiences of adults with learning disabilities. This is an inter-disciplinary research field and so I have worked with colleagues from a range of disciplines including health, social science, and engineering.

Whilst this experience has led me to conclude that there is great potential for the development of innovative methods through interdisciplinary working, I also firmly believe that there is an important role for what Etienne Wenger called "brokers", people who are comfortable working at the edge of a number of communities (in this case, research disciplines) and can move comfortably between them, transferring ideas and practices from one to the other. There is also a role for "brokers" in terms of alerting researchers that what is seen as new in one discipline or field has actually been around a long time in another field. Certainly, a common phenomenon in technology enhanced learning, is a "reinventing of the wheel" in terms of methods. This is due largely to a failure to place appropriate value on the work conducted in areas that are perceived as unrelated, but actually have a lot of synergies.

Through my involvement with NCRM I will be interested in exploring further the pivotal role that "brokers" and others play in forging new knowledge and methods through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Viewpoint

Neville Davies, Director, Royal Statistical Society Centre for Statistical Education



In 2007 ESRC proposed initiatives for building a world class social science research base in advanced quantitative methods. Such heady aspirations can only be achieved if there is a continuous supply of young people who are not only

happy to study basic quantitative methods, but are also then prepared to choose to study more advanced methods as undergraduate and postgraduate social scientists. Unfortunately their school experience can alienate these young people from 'quants'.

The first exposure to statistics is in the primary school curriculum with the teaching of tables and graphs for summary and presentation. It then continues within mathematics and other subject curricula at secondary level. Charts, graphs and tables tend to be taught several times over and, as is often also the case with calculations of summary statistics, in the absence of a sensible context. Within mathematics it is seen as an exercise in arithmetic and students find it boring. Statistical thinking is nowhere to be seen.

At university is the teaching of elementary statistics any better? Often called 'methods', it is all too often just a repeat of the school experience! We must be radical – let's campaign to change the way statistics is taught *both* at secondary school *and* first year university levels by teaching it through a problem solving approach (PSA), using real data. After all, the PSA in statistical investigation provides the foundation for evidence-based decision-making on which social science research methodology is based - changing pedagogy could actually connect school and university study.

A recent national project (www.rsscse.org.uk/qca) found evidence that the PSA could help switch-on disaffected secondary school students to statistics. It focuses their minds and makes them realise what statistics is *for*. Reinforcing the PSA with first year undergraduate social science students could potentially switch them on to the rich world offered by social science research.

Call for ESRC training bursaries

The next call for the ESRC training bursaries for training in research methods will be out on Friday 1 February 2008.

The call will be advertised on the front page of the NCRM website www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Focus on the Hub

Second round of NCRM nodes and renewal of NCRM hub

NCRM is pleased to announce the second round of nodes, which are listed below. The nodes will generally start in April 2008 with three-year terms. In addition, ESRC is to continue funding the NCRM Hub at the University of Southampton for a second five-year term from April 2009. Awards funded under the National Centre for Research Methods Nodes call:

- Qualitative Innovations in CAODAS (QUIC), Professor N Fielding, University of Surrey
- Structures for Building, Learning, Applying and Computing Statistical Models, Professor JR Rasbash, University of Bristol
- SIMIAN: Simulation Innovation: A Node, Professor GN Gilbert, University of Surrey
- Realities (REAL Life methods for researching relationalITIES), Professor J Mason, University of Manchester
- ADMIN: Administrative Data - Methods, Inference and Network, Professor LM Dearden, Institute of Education
- Bayesian Methods for Integrated Bias Modelling and Analysis of Multiple Data Sources in Observational Studies (BIAS II), Professor NG Best, Imperial College
- The Lancaster-Warwick-Stirling Node: Developing Statistical Modelling in the Social Sciences Phase 2, Professor B Francis, Lancaster University

Any queries regarding the 2007 NCRM Nodes call should be directed to Suzanne Tanner at ESRC by email Suzanne.Tanner@esrc.ac.uk or Tel. 01793 413024

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

Confirmation of the content of the programme has been received for nearly all sessions. This will allow the bookings to open in January for speakers and for others in March. The programme includes evening lectures by international speakers: Kathy Charmaz will speak on 'Emergent ethics in qualitative research', Bob Groves will ask the question 'Do we still need probability sampling in surveys?', and Charles Ragin will take 'Redesigning social inquiry' as his theme. The programme also includes 'What is?' introductions to different methods which assume no prior knowledge of the subject on the part of the audience; these sessions proved very popular in 2006. There will also be sessions dedicated to presentations about resources available to support social science research, as well as a full range of sessions on substantive topics, along with workshops and masterclasses and specialised sessions on cutting edge developments in social science methodology. For more details and draft programme please go to <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>.

