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Director's Corner

Chris Skinner



Chris Skinner, Director

Welcome to this first issue of **MethodsNews**, produced for anyone with an interest in the methods used in research in the social sciences. We'll be drawing your attention to what's happening at the new ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and elsewhere, providing information about resources you might like to use and sharing views.

The Centre has been operating now for six months. Setting up a new venture can at first seem to take a disproportionate amount of work relative to outwardly visible achievements. And attention can seem rather inwardly focused. But, step by step, the Centre is beginning to engage with the wider community of researchers and users of social science research who have interests in research methods. This first issue of **MethodsNews** represents a further opening up of the Centre.

While we may have a particular focus on leading edge methods, we're certainly not the first to set out to develop research methods and strengthen capacity. So, one of our essential first steps has been to learn from previous work and to get in touch with related developments and bodies.

In particular, we have benefited enormously from building on and working with ESRC's Research Methods Programme and have the great fortune to be able to coordinate our development with our counterpart Hub and Nodes centre, the ESRC National Centre for e-Social Science. I am really pleased that both their directors, Angela Dale and Peter Halfpenny, have contributed to this issue and it is exciting to share participating in a field with such contemporary prominence in the social sciences, compared to days when some of us in the UK with methodological interests could feel at the margins.

The next key step for us will be ESRC's announcement shortly of the Nodes which will join us at the Hub in Southampton next year to establish the 'fully fledged' Centre. More about that next time...

Viewpoint

Peter Halfpenny

In this regular feature we will be inviting key figures to comment on current developments in Research Methods.

When I began my sociology career, social statistics were calculated using long multiplication and division. Today it is almost impossible to remember the toil that lay behind even the simplest analyses and how that constrained the size or complexity of the datasets that could be tackled. I can now sit in front of a modest PC and accomplish in an instant what once took me days.

What has changed is not just the technology but more importantly our explanatory ambitions. We use our computers to build complex multi-level models and test them on vast numbers of cases. Even so, we have barely begun to understand the full intricacies of the social world. But we are poised to make a leap forward comparable in magnitude to the switch from pen-and-paper calculations to computer-assisted statistical analyses.

Every day more and more information about people's activities is being digitised. If social scientists can access this data, integrate it and draw on enormous computational power to manipulate it, then there will be a step change in our capacity to understand the complex workings of social systems.

The methodological advances being nurtured by NCRM combined with the application of e-science technologies to social science research problems being promoted by the National Centre for e-Social Science (www.ncess.ac.uk) provide exciting possibilities to achieve this step change.

Focus on the Hub

The Hub began work in April 2004, under the Direction of Professor Chris Skinner. Based at the University of Southampton the coordinating Hub forms part of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). The other partners in the NCRM are the Nodes, which will be distributed around the UK. The Hub provides overall strategic direction and coordination of the Centre's activities. The Hub is specifically responsible for the:

- assessment of needs and development of Centre strategy
- co-ordination of short-term research projects and of the Nodes
- co-ordination of training and capacity building activities
- management of Centre communications, including dissemination, online resources and outreach activities
- co-ordination of a seminar series to be hosted at the University of Southampton
- liaison with non-academic organisations

As a first step in this process, the Hub team undertook a consultation of the UK social science community over the specific shape of the Centre's research and training programme. This consultation informed the call for proposals for nodes and will inform the broader strategic direction of the Centre.



The Hub Team begins work: from left to right Becky Clarke, Jackie Powell, Chris Skinner, Sue Heath, Gráinne Conole, Dave Martin, Gabriele Beissel-Durrant and Rose Wiles

The Hub is currently commissioning its first short-term research projects. In 2005-06 these will focus on comparative research aimed at stimulating new ideas and improving understanding of research methods among the social science community. The projects will consist of a series of network-based events and related activities over a period of 1-6

months. The Centre will fund two projects per year, the first of which will be announced in December 2004 and commence in April 2005.

