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Directors' Corner

Jackie Powell, Co-Director, NCRM



It is now three years since the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) was set up, and during this period there has been an increasing interest in the need for capacity building in research methods across the social science community.

NCRM's brief is a broad one that encompasses researchers at all stages of their career across academic, policy and practice settings. Much of our training and capacity building activities have focussed on specific training events for individual researchers keen to update or widen their methodological expertise. To complement these activities NCRM is working to enhance the research expertise of the next generation of researchers. Many research students take advantage of our training events seeking out particular training in research methods that supports their doctoral studies in a substantive area. Supervisors and those providing training within their own institutions play important roles in facilitating students' access to these resources. It is these 'trainers' that we are also keen to support. Building on the 'training the trainers' theme from last year's Research Methods Festival, NCRM is hosting an event on 4 June to do just that.

We hope that this occasion will provide some practical advice and resources to support our 'up and coming' generation of researchers and also stimulate debate about some of the underlying assumptions that animate our day to day practices. What is the nature of social scientific research? What constitutes methodological rigour? Are the answers to these questions as varied within disciplinary boundaries as between them? We do not necessarily have to provide definitive answers, but we do need to allow such questions to be raised from time to time.

Proposals for Networks for Methodological Innovation projects will be called on 14 May 2007. This scheme enables networks of researchers to meet in order to stimulate debate and develop ideas in relation to methodological innovation. Further information and the application form will be available from May 14 from the NCRM website <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk> or from info@ncrm.ac.uk.

Viewpoint

David Hall, Census Services Coordinator, UK Data Archive, University of Essex



Questions about research methods are often inextricably tied up with questions about data. There is thus a need for ESRC investments to work together to provide an integrated infrastructure for research. From this summer an exciting, newly designed web portal Census.ac.uk

will give enhanced access to the resources of the ESRC Census Programme. Researchers have become familiar with the need to search and use a wide variety of online data and it can be a significant task just to identify and evaluate all the sources of potentially relevant information. The ESRC Census Programme has a well established range of online services - developed and maintained by six data support units - and the portal will promote these in a way which will give researchers valuable support in starting and continuing to use census data.

Improving awareness and accessibility to the full range of census data and providing a helpful and straightforward starting point for the discovery of relevant data is what the portal is all about. Users will be able to identify resources that suit their needs and access them as directly as possible. There will be the enormous benefit of information explaining the basics of aggregate data, digitised boundaries, microdata, interaction data and census longitudinal studies, in guides written by those who not only know the data intimately, but also have experience of their use within research. Other guides will provide pointers to related non-census resources. Comprehensive structured metadata provided by partner organisations will make the new detailed search facility a powerful tool for identifying relevant data available across the whole programme and beyond. The metadata records will help users establish the potential of the data before they move on by using the direct links to data and further data sources.

Access to the programme's data is either by way of registration or - in the case of longitudinal data - direct application to one of the support units. A redesigned online registration process will make signing up for data access simple and self-explanatory. Phase one of the new portal will be in place for the start of the 2007-08 academic year. We are already preparing for the enhancements that will follow!

Focus on the Hub

New project on Sustaining On-line Resources

A Hub-led proposal for building an online repository of research methods resources has been approved by the ESRC. NCRM's nodes' websites already include materials relating to their areas of methodological focus, including guidance on methods and software and documentary sources. Many other ESRC projects have also created excellent resources, notably arising from the Research Methods Programme (RMP).

The full value of ESRC investment in such resources often only comes into play close to the point when project funding ends, raising the question: how can the value be sustained beyond this point? ESRC has provided the Centre with additional funding, starting on 1 July, to address this question. The project will enable the Centre to maintain selected resources, generated from ESRC's RMP, Researcher Development Initiative and Quantitative Methods initiative as well as from the Centre. Technical development will take place to enable the resources to be accessed in an integrated way from the Centre website. There will also be provision for updating the materials. Angela Dale, director of RMP, played a key role in the project's genesis and she will join the hub team of Chris Skinner, David Martin, Graham Crow and Kaisa Puustinen in working to develop ESRC's general strategy on sustaining on-line resources. For further information please contact Kaisa Puustinen at k.puustinen@soton.ac.uk.

New members of staff at the Hub



Jon Earley



Kaisa Puustinen



Jan Carroll

Three new members of staff have started at the NCRM Hub in Southampton. Jon Earley took the new post of Information Systems Officer in October 2006. His time is divided between the Hub team and the School of Social Sciences Information Systems Group. Before this post Jon worked at the University's School of Nursing and Midwifery. Kaisa Puustinen started as the External Relations and Resources Officer at the beginning of January 2007, having previously worked for the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA), University of Helsinki and the Academy of Finland. Latest addition to the Hub team is Jan Carroll, the new Administrator. She started part time in February and was appointed to the full time post in March 2007. Jan's background is in HE administration and quality auditing for the Royal Navy Training.

