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Directors' Corner

Graham Crow, Deputy Director



The case for specialization in one particular area of expertise is a powerful one. It would be an exceptional person indeed who had the capacity to acquire the knowledge, skills and experience required to move to and fro effortlessly between all of the disciplines that make

up the social sciences, and to keep up with developments in the methodologies employed at the cutting edge of each of these fields. Put another way, people who aspire to being generalists risk being labelled 'Jack of all trades and master of none'. There is, however, a case against specialization, or at least against overspecialization. This applies when specialists become reluctant to venture beyond their area of expertise, and averse to approaching research from points of departure that are different to those with which they are familiar. The potential value of stepping outside of one's areas of expertise was nicely demonstrated recently at the third Mixed Methods Conference which was hosted in Cambridge, UK. This event brought together participants whose fields of expertise were remarkably diverse, but who shared an appreciation of the benefits that can be achieved when researchers – either as individuals or as teams – have more than one string to their bow. Venturing beyond one's methodological 'comfort zones' can, of course, be challenging, especially where the unfamiliar approaches have their roots beyond the social sciences. But the opportunity to engage with researchers who are experimenting with unfamiliar combinations of methods more than compensated for the discomfort.

The Methods for Research Synthesis (MRS) node is now inviting applications from students registered for a postgraduate degree who have an interest in the use of research evidence for policy and practice and research methodology. Students on the MRS placement scheme undertake paid work alongside research staff on current projects to gain practical experience of funded systematic research synthesis projects. For more information please visit <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms> or contact Dr Karen Bird at k.bird@ioe.ac.uk

Viewpoint

Peter Elias, Strategic Advisor (Data Resources) to the ESRC



25th June saw the launch of the National Strategy for Data Resources for Research in the Social Sciences (the National Data Strategy). This is a plan which aims to ensure that the national data infrastructure meets the demands which will be

placed upon it to address both current and future research needs. Funded by ESRC, it has been created by the UK Data Forum, a body which brings together those with responsibilities for the development of data resources across two research councils, research foundations, a range of government departments, Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the devolved administrations. It builds upon work undertaken by many of these bodies to identify the key research challenges they will face over the next five to ten years, and sets out a series of goals that must be met in the short term to provide the resources required to address the longer term research issues it has identified.

The strategy was needed because we have had no clear mechanisms to link future research to the necessary data resources and the funding of an increased portfolio of data resources is beyond the means of single agencies. Despite duplication of effort in some areas, problems of data access and availability to researchers remain.

Initial progress in implementing the data strategy has several strands and many aspects will be of relevance to those with research methods interests and expertise. Major new developments in longitudinal resources include commissioning the new UK Household Longitudinal Study and examining the case for a new child cohort study to start around 2011/12. The commissioning of a new Administrative Data Service will assist in the development of new linkages between administrative data sources and support the provision of appropriate documentation and metadata, while a Secure Data Service will develop and support new opportunities for research access to sensitive data within appropriate secure settings. Further details are available from Peter.Elias@warwick.ac.uk

Focus on the Hub

Training the Trainers - 4th June, London

Cathy Sullivan, Chair SRA Training Committee, Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University

This event from the NCRM hub dubbed 'Training the Trainers' attracted academics from forty institutions, although too few 'new University' colleagues. The programme focussed on support issues for supervisors and others engaged in research methods training of social science postgraduates. Mike Wallace (Cardiff) offered a comprehensive model of possible dimensions to any support, based on AIM project work, recognising multiple roles and tasks, organisational culture, the variety of learning support, and individual development as a process. This posed a challenging agenda for national and institutional strategy, balancing generic vs. bespoke support, voluntarism vs. mandated compliance, the tension of expressed vs. assessed need, and the mix of core vs. innovative curricula. Nick Bardsley (Southampton) summarised the infrastructure and resources arising from the NCRM and RDI programmes, evidencing a noticeably genuine increase in methodological support available to those working at the 'methods frontline'.