New report 'Evaluating the impact of NCRM Training and Capacity Building Activities'

The core aim of the NCRM is to improve the range and quality of research methods used by the social science community. One of the key means of achieving this is through the Centre's training and capacity building programme. The evaluation, which was performed by Dr Rose Wiles and Dr Nicholas Bardsley, set out to explore the impact of NCRM training and capacity building activities. In the report Wiles and Bardsley explore participants' perceptions of whether and how they benefited from taking part in NCRM training. To read the full report, please go to <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/>.

Focus on the Nodes

News from Real Life Methods

Jennifer Mason and Hazel Burke, University of Manchester



Judging by the plans for research, training and capacity building, 2008 promises to be an exciting year for the Real Life Methods (RLM) team. From October, the RLM director Jennifer Mason will lead the newly-funded Realities node which will be based at the Morgan Centre at the University of Manchester. Research from RLM's projects at the University of Leeds will continue under the recently launched ESRC Timescapes programme and through other avenues.

RLM's interdisciplinary research programme is made up of four projects based in the areas of family, youth and community. Each project uses a different combination of qualitatively-driven methods. The aim is to develop and use methods and methodologies that will help bring social science research closer to the experience of everyday life. The projects are:

Connected Lives - exploring the dynamics of 'community' interactions through a multi-dimensional neighbourhood case study;
Living Resemblances - exploring the meaning, impact and negotiation of family resemblances (see photo competition!);
Family Background and Everyday Life - exploring the role of family 'background' in interpersonal relationships; and
Young Lives - exploring the dynamics of young people's relationships and spheres of influence.

Fieldwork is either finished or nearing completion in all projects apart from Young Lives, which as a qualitative longitudinal study will be collecting data in waves for many years to come. The research teams are now busy analysing data and writing up findings for conference papers, journals, book chapters and leaflets. RLM team is organising five sessions at the Research Methods Festival this summer and is also involved in two events during the ESRC Festival of Social Science. Young Lives is holding two events a drama workshop for participants, and an event on 15 March for research users and the general public. RLM's two main types of training and capacity building events are training workshops and methods workshops. The remaining one-day training workshops for 2008 are *Analysing Real Life Mixed Method Data* on 18 April in Milton Keynes; and *Bringing*

Together Qualitative and Quantitative Data on 9 May in Leeds. The methods workshops are two hour sessions where three speakers each introduce the different methodological approach they have taken to researching the same broad topic, followed by discussion from participants. Workshops for 2008, which take place in Manchester, are *Researching Socio-Cultural Change* on 6 February 2008; *Approaches to Secondary Comparative Analysis* (European Social Survey) on 6 March 2008; and *Researching Social Relations in Sub/Urban Environments* on 8 May 2008. Please see <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk> to register for events, find out more about our research and sign up for our email newsletter.

Vital Signs: Researching Real Life conference

Vital Signs conference on 9-11 September 2008 in Manchester will provide an exciting forum for cutting edge interdisciplinary discussion of the methodological challenges of researching real lives. Plenary speakers are Prof Les Back (Sociology, Goldsmiths), Prof Tim Ingold (Anthropology, Aberdeen) and Prof Carolyn Steedman (History, Warwick). The deadline for abstracts is Friday 7 March 2008. For further details please see <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk>.

Who are you like? Photo competition and exhibition



Send us a photo on the theme of likenesses between family and friends. Competition winners will win up to £50 and be part in our exhibition (in Manchester, and online) in March 2008. Closing date: 11 February 2008

<http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/whoareyoulike>

Other News

News from the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative

Ray Lee, RDI Co-ordinator

Information collated from RDI projects shows that the programme is being successful in providing training and capacity-building activities and resources for the social science community in the UK. To date, ESRC has funded 44 projects in RDI over three rounds. Round 3 projects were commissioned over the summer and will begin rolling out early in 2008. From the inception of RDI, projects funded at Rounds 1 and 2 have mounted over 200 training events, mostly in the form of workshops or short courses, providing in the process training for almost 4,500 participants. Research students were the largest single group, making up almost half of the participants at RDI training events. Substantial numbers of early career and mid-career researchers also participated. There is little difficulty in attracting participants to RDI training activities. Judging from RDI project evaluation data, it is clear that there are very high levels of participant satisfaction with training events. Project directors express considerable satisfaction at the opportunities for capacity-building afforded to them by RDI. It is clear that in a number of cases activities will continue after RDI funding has ceased, and that RDI support has provided a platform for extending initial work in new directions. There is a considerable volume of RDI activity, targeted at those groups for whom it was intended, with high levels of demand for the events funded under the Initiative, and considerable levels of

satisfaction being expressed by those participating in them. Round 3 has seen the continuation of work funded under previous rounds with further support for Mike Wallace's project on training the trainers in management research and David Martin et al.'s Geo-Refer project. Training and capacity-building support is being provided in management studies, social work, psychotherapy and counselling, and socio-legal studies. Two projects have been funded in the broad area of meta-analysis and research synthesis. Round 3 also sees funding for a project on applied psychometrics, for advanced quantitative methods training in the Midlands, a further project on research ethics, and for the support for training in complex systems and complexity theory.