Coming up: Training the Trainers event Monday 4 June, Royal Statistical Society, London

NCRM is committed to supporting the training of trainers of postgraduate students and other researchers in the social sciences, helping them to keep abreast of developments in research methods. This event is designed to provide a forum

for discussion of common issues facing those with responsibility for providing training in research methods to social scientists. Three themes running through the day will be:

- How to train a group who are mixed in terms of: levels of previous knowledge, disciplinary backgrounds, and levels of interest.
- The advantages and disadvantages of students and other trainees bringing their particular project topic and material to training sessions.
- What mechanisms exist or should exist for sharing good practice in research methods training and discussion among trainers of common problems.

There will be no charge for this event, but advance booking will be necessary. Lunch and other refreshments will be provided for all participants. Numbers are limited and interested people should email Jacqui Thorp jmh6@soton.ac.uk with their name and contact information.

Focus on the Nodes

News from LEMMA

Jon Rasbash, LEMMA, University of Bristol

The LEMMA node has been running a variety of training events to explore what type of formats work best to facilitate 'take off' of participants. By 'take off' we mean moving participants to a position where they are able to usefully employ multilevel modelling to a level where they are able to publish applied papers using the technique. We have explored the use of face-to-face, 3-day workshops where participants come from a variety of subject areas with a wide range of technical ability; face-to-face workshops followed by on-line mentored, collaborative learning environments; targeting entire departments, where a group of ten to twenty researchers all express a wish to learn to apply multilevel modelling; and extended workshops with a high participant-to-teacher ratio, where all participants must have an appropriate dataset of their own and a great deal of time is allocated at the workshop for analysis of their data. Our finding is that two of the major drivers for 'take off' are, to an extent, independent of the workshop format. These drivers are desperation and opportunity, which together can provide a powerful propulsive force! At each workshop there are between 0-2 participants who have good data, a good understanding of quantitative modelling and a good knowledge of their subject area. They see developing their use of multilevel techniques as an important part of their career. As Kelyvn Jones said 'For most social researchers multilevel modelling is not a casual activity, it is a lifestyle choice'. It seems a good strategy to us to support these able enthusiasts.

We are also in the process of building an on-line training system. This is new material that follows two parallel tracks. The first describes the basic structure of the models and the second provides worked examples using the *MLwiN* software. The materials will also include on-line videos and quizzes. Users will register to use the training system, at which point they will enter some basic user profile information. All subsequent

progress through the materials will be recorded on a central database. Responses to the quizzes will allow us to see sections that are causing difficulty for users and these sections can then be refined. A demonstration of an early prototype of the system will be given at a meeting 'Statistics Training for Social Scientists' on 22 May 2007.

The LEMMA team is looking forward to welcoming Daphne Kounali as a social statistician.

Our software package for multilevel modelling *MLwiN* was made freely available to UK academics in October 2006 as part of the NCRM programme. So far, 419 copies have been downloaded and downloads are currently running at a rate of five a day. We are aiming to release the Beta of version 2.1 of *MLwiN* during summer 2007. New features include the ability to read and write Stata and SPSS files; improved flexibility for setting up models; new model visualisation features and of course, one hopes, more bugs fixed than introduced.

As part of the NCRM programme we have completely revised the Centre for Multilevel Modelling web site. We have recently started including video presentations on our web site, which are proving to be very popular. Key web links:

Centre for Multilevel Modelling web site
<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk>

Free download of *MLwiN*
<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/MLwiN/ordering/ac-uk.shtml>

A brief outline of Beta of version 2.1 of *MLwiN*
<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/MLwiN/features/mlwin-2-1.shtml>

Statistics Training for Social Scientists, 22 May 2007 at the Royal Statistical Society
<http://www.cmm.bristol.ac.uk/MLwiN/tech-support/workshops>

Other News

News from Research Methods Programme (RMP)

RMP is pleased to announce the following events. For further details of all events, see <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/events>

Radical data for radical research: Tracking and tracing 9 May 2007, Royal Statistical Society, London.

This seminar asks how research is able to use data produced as a by-product of day-to-day transactions, for example from use of mobile phones, CCTV footage or from loyalty cards. It is being organised jointly by the ESRC e-Society Programme, RMP and Chimera, University of Essex.

Longitudinal data analysis in the social sciences: variable constructions in longitudinal research 11 May 2007, Royal Statistical Society, London.

This introductory workshop, suitable for social science researchers with an interest in the opportunities and challenges associated with longitudinal survey data, will feature a combination of methodological reviews and expert research presentations, in order to provide an accessible introduction to this important topic in the context of large scale longitudinal social surveys.