Case studies make a special contribution to this kind of programme, offering practical grounded experience. Malcolm Williams and Carole Sutton's account of support activities being developed at Plymouth demonstrated that an ambitious local strategy is possible. A different case study by Karen Bird and Angela Harden exemplified reflective practice through a self evaluation of Systematic Review training at the Institute of Education. They also provoked a stimulating discussion about the different meanings of 'team teaching'. The aim of the afternoon workshops to provide 'cameo' updating in selected contemporary methods such as visual methods and the use of 'R' software in statistical work was a format that several thought useful for future events.

The concluding discussion took forward the day's agenda. One theme was the isolation experienced by many delegates in their institutions. This contrasts with the ideal of sharing the research training role. The suggestion that some form of 'methods trainers' network might be a way forward met with a positive response. This would be distinct from the established UK Grad networks. Such a network would promote dialogue, exchange of ideas and partnership beyond the academic arena. For example the Social Research Association (SRA), with a research practitioner membership spanning the academic, government, independent, commercial and voluntary sectors, plans to convene a Training Forum as part of its RDI Round 2 Life Course Training Development Programme. Training providers, employers and individuals interested in training matters from all sectors will be encouraged to explore and pilot innovative training formats e.g. mentoring and the support and career development of experienced researchers. This forum will undoubtedly benefit from links with any academic trainers' network, e.g. shared support needs, conceptualising the learning process. Training experiences beyond the academic sector pose distinct challenges that may also be relevant to those faced within it, e.g. training for interdisciplinary contexts. A joint event or collaboration might emerge in the medium term to contribute to the wider goals of the RDI funding stream.

Participatory Video National Research Network launch

The Participatory Video National Research Network was launched on 2 July at the Open University in Milton Keynes. The network aims to stimulate the use of participatory video (PV) methodology within the research of the UK social science community. Over the next year, the Network will work to develop a research and capacity-building agenda for the enhanced use of this methodology, through a series of public events and training workshops. As a result of this, the network will develop and test a training curriculum for the use of PV in academic research that will complement existing training for practice, and academic-based training in general research methods.

The network is funded by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. For more information about the Network, please contact Chris High on C.High@open.ac.uk

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

The third ESRC Research Methods Festival will run from Monday 30 June to Thursday 3 July, 2008. Once again it will be held at St Catherine's College, Oxford. Responsibility for organising the event has passed to the National Centre for Research Methods, and details will be made available on the NCRM website prior to bookings being taken early in 2008. Confirmed speakers include Kathy Charmaz, Angela Dale, Bob Groves, and Charles Ragin, and there will be contributions from across the range of disciplines and sectors that make up the social science community, aiming to speak to researchers at all career stages.

Focus on the Nodes



A lot has been happening at Qualiti since our first report back in the January 2006 issue of the *Methods/News*. There have been several staff changes during this period. We have said goodbye to researchers: Ben Fincham, who has moved on to a lectureship in Brighton and Susanne Langer, now working at Manchester Business School. Bethan Charles, the Qualiti administrator also moved on to train as physiotherapist at Manchester University. Colleagues who have joined the Qualiti team are; Dr Nicola Ross and Dr Rachel Hurdley (researchers) and Tina Woods (Administrator).

The Spring/Summer of 2007 has been a busy time for Qualiti, we have delivered three training workshops in various parts of the country. These were: 'Qualitative Research and Ethical Approval' (Belfast), 'Multimodal Qualitative Research' (Plymouth) and 'Using new technologies in Qualitative Research' (Bristol). These were all well received by participants and indeed were oversubscribed. We plan therefore to offer these again during the winter of 2007/08. Dates and venues will be announced on the NCRM and Qualiti websites.

In addition to the workshops, another successful event which took place in June 2007 was our Interdisciplinary Seminar; 'Developing Mobile Methods'. This seminar brought together academics from Cardiff, Edinburgh, Bath, Brighton and

colleagues from the Real Life Methods node at Leeds. The second seminar in this year's series is to take place on 18 September in Cardiff on the theme; 'Qualitative Research and Arts Practice'. Speakers at this seminar will include Brian Roberts, Kip Jones and Frances Rapport.