As part of the Centre's training and capacity building activities the Hub is organising a number of two-day training courses. The first in December 2004, on *Using PcGets in Time-Series Modelling*, run by Professor David F. Hendry and Professor Hans-Martin Krolzig. The aim of the course is to introduce participants to the PcGets program, designed for automatic model selection (also known as data mining).

The second will be held in January 2005 at the Institute of Education on Biographic-narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM). Run by Prue Chamberlyn and Tom Wengraf this workshop provides practical tasters of BNIM, both of its open interview approach and of its two track method of future blind chunk by chunk panel interpretation.

The Hub is also sponsoring a seminar/workshop series developed by Brenda Johnston, Susan Rogers and Helen Elsey at the University of Southampton. The aim of which is to create the opportunity for researchers at all levels and across disciplines to debate current issues and share practical experiences of qualitative methodologies. This will begin in January 2004.

Finally, this month the Hub (in conjunction with the ESRC and RMP) will hold a Government Forum to discuss ways in which the NCRM will engage with government in the UK.

Full details of the Hub's activities will be available at www.ncrm.ac.uk

Focus on the Nodes

The Centre will be distributed across a number of sites, and will consist of the coordinating Hub and a series of Nodes. The Nodes will be commissioned to start on 1 April 2005.

The commissioning of NCRM Nodes has been a two-stage process and the commissioning panel has now met to consider proposals for Nodes to operate over a three-year period. The outcome is expected to be announced in late November 2004 by the ESRC.

The Nodes will focus on the development of leading edge research methods within the context of substantive multi-disciplinary research problems. The scope of a Node's work programme is expected to be defined primarily by a methodological focus, e.g. a field of qualitative or quantitative methods or the integration of different methods, to be explored through substantive topics. The scope will not be defined primarily by a social science discipline. They will be involved in the application of their specified research meth-

ods to more than one discipline and/or to interdisciplinary research.

The Nodes will also make a major contribution to the Centre's training and capacity building activities and will work closely with the Hub and form connections with other key ESRC and non-ESRC funded investments. The Nodes will be responsible for delivering the Centre's research programme. They will provide training, support and capacity building activities across the UK, together with resources and online services.

The NCRM will be hosting a launch event on the 21 June 2005 at St. Anne's College in Oxford, introducing the Nodes and presenting their current research findings. More details will be available soon from the NCRM website www.ncrm.ac.uk

News from the Research Methods Programme

Angela Dale

The RMP, directed by Angela Dale at the University of Manchester, is mid-way through its funding period. The 38 awards include training programmes which extend over 4 or 5 years, one-year fellowships, projects of 1-3 years duration and projects to develop training materials or short courses. Methodological areas range from digital ethnography to record linkage in survey data and from isonymy to multilevel mixed models. Information about all projects is available from the RMP web-site: www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods.

All the training programmes run regular courses and many projects are now at the stage of holding dissemination events. A complete listing is available from the diary on the RMP web-site. The next RMP event will be a two-day workshop on December 15-16th on constructing on-line resources. Its aim is to share good practice in design and evaluation of on-line resources and also provide information on copyright and IPR issues and metadata standards.

The RMP is working closely with the NCRM. Together, the RMP and NCRM will provide a first port of call for people who want to find out about methodological developments, training opportunities or methods-related events. Finding out about courses and resources is extremely important and the RMP has developed a searchable database of short courses. This is being developed and extended by the NCRM and will soon provide a really useful way of finding what is available. RMP runs a bursary scheme to provide up to £1,000 for staff and researchers in HEIs to take methods-related short courses. A call for applications is made twice a year. If you register with the RMP site you will be emailed about these opportunities.