News from RDI



The Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) is now in its second year of operation. The training and capacity-building projects established at Round 1 have come on-stream and are delivering training activities and resources. The second round of

projects has been commissioned, while the call for Round 3 proposals closed on 16 April 2007.

In February 2007, RDI held a 'Developing the Researcher' conference in London. The conference included sessions on resources for researcher development, training in innovative methods and good practice in training and capacity building. Among other topics discussed were the sustainability of training resources; intellectual property; issues related to specific disciplines; interdisciplinary work; and training and capacity-building in the regions. Part of the conference was devoted to a consultation on Round 3 of RDI.

A number of RDI projects have held international conferences. Stephen Gorard and Carole Torgerson, who lead the Round 1 RDI project on training in pragmatic social intervention, organised a very successful conference on Randomised Controlled Trials at York in September 2006. They will hold a further conference later this year. In April 2007, a conference on Advances in Qualitative Computing was held at Royal Holloway University of London under the auspices of the RDI project on Qualitative Data Analysis Skills for Social Researchers. Researchers, software developers and methodologists from many different countries attended the event.

Spotlight on Resources

Focus on resources: Neighbourhood Statistics

Under the current government, there has been an increased emphasis on neighbourhood-based policy initiatives which in turn have led to a massive increase in the amount of locality-based information being assembled by government departments and made available to the public. Each of the UK statistical agencies has developed websites which provide free access to these resources and which include a growing body of reference information for researchers. Differences between the national services reflect their somewhat different policy agendas, but each now contains a wide range of information relating to the broad areas of: Access to Services, Community Well-being / Social Environment, Crime and Safety, Economic Deprivation, Education, Skills and Training, Health and Care, Housing, Indicators, Indices of Deprivation and Classification, People and Society: Income and Lifestyles, People and Society: Population and Migration, Physical Environment, Work Deprivation. At the core of these services is a collection of area-based 2001 census information (albeit much less than that provided by ESRC's census programme – see Viewpoint article) but this has now been substantially supplemented by information derived from government service delivery. This information is searchable by place or topic and is freely downloadable. The entire collection is being actively updated

and includes, for example, current official indices of deprivation. Levels of geographical detail vary according to the sensitivity of the dataset but all are searchable at the postcode level and many standard-format neighbourhood profiles can be produced. Online mapping includes the locations of public services such as health and education facilities and in some cases additional functions, such as the ability to save area definitions, is available by registering for the service. Anyone commencing area-based studies or seeking to identify broad locality-based socioeconomic profiles should explore the relevant neighbourhood statistics service early in their preliminary work.

ONS Neighbourhood Statistics for England and Wales

<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>

Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics

<http://www.sns.gov.uk>

Neighbourhood Statistics for Northern Ireland

<http://www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk>

Spotlight on Events

NCRM Annual Centre Meeting

11-12 January 2007

Chancellors Conference Centre, Manchester

Katherine Davies, Real Life Methods

With the nodes now well into their research programmes, it was the researchers who took centre stage at the second NCRM Annual Centre Meeting with a researcher from each node presenting an aspect of their work. The range of papers was exciting and diverse. On the first day Les Humphries from the Lancaster/Warwick node examined 'Patterns and participation in criminal careers'; Inna Kotchetkova from Qualiti discussed the Talking Treatments project and her use of 'deliberative methods to engage citizens in the provision of health care'; George Leckie from LEMMA discussed the process of examining the 'impact of missing data on value added school assessment measures', and I used a qualitative case study from a project within the Real Life

Methods Node to talk about 'Understanding resemblances through family interactions'. On the second day BIAS's Chris Jackson gave a fascinating paper on his work 'combining survey and administrative data in the study of air pollution and low birth weight' and Karen Bird's paper from the MRS Node, 'Research Synthesis: Different questions, different methods', incorporated participatory elements with delegates discussing and generating research questions.

The organisation of the meeting around researcher presentations provided an excellent opportunity for members and associates of the Centre to gain an insight into the research activities of the other nodes and speakers worked hard to present papers that were intellectually stimulating and accessible to an audience with such wide ranging expertise. I found the experience of presenting aspects of my work to such a diverse audience exciting and rewarding and all the papers encouraged lively debate. Researchers had also prepared posters of their work, giving delegates the chance to peruse and discuss those projects that hadn't been presented.

As an alternative to a discussion about innovation and future research needs within the Centre, researchers were given the opportunity to attend a parallel career development session where Sue Heath and Graham Crow facilitated a helpful and optimistic discussion about future funding opportunities for contract researchers. John Bynner finished the meeting with some reflections on the mid term review process.

Organisation by the Hub and Vicky Higham and Hazel Burke from Real Life Methods was excellent and the trip to Manchester's China Town for our evening meal was enjoyed by all.



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