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## Directors' Corner

*Chris Skinner, Director*



The Research Methods Festival, held in Oxford earlier this month, provided a marvellous array of opportunities for exploring methodological issues in the social sciences. Despite the sun's best efforts to slow us down, there was a real buzz around the lecture rooms, courtyards and dining hall of St. Catherine's College. It's really exciting that the demand for the Festival was so high, with bookings having had to be closed when they reached a thousand. The notion that methods is too dry a subject to attract more than a few aficionados clearly didn't apply here and I was encouraged from my conversations with participants that this was a reflection of broader trends. A particular appeal of the Festival seemed to be that researchers could cross boundaries and explore possibilities outside their normal disciplinary or subject matter fora.

The Centre organised and contributed to many sessions. There were many opportunities to hear some of the early outcomes of the Centre's research programme. There were also 'tasters' of a wide range of research methods, which can be followed up in more depth at one of the training events offered by the Centre. The two year interval between this and the previous 2004 event is to be repeated. The Centre will be organising the Festival on 30 June - 3 July 2008. The standards set by Angela Dale, Ruth Durrell and the Research Methods Programme team in 2004 and 2006 make for a hard act to follow and we are certainly looking for continuity in many of the successful features, including the venue. Any suggestions you may have for the planning of the next Festival would be welcome on [info@ncrm.ac.uk](mailto:info@ncrm.ac.uk).

## Viewpoint

*John Stilwell, ESRC UPTAP Initiative*



### UPTAP: Building Capacity

UPTAP is the acronym for 'Understanding Population Trends And Processes', an ESRC-funded initiative that got underway in late 2005 and involves a network of social scientists across the country.

The primary purpose of UPTAP is to 'build capacity' by giving young and mid-career researchers the opportunity to develop or enhance their knowledge and skills in secondary data analysis, both of a qualitative and quantitative nature. In doing so, the initiative seeks to promote the use of large-scale data sets, several of which have received substantial ESRC investment in recent years. Moreover, the initiative is part of the ESRC's strategy for addressing the major concerns about the strength of the social science skills base in quantitative methods, the so-called 'quantitative deficit'. In this respect, there is an important training dimension that concentrates on improving methodological skills of those researchers involved, and that dovetails with other ESRC activities including the Research Methods Programme, the National Centre for Research Methods and the Researcher Development Initiative.

In total, 21 awards were made in the first round of UPTAP funding for projects starting and completing at different times between October 2005 and 2009 and concentrating on various demographic trends and socio-economic processes which affect the nation's economy, society and its population. The first round awards included four postdoctoral fellowships, six mid-career fellowships, and one 'user' fellowship involving a non-academic researcher in secondary data analysis. In addition, seven small research grants were awarded together with three large grants, each of the latter being led by an experienced secondary data analyst acting in a supervisory/mentoring capacity to mid-career researchers and in one case involving two linked +3 studentships.

An inaugural two-day conference was held at the University of Leeds in March this year and brought participants together for the first time to present work proposed on a wide range of themes: demographic and residential change; fertility, motherhood and childlessness; cohabitation and mobility; living arrangements and childcare; health, well-being and employment; education; identity, ethnicity and segregation; and political and social values. One of the most interesting features of the conference, and of the initiative as a whole, was the gathering together of economists, epidemiologists, geographers, sociologists and social policy specialists to discuss some of the key trends and patterns in contemporary Britain. For many, it was their first

experience of exchanging ideas with others from outside the strict confines of their particular discipline and this itself was beneficial from a capacity-building perspective.

In addition to communicating with other academics in the social sciences, a major objective of the UPTAP initiative is to communicate with and disseminate the results of research to the non-academic community of practitioners and users. Consequently, activities are being planned for UPTAP researchers to discuss their research with various sub-groups within the policy-making community and to circulate their results in the form of research bulletins that will be of interest and value to those outside the academic sector. At the moment, only one fellowship has been awarded to a non-academic researcher, following a disappointing response from outside the academic sector in the first round. A second round of funding, planned for later this year (September-October), will provide for further user fellowships in an attempt to stimulate more interaction between the user and the academic sectors. The fellowships will enable users to work for a period of time (either full-time or part-time) in a centre of academic expertise. We hope for a good response this time around.

For further details of current projects, together with news items, forthcoming events and details of the second round call for proposals, visit the website: <http://www.uptap.net>.

