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Directors' Corner

Sue Heath



Sue Heath, Deputy Director

The first National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) summer school, recently held in Southampton around the theme of 'Data Generation, Complexity and Synthesis', provided a wonderful case study of the possibilities for developing cross-disciplinary working across the social sciences. The summer school brought together a diverse group of doctoral students and researchers: diverse in terms of both their disciplinary backgrounds, and their areas of methodological expertise. Whilst it is not always helpful to conceptualise methodological approaches within the social sciences in terms of a qualitative-quantitative distinction, in practice many researchers nonetheless tend to be more experienced within one broad tradition than in both. For the most part, that was certainly true of the summer school participants – speakers as well as students! Any initial nervousness about the possibilities for developing a dialogue across these differences was, however, soon dispelled by a general willingness to move outside of our 'comfort zones' and to grapple with the challenges presented to our own research by exposure to very different research traditions. In so doing, we all became acutely aware of the extent to which researchers from different disciplinary and/or methodological approaches often use similar terminology yet often with very different meanings, underlining the importance of really listening to each other. The overall success of the week is a tribute to the extent to which all of the summer school's participants were prepared to do just this, and I would like to thank everyone involved for their willingness to do so.

The programme consisted of a series of plenary sessions, seminar discussions and hands-on workshops, with speakers drawn largely from the NCRM Nodes. We were also joined by Professor Rob Kitchin from the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and by Professor Rob Proctor and colleagues from the

National Centre for e-Social Science.

Topics ranged from small area estimation, multi-level modelling and e-social science through to research ethics, multi-modality in qualitative research and hypermedia ethnography. Each of the speakers' presentations will shortly be accessible via the NCRM website.

Viewpoint

Karen Henwood, Senior Lecturer in Clinical and Health Psychology, University of East Anglia



Karen Henwood, University of East Anglia

The launch of the NCRM signals exciting times ahead for UK social scientists. Across the range of social science disciplines we have to deal with changing relations between research, members of the public, professional practice, and policy making.

At the NCRM's pre-launch meeting, I offered some of the methodological challenges I see as important as topics for discussion by the staff of the Hub and Nodes. In presenting my views of 'methodological challenges in psychology', I spoke as a qualitative specialist and as a researcher who is mindful of the need to find rigorous and creative ways of combining qualitative and quantitative methods.

There was a fruitful discussion of whether any risks are involved when dominant models and metaphors take root, and as efforts are made to foster collaboration between qualitative and quantitative multi-disciplinary teams.

One such metaphor suggests that qualitative investigations can 'open up the black box' between inputs and outputs of experiments such as RCTs. Two inter-related themes were developed by the group: the need to go beyond rhetoric, and to find careful ways to consider quality-quantity issues that are applicable to an investigation. Caution was expressed about the practice of separating out quantitative and qualitative research questions if the result is that they are no longer mutually challenging.

The introduction of guidelines for assessing the quality of qualitative studies was discussed, especially those sponsored by the Cabinet Office and produced by the National Centre for Social Research, and that are intended to assist in the assessment of qualitative evidence for use in policy. The NatCen framework was described as having an impact on how educators think about their work. Two further developments were identified as potentially valuable: extending questions about reflexive practice into the quantitative arena, and setting up dialogue about the formulation of research questions between the academic and policy research communities.

A final discussion topic was whether there is a need to develop methodologies of collaboration. On this point, one suggestion was that asking questions about how we do research should not inhibit getting on with the research itself. In addition, though, there were sharp differences on how to view good collaboration. Is it best viewed as a matter of trust? As involving communication about different agendas? As requiring engagement by all parties in the ongoing process of decision-making? One proposal to take forward these considerations was for the NCRM's Hub and Nodes to include writing up their 'methodologies of collaboration' as part of the outputs of their work.

Focus on the Hub

Further to the Launch event and the first Summer School of the NCRM (details of which can be found in Directors' Corner and Spotlight on Events), the Hub has been engaged in activities for the 2004/05 NCRM short-term projects designed to develop new methodologies for social science.