The report from our first Commissioned Inquiry; 'Risk to well-being of researchers in Qualitative Research' is due to be published this summer. The inquiry was led by Mick Bloor, assisted by Ben Fincham and Helen Sampson. Copies of the report will be available for download via the Qualiti website.

The second of Qualiti's Commissioned Inquiries is now underway and is focussing on Qualitative Research and Policy. A meeting of key stakeholders, including academics and policy-makers, is planned for September 2007.

Qualiti has recently published two working papers which are available for download from the Qualiti website. These papers are based upon research from two of our four demonstrator projects. 'Public opinion as questions not answers: how citizens evaluate the therapeutic potential of stem cell research in the context of T1 diabetes' is based on the Talking Treatments project led by Rob Evans. 'The emotional impact of working with disturbing secondary data' is based on the 'Qualitative Sociological Autopsy Study of Gendered Suicide' Project led by Jonathan Scourfield. Both these demonstrator projects are in their final reporting stages. The two remaining Qualiti demonstrator projects are now well underway; '(Extra)Ordinary Lives: Children's Everyday Relationship Cultures in Public Care' and 'Watching, Listening, Clicking and Reading'. Finally, we were extremely lucky to welcome two international visitors to the Cardiff Node in May 2007. Professor Gary Alan Fine from Northwestern University, Illinois, USA came at the beginning of May for 2 weeks. His visit was very productive and included an American style 'fireside chat' where colleagues discussed his paper 'The ten lies of ethnography'. Professor Greg Dimitriadis from Buffalo, the State University of New York was the second of our international guests. Again his visit was extremely useful, particularly for our research teams who had the opportunity to discuss their projects with him and generate ideas for data analysis.

Other News

John M Chambers Statistical Software Award for the NCRM Lancaster-Warwick node

Software development work partially carried out under the ESRC-funded Lancaster-Warwick node of the National Centre for Research Methods has been awarded the 2007 John M Chambers Statistical Software Award of the American Statistical Association. The award is to be made to Dr Heather Turner and Professor David Firth, from the Warwick part of the node, for their gnm package. The Chambers Award aims to encourage innovative and well-designed statistical software, and is awarded annually to one project worldwide.

The open-source gnm package is published as an add-on to R, through the Comprehensive R Archive Network. It provides extensive facilities for specifying, fitting and interpreting a large class of statistical models, the generalized nonlinear models, its

generality being achieved through the innovative, unified use of over-parameterized representations of models. Applications of the software are in many different research fields, including the social sciences, health sciences and agriculture. A detailed manual, Generalized Nonlinear Models in R: An Overview of the gnm Package (pdf) gives many worked examples from different fields.

The initial development of gnm was funded by ESRC through a Professorial Fellowship, and the first public release was in 2005. Ongoing work is also funded by ESRC, as part of the Lancaster-Warwick node of the National Centre for Research Methods. Heather will travel to Salt Lake City in August to receive the award at this year's Joint Statistical Meetings.

MSc in Evidence for Policy and Practice

The Methods for Research Synthesis (MRS) node of NCRM has successfully run the new MSc programme in Evidence for Policy and Practice for three terms. The MSc was launched in October 2006 by Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Geoff Whitty, Director of the Institute of Education (IOE), London.

The MSc workshops have been attended by students using the modules as stand alone courses as well as by those completing the full MSc course. The students have included those who might commission, conduct or appraise systematic reviews such as PhD students, professional researchers, charity employees, practitioners, civil servants and policy makers. Students come from a diverse range of areas and disciplines, including work and pensions, social care, drug prevention, and child welfare. Feedback on the modules has been extremely positive and the programme is responding to student demand by developing a mixed mode version of the Research Synthesis for Policy and Practice module. This will be delivered through shorter face-to-face workshops with many online activities before, between and after the workshops. MRS is also planning to introduce online discussion forums, Wikis and online practice activities on each stage of a systematic research synthesis.