Spotlight on Resources

The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Nicholas Bardsley, NCRM

A three volume work published in hardback in 2004, the Encyclopedia is now available online through SAGE e-reference. This is an impressive resource, containing concise introductions accessible to a non-specialist audience, to the whole panoply of social science research methods, quantitative and qualitative, and related issues. The c.1000 articles are generally written by recognised experts, quite up to date and well-referenced. The overall quality is exemplary, though as reviewers commented, there is some understandable variation, given the 390 or so contributors. Since this volume has been out for some years, it is perhaps better to comment on its online usability than to critique the content.

The online version can be explored either by searching or browsing, and the basic search facility seems to be well-tuned, returning neither too many nor too few hits in most cases. One mildly irritating feature is that after a search is conducted the default for the next search is "search within results" which causes some false negatives until you realise what is going on. There is also a commendably simple 'advanced search' facility. The browsing facility is organised alphabetically at two basic levels of detail – clusters of entries and the entire list of entries. The complete A-Z listing also searches at a fine level while you are typing. This makes it relatively easy to find what one is looking for. However, a thematic organisation around a methods typology, such as that set out by Beissel-Durrant (2004, *A Typology of Research Methods Within the Social Sciences*. NCRM), for example, is arguably missing. This would give some clues about how an item relates to other entries - what kind of method or issue an unfamiliar term refers to, for example - and would just provide a more meaningful ordering of the material. It would also be helpful to have page references to the hardcopy version for citation purposes.

Overall the online version is a fine resource, thoughtfully set-out, that should be useful to researchers, methodologists and teachers of research methods for a long time to come.

<http://www.sage-e-reference.com/socialscience>

Spotlight on Events

Methodological Challenges for the Twenty First Century

Angela Dale, RMP Director

The final conference organized under the Research Methods Programme (RMP) was held in Manchester on 22-23 November 2007 and focussed on methodological challenges to social science. Nigel Thrift (VC, Warwick) kicked things off with a wide-ranging look into the future that included a number of methods-related challenges: the sheer weight of data, of all kinds, now becoming available and the range of ways in which data are generated; the intersections and changing boundaries between social science, humanities and science; and the need for a new style of social science that uses the web to communicate. Nigel also argued that the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative was no longer valid as methods 'seep' into each other, the boundaries of 'objectivity' change and new 'devices' influence methodology.

Ian Diamond comprehensively reviewed the key challenges that he saw in terms of achieving ESRC's Methods agenda. This included the importance of the two-way relationship between social science and science and the need for social science to use methods that were sound and defensible to support a critical analysis of society. Ian also highlighted the need for integration: of survey data, administrative data and 'born digital' data; of quantitative and qualitative data; and of data at different levels and with different structures.

The rest of the conference was organized under five themes: Methodological challenges to providing research evidence for policy; Case-based methods versus variable-based methods; Family relationships and genetics; Research design, data collection and analysis using mixed methods; and New forms of data will replace the social survey. Discussions around research evidence for policy brought out some of the complexities of such work – both methodological and political. Economists highlighted the importance of establishing the counterfactual and the importance of qualitative evidence to go alongside statistical analysis was widely agreed. Discussions regarding randomised controlled trials reached a remarkable consensus,

recognising their role across a wide range of social interventions, but also the difficulty of conducting them in a rigorous way and the need to avoid over-stating the case - for or against.

At the core of the discussion over case-based methods was not a separation between case-based and variable-based methods as they might translate onto a 'quantitative/qualitative' divide but, instead, diverging 'norms' of data analysis. Central to the discussion therefore was the potential for diverging positions to be reconciled in three methodological developments which bring statistical and qualitative researchers into closer dialogue: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA); Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) and; Social Network Analysis (SNA).

There is a growing understanding of the role of genotype in pre-disposing people to certain illnesses. Andrew Pickles argued that we need to overturn the traditional oppositional divide between genetics and environment and, instead, think about the process of gene-environment interaction. We need social science informed genetics and genetically informed social science. Sessions on mixed-methods covered the design of such studies, the relative weighting of different studies, issues that arise when integrating methods from different traditions, whether 'mixed-methods ability' is a property of individuals or research teams, and how research quality should be measured.

In a debate on whether new forms of data will replace the social survey, Mike Savage set out a case for recognising that the massive increase of administrative and transactional data means that the social scientist is no longer the major collector or instigator of data and that, while surveys will continue, they will form a smaller proportion of the market share than other data sources. Richard Webber provided many examples of the huge amount of analysis could be done using administrative data sources. Stephen Jenkins outlined plans for the new UK Household Longitudinal Panel Survey and concluded that there is enormous scope to enhance traditional surveys with administrative data – but that the social survey is still essential to social science.

Details of all presentations and summaries are available on the RMP web-site at <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/events/challenges>



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Telephone: +44 (0)23 8059 4539
Fax: +44 (0)23 8059 8908

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www.ncrm.ac.uk