Firstly, with the project on **Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research Methods: the Challenges of Global Social Science**, led by Professor John Holmwood at the University of Sussex. The issues are being addressed in three focused but linked, seminar/ workshops each taking place over two days at the University of Sussex. The first two have taken place 'Emerging ethical issues in cross cultural research: ethical dilemmas and practice in research collaborations between social sciences and medicine', 'Problems and possibilities in 'multi-sited' ethnography', whilst a final one will be on 'Small and Large-N Comparative Solutions' on the 22-23 September. The seminar series will conclude with a one-day conference on 'The challenge to global social inquiry: inclusion, exclusion, and participation' on the 18 November.

The second of the 2004/05 NCRM short-term projects underway is on **Mixed Mode Data Collection in Comparative Social Surveys**, led by Professor Roger Jowell at City University. Which comprises a one-day conference on the 15 September. This will provide an opportunity for survey research practitioners and experts in

survey methodology to come together to share expertise concerning methods of mixed mode data collection, with a particular focus on their application in comparative social surveys. The conference will focus on the following themes: the impetus for mixing different modes of data collection in survey research; different methods of mixing modes; the challenges of using multiple modes in a cross-national context and of switching modes within a time series.

The closing date for the 2005/06 NCRM short-term projects was the 15 July, the results of this call will be announced in December 2005.

Details of the NCRM 2005/06 training programme will be published in the next issue of *Methods/News* and details of all NCRM training courses and events can be found in the new training and events database at www.ncrm.ac.uk.

Focus on the Nodes

In this issue we present the second of our quarterly foci on the NCRM Nodes. This issue focuses on the activities of the Bayesian methods for combining multiple Individual and Aggregate data Sources in observational studies (BIAS) Node

The BIAS Node is based at the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health in Imperial College, London. The work is focused on developing a set of statistical frameworks for combining observational data from multiple sources. Social science data are notoriously full of complications such as missing values, non-responses and selection biases. Simple analyses are usually misleading. Instead a comprehensive set of inter-dependent sub-models, and often a combination of datasets, are needed to model the core processes that social scientists want to understand.

The Node is directed by Dr. Nicky Best and jointly supervised by Prof. Sylvia Richardson. A senior Research Associate, Dr Chris Jackson, is responsible for the component of the project involving combining inferences from individual and aggregate data. Two further Research Associates have recently been appointed. Sara Geneletti will be working on a generic framework for probabilistic sensitivity analysis for observational studies using multiple data sources. Virgilio Gomez-Rubillo will be working on prediction of small-area indicators using multiple data sources. The latter work will be carried out in collaboration with the methodology division at the Office for National Statistics.

Nicky Best will be talking about some of these methodological ideas and applications as part of a plenary presentation at the Association for Survey Computing International Conference on Survey Research Methods at Newlands Park in September (www.asc.org.uk).

The BIAS Node will be running a short course on Bayesian Hierarchical Models in September. This is an advanced-level course aimed at researchers who are confident with standard statistical techniques such as generalized linear models. More introductory-level courses on Bayesian methods and use of the WinBUGS software in social science applications are planned for the next academic year.

Other News

Census: Present and Future

Gilbert Murray Conference Centre, University of Leicester,
16-17 November 2005

A conference presenting the latest census-based research and exploring the future of population datasets

The ESRC/JISC Census Programme is pleased to announce a two-day conference examining the present and the future of the census in the UK. The conference programme is now available online and includes speakers from the Census Programme, researchers within and beyond the academic community and international statistical organizations. Delegate registration is now open. Full details are available by following the conference link on the ESRC/JISC Census Programme website at <http://census.ac.uk/> Enquiries may be addressed to census2005@geodata.soton.ac.uk

News from NCeSS

The remaining NCeSS research nodes have been announced:

- Oxford e-Social Science (OeSS) Project: Ethical, Legal and Institutional Dynamics of Grid Enabled e-Science
Director: Dr WH Dutton (University of Oxford)
Focuses on the social, institutional, ethical and legal issues surrounding e-Science infrastructures and research practices.
- 'GEOVUE: Geographic Virtual Urban Environments'
Director: Professor M Batty (University College London)
Proposes to design a platform for virtual urban environments (VUEs) through which users will be able to design and construct environments specifically tailored to their own requirements.
- Semantic Grid Tools for Rural Policy Development and Appraisal
Director: Dr P Edwards (University of Aberdeen)
Focuses on the development, application and evaluation of agent-based models and semantic grid tools. The application domain is environmental modelling and aims to facilitate the use of mixed methods for evidenced-based policy making.