Spotlight on Resources

Gráinne Conole

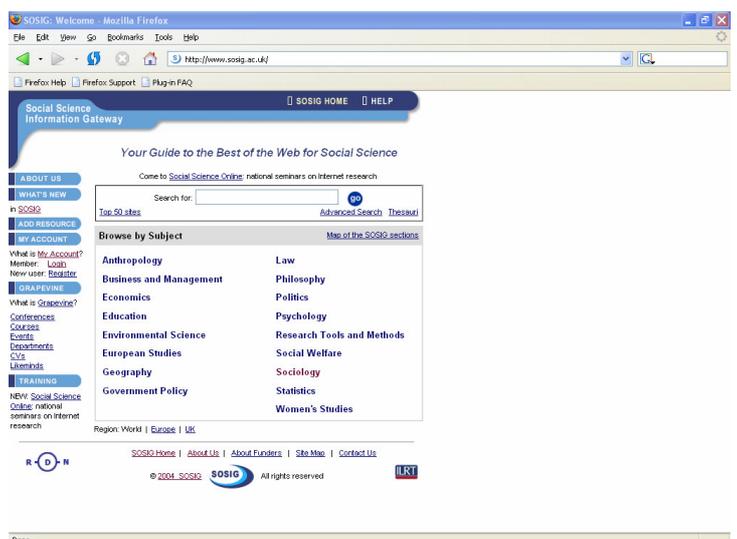
In this regular feature we will provide a spotlight on a major research methods resource.



The Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) is a website which gathers information on resources relevant to the Social Sciences. Funded jointly by the ESRC

and JISC, SOSIG is a 'trusted source of selected, high quality Internet information for researchers and practitioners in the social sciences, business and law'. It provides a catalogue of resources (currently around 28,000 descriptions), including a brief abstract on each resource along with a link for further information (www.sosig.ac.uk).

The system includes two levels, the first is a national network of subject experts who search for and describe resources in the subject areas covered by SOSIG. The second level is an automatic tool which harvests further resources linked from the initial set of resources catalogued by the subject experts. It can be browsed either by subject area or via a keyword search. In addition to the subject-based resources, the site contains up to date information on relevant conferences, workshops and events across the Social Sciences.



SOSIG homepage

It is possible to create a personalised view of the site 'My Account' which allows you to customise the information you see and includes an email alerting scheme for new resources and events which may be of interest. The site is well laid

out and easy to navigate. SOSIG includes a section on research tools and methods which covers a range of resources on qualitative and quantitative methods. There is also a dedicated tutorial on research tools for research. This provides an excellent simple introduction to finding information on research methods on the web and will help you: distinguish between different types of resources available over the Internet, identify key resources relating to social research methods and begin to build up a list of Internet sites that can support your study, teaching or research.

In addition, a number of practical sessions were included in the programme to provide practical advice on 'how to' undertake a range of research related activities (e.g., how to: succeed in grant applications; do a literature search; improve your PhD supervision; make an effective presentation). Some of the most popular sessions were those focusing on: computer-aided qualitative analysis; research ethics; and, multilevel modelling.

The festival generated considerable interest from people from a range of disciplines with well over 700 people either attending the festival or expressing a strong interest in doing so. The format of the festival provided ample opportunity for networking across disciplines.

Spotlight on Events

Rose Wiles

In this regular feature we will provide a spotlight on a major research methods events.

ESRC Research Methods Festival, Oxford. 1-3 July, 2004

The Research Methods Festival held at St Catherine's College in July 2004 was the first event of its kind in the UK. The aims of the event were to: generate an interest in methods in the social sciences; provide awareness of issues and opportunities; engage across disciplines and methods; highlight ESRC resources related to methods; and, provide capacity building. The programme comprised 38 half day sessions over the three days with the third day focused on sessions aimed primarily at PhD students.

The sessions for the festival were drawn primarily from projects funded within the Research Methods Programme encompassing quantitative and qualitative methods and methodologies and other aspects of research practice such as user involvement, research ethics and the use of new technologies in research.



Participants relaxing and enjoying the early-evening wine reception

A second Methods Festival will take place on July 17-20 2006 (not 2005) at St Catherine's College, Oxford. Both the NCRM and National Centre for e-Social Science will be centrally involved in this. Your views on themes and session will be greatly valued – email Ruth Durrell, the RMP administrator on r.durrell@manchester.ac.uk.



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