## Focus on the Hub

Since the last newsletter was published, the NCRM hub team at Southampton has been joined by Graham Crow and Annabel Preston.



Graham Crow joined the NCRM hub team as a co-director in April and will take over from Sue Heath as Deputy Director in September 2006. He worked with Sue Heath, Rose Wiles and Vikki Charles on the ESRC Research Methods Programme project on informed consent and the research process (2003-4). This has parallels with the issue of how far it is possible for researchers to anonymise communities, which arose directly in

earlier research he undertook with others into relations between neighbours. More generally he is interested in the issue of the boundaries of social science disciplines. His first degree was in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, and he has worked in a Department of Sociology and Social Policy in a School of Social Sciences for more than 20 years, so the issue of how disciplines relate to each other has never been far away. His co-editorship of the journals *Sociological Research Online* (2001-3) and *Sociology* (since 2006) has also brought home the difficulty of determining what is (and what is not) sociological. He has come to be more and more intrigued by various methodological matters and has written on issues such as the community study method, comparison, time, research ethics, and the methods of presenting their arguments that social scientists use (the latter topic inspired by Marx's

observation that 'the method of presentation must differ in form from that of enquiry'). His inaugural lecture to be delivered in December 2006 will be entitled 'If sociology is the answer, what is the question?', and will argue that asking the right questions is at the heart of good social science.

Annabel Preston joined us in June as the new Administrator. She comes from a varied background; most recently she has been working in the environmental world, saving energy to help stop global warming and climate change.

### Responses invited to NCRM consultation on need for research in research methods

NCRM have recently conducted a consultation exercise to identify the areas of need in relation to methods research. The aim of this exercise is to inform the ESRC's strategic direction in this area. Phase one of this exercise is now complete and responses to the initial consultation are invited from all interested members of the social research community. The initial report can be found at <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/publications/documents/researchneeds-workingpaper.pdf>.

Following this second phase of consultation the final report will be written and submitted to ESRC in November 2006 and made available on the NCRM website.

We are now inviting responses to the phase one report to focus on the following issues:

- What areas identified in this report are already well researched? It would be useful if some evidence for this could be provided.
- What are the priorities within the topics outlined in the report?
- What is the specific research agenda in relation to these topics?

Responses should be submitted by 30 September 2006 by email to [info@ncrm.ac.uk](mailto:info@ncrm.ac.uk).

## Focus on the Nodes

**The Real Life Methods Node** is based at the Universities of Manchester and Leeds. As our name suggests, our aim is to explore and develop research methods that resonate with people's everyday, 'real', lives.

### Research

Our research is based in the area of family, youth and community and our approach is interdisciplinary, to reflect the fact that, 'real' lives do not fit neatly into discipline areas. We are developing a creative and innovative mix of methods and approaches, because we think these are required if we are going to fully grasp and explain the different dimensions through which real life is lived.

We describe our broad approach as 'qualitatively-driven', because it starts from some of the best principles of qualitative research. But it moves outward from these, and our research spans and transcends the qualitative/quantitative divide.

Our research programme is made up of four projects, and cross-cutting activities that link and extend them:

- *Ceremony and Ritual in Everyday Lives* – examining the changing nature of family, relational and interpersonal ceremony, ritual and celebration.
- *Changing Lives* - exploring the dynamics of young people's relationships and spheres of influence.
- *Connected Lives* - exploring the dynamics of 'community' interactions through multi-dimensional neighbourhood case studies.
- *Living Resemblances* - exploring the meaning, impact and negotiation of family resemblances in a range of contexts.

### Training and Capacity Building

We have a programme of training and capacity building activities (see <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk/training>). We run three full-day training workshops a year, as well as seminars and methods workshops.

### Forthcoming Events

21 September 2006	Creative Interviewing Training Workshop
19 October 2006	Localities Methods Workshop
30 November 2006	Social Networks Methods Workshop
1 March 2007	Comparative Cases Methods Workshop
17 May 2007	Kinship and Relatedness Methods Workshop

Training workshops are also planned in Qualitative Longitudinal Research, Geodemographics and Participatory Approaches (dates to be confirmed). See our website for more information.

Further details of the node's activities can be found on our website at <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk>. If you would like to keep up to date with our news and activities you can join our email newsletter by sending your contact details to [reallifemethods@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:reallifemethods@manchester.ac.uk).

## Other News

### Free Seminar on Internet for Social Research

Wednesday 20 September 2006, University of Birmingham

Aimed at social science lecturers or researchers who want to extend their knowledge of the Internet, or who teach Internet research skills to their students.