Spotlight on Resources

PEAS: Practical Exemplars on the Analysis of Surveys

<http://www.napier.ac.uk/depts/fhls/peas/>



This resource was developed with funding under the ESRC Research Methods Programme by Gillian Raab, Susan Purdon, Kathy Buckner and Iona Waterston. The aim is to show social science researchers how to analyze complex surveys using different packages, while explaining

the theory behind the methods, practical consequences for real examples and how to make allowance for survey non-response using weighting or imputation. As the name implies this is very much a case of learning by example.

The site is arranged as interlinked sections covering exemplars, theory, software and surveys so that it is possible to approach the resource from several different directions depending on the question uppermost in the researchers' mind. Each exemplar

uses a different survey and illustrates different design features and techniques. The surveys are mostly drawn from Scotland but have been chosen so as to demonstrate key theoretical and practical considerations in survey design. The theory sections addresses topics of: stratification, clustering, weighting, standard errors and design effects, non response adjustments by weighting, imputation, analysing subgroups of surveys, how to check data before analysis and finite populations.

Practice is demonstrated through worked examples of analyses of each of the surveys using the packages R, SAS, Stata and SPSS and guidance is given regarding which of these packages can handle different aspects of the analyses. Both novice guides and mini-guides for more experienced users are given for each package. This is a really valuable resource for anyone needing immediate practical guidance on survey analysis.

Spotlight on Events

Recent activity in Visual Research Methods

Paul Sweetman, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Southampton

Recent years have seen growing interest in visual methods of research, with the publication of several new introductory and advanced texts aimed at sociologists, anthropologists, and researchers in related disciplines, along with the establishment, in 2006, of a British Sociological Association study group devoted to visual methods. During 2007 this renewed interest has continued apace. The BSA annual conference at the University of East London in April included two dedicated sessions on visual methods organised under the aegis of the new study group, and featuring sessions by Terence Heng on the use of photography in research, Jon Prosser on visual methods in longitudinal research, Janet Fink and Helen Lomax on images of mothering, Marc Bush on the use of drawing, Charlotte Bates on representations of the body, and Bettina Kolb on 'visualisation' in transdisciplinary research. Several papers discussing visual methods were also presented in sessions organised by the NCRM, including work

coordinated by the Real Life Methods node, such as Katherine Davies' use of photo albums in the investigation of family resemblances, Stewart Muir's use of photographs of the urban landscape, and Anna Bagnoli's research involving children's drawings as one strand of her investigation of young people's lives and relationships. The conference also featured an exhibition and associated round-table discussion of women artists convened by Maria Tamboukou, and an exhibition of photography by Chris Clunn as part of the ESRC Identities in Social Action Programme, which had previously been shown at the Brick Lane Gallery in London during March. The latter exhibition also formed part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science

The last couple of months have also seen the first few events in the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative 'Building Capacity in Visual Methods', run by Jon Prosser and co-fund-holders, including a 'masterclass' event at the University of Westminster during July co-organised by David Gauntlett. This will be followed by several more events over the duration of the initiative, which runs until November 2009. Goldsmiths College recently hosted an exhibition of Pierre Bourdieu's fieldwork photographs alongside a related ESRC seminar series organised by Nirmal Pirwar and Les Back of the Methods Lab, in collaboration with the exhibition's curators, Franz Schultheis and Christine Frisinghelli. Speaking for myself, following a keynote presentation on Visualizing Habitus at the Nordic Visual Research Network conference in Roskilde, Denmark, in November last year, and a related paper at the BSA conference in April, I also presented a general session on visual methods at the NCRM Training the Trainers Event, at the Royal Statistical Society, in June. In addition to forthcoming events as part of Jon Prosser's Building Capacity initiative referred to above, visual methods related events scheduled to take place over the next couple of months (in addition to the IVSA annual conference in New York during August) include a one-day session on 'Creating Visual Knowledge' to be hosted by the Real Life Methods node at the University of Manchester in October, to coincide with and featuring a presentation by visiting fellow Richard Chalfen.



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