These nodes will start in autumn 2005 and, together with the four nodes already announced, will form the core of the NCeSS research programme.

Researcher Development Initiative

At its meeting in Edinburgh in June, the ESRC's Training and Development Board approved the funding of 15 training activities under the Board's Researcher Development Initiative (RDI). In all, 63 applications for funding were received in the first round of RDI. A further round is expected to be announced later this year.

RDI was established with the aim of developing a training infrastructure in the social sciences at national and regional level. In its first round, RDI encouraged submissions that would address the needs of researchers 'throughout the life course.' Among priority areas encouraged under the Initiative are advanced quantitative methods, and computer-based qualitative methods, areas such as systematic reviewing, and a range of topics, including project management, related to the professionalisation of researchers. Also encouraged were applications aimed at the development and use of new tools and packages for training purposes, and those that stimulated the uptake and use of new and emerging methods. The overall portfolio of activities produced by RDI is intended to include a balanced mixture of online and face-to-face provision, training activities of differing lengths and degrees of intensity, and events available at regional or national level. The Researcher Development Initiative is coordinated by Ray Lee (r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk), Professor of Social Research Methods at Royal Holloway University of London.

Spotlight on Resources

Ann Lewins, Project Manager, CAQDAS

CAQDAS

The CAQDAS Networking Project, conceived by Nigel Fielding and Ray Lee in the early 1990's to support Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis began its formal life, funded by the ESRC, in May 1994. Now into its eleventh year, it has achieved a record number of six ESRC funding renewals, the most recent under the Research Development Initiative. The project still has more than a year to run under the auspices of the ESRC Research Methods programme.

Ann Lewins and Christina Silver, both part time researchers, now offer such a vigorous and frequent schedule of events throughout the academic year (last year, 48 scheduled events based at Surrey or around the country) that it has become a major source of support amongst the academic, government, health and voluntary sectors' research community who are doing qualitative work.

Traditionally appealing to health and social research, the project sees new disciplines taking part. Subject areas such as archaeology and historical documentation, accounting, epidemiology, textile research and law now require support from the project.

At scheduled events, participation levels reach between 600 and 800 per year. Hundreds more receive informal telephone or personal email support from its two researchers. Free seminars are held to enable as many researchers and students as possible to meet developers and an academic discussion list ensures open fora for feedback and debate. Introductory and advanced (project oriented) tuition and hands-on support in using a range of qualitative software packages repeats throughout the year. Events forthcoming between September 05 – February 06 include workshops on NVivo, MAXqda2, ATLAS.ti, QUALRUS and comparative overview seminars. For a full list of events see the CAQDAS website at <http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk>.

Spotlight on Events

*Siu Woon Edmond Ng, Research Officer,
Institute of Education*

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Launch, 21 June 2005, St. Anne's College, Oxford

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) was launched formally on the 21 June 2005. This event marked the beginning of a new ESRC initiative to promote a step change in the quality and range of methodological skills used by the UK social science community by drawing upon the expertise of some of the leading qualitative and quantitative social scientists both in and outside of the UK.

Chris Skinner, Director of the NCRM, introduced the launch day by providing us with an overview of the objectives and organisation of the NCRM. The schedule involved a series of presentations given by representatives from the coordinating Hub and six Nodes. The sumptuous buffet lunch and coffee/tea in the marquee provided staff and collaborators with valuable networking opportunities.

The presentations gave the audience a flavour of the aims and planned activities of the six existing Nodes. The foci of the Nodes are diverse and wide-ranging in the spectrum of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. They range from developing ways to grapple with the multi-dimensionality of 'real lives' to developing and expanding multilevel modelling methodology to enable the modelling of the highly complex structure of social science data. Detailed description of the Nodes and their aims and objectives are available from the NCRM website.

Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC delivered the closing address where he emphatically endorsed the urgency and timeliness of this new ESRC initiative which aims, partly, to respond to the imminent shortage of social scientists in the UK and stressed the ESRC's long-term commitment to the NCRM.

A common theme throughout the day was 'capacity building', a phrase re-iterated in all the presentations. The NCRM's emphasis on training will be welcomed by and benefit the current generation of social scientists in the early stages of their careers.

The immaculate organisation of the Launch coordinated by the Hub staff is to be commended and I believe all participants will join in saying that they felt the launch was a very positive start to a long and challenging endeavour.



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