This FREE one day seminar will provide practical ideas and materials to help with teaching Internet searching, Internet research and website evaluation. Lunch is included. The programme includes:

- An overview of the Web for social research
- An insight into leading Internet services for this area
- Hands-on sessions in an IT suite with help
- Worksheets and ideas to take away
- An opportunity to network with other lecturers, researchers, librarians or information providers

To find out more, please email [Angela.Joyce@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:Angela.Joyce@bristol.ac.uk), or see: [http://www.sosig.ac.uk/training/training\\_events.html](http://www.sosig.ac.uk/training/training_events.html).

**Internet Detective**, a related online tutorial designed to help students develop the critical thinking required for their Internet research, is now available in the RDN Virtual Training Suite at: <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>. The tutorial offers practical advice on evaluating the quality of websites and highlights the need for care when selecting online information sources to inform university or college work.

This seminar and tutorial are produced by *Intute: Social Sciences*, the new national service that guides you to the best of the Web (formerly comprising The Social Science Information Gateway and Altis - see: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/development/>).

## Spotlight on Resources

### courses in **CASS** applied social surveys

#### Who we are

Courses in Applied Social Surveys (CASS) is a programme of short courses in applied social surveys run by the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute (S3RI) at the University of Southampton. The programme is coordinated with the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods training programme.

#### What we do

CASS provides short courses for academic social scientists and applied researchers in government, market research and the independent and voluntary sectors. The programme covers all aspects of the quantitative survey process from survey design and implementation to data collection and analysis. The courses aim to provide guidance and workshop practice for researchers who face practical survey tasks and decisions, such as how to draw a sample, how to design a questionnaire and how to analyse a data set.

Courses are usually two to three days long and may vary from introductory, intermediate to more advanced levels. Teaching is interactive and responsive to course participants' needs. All courses include practical sessions and computer workshops to enable participants to put the learned methods into practice. All our courses are taught by highly qualified staff and international experts in their fields.

For further information please visit our website at [www.s3ri.soton.ac.uk/cass](http://www.s3ri.soton.ac.uk/cass) or email: [cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk](mailto:cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk).

## Spotlight on Events

### Second International Conference on e-Social Science, 28-30 June 2006, Manchester

*John 'Mac' McDonald, Associate Member of NCRM, University of Southampton*

Electronic Social Science? Enhanced Social Science? Or Enabling Social Science? e-Social Science means all of these things. The ESRC created the National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS) to explore and develop ways in which e-Science research methods and infrastructure can be applied to the Social Sciences. In e-Science the research methods are typically large scale, collaborative and multidisciplinary. Many of the conference themes and papers highlighted such methods, such as providing tools and techniques for social scientists to collaboratively analyse audio-visual qualitative data at a distance. The term 'large-scale' can be an understatement, e.g. the Internet Archive provides snapshots of all the data on the World Wide Web at two month intervals and comprises more than 40 billion webpages! Cybertools have been developed to extract and analyse such massive datasets, so that one can study online networks, e.g. how web pages are linked and online communities, e.g., the World of Warcraft (WoW) gaming community. The 'Age of Networks' featured prominently at this conference with an impressive keynote presentation from Noshir Contractor, from the Departments of Speech Communication and Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, titled 'From Disasters to WoW: Enabling Communities with Cyberinfrastructure'.

While many of the talks presented research carried out by the NCeSS research nodes, pilot and small grant projects, there was a strong international presence as the UK leads the world in e-Social Science research! This conference was a marvellous opportunity to interact with the computer science community and all the Social Sciences as well as some of the Humanities. Pre-conference workshops included 'Social Science

Perspectives', 'e-Collaboration', 'Semantic Grid', 'Qualitative Research' and 'Visualisation'. As no single discipline 'owned' this conference, I found myself fascinated by talks outside my usual interests. I am very much looking forward to the Third International Conference on e-Social Science.

#### In the words of NCeSS:

The Second international conference on e-Social Science organised by the ESRC National Centre for e-Social Science took place on the 28<sup>th</sup> -30<sup>th</sup> June. The event brought together more than 170 e-social scientists from across the UK as well as large delegations from the US, Australia and Europe.

All the presentations and accompanying papers from this year's and last year's conference are available from the NCeSS website (<http://www.ncess.ac.uk/>). If you would like to be kept informed of news on next years conference then please join the NCeSS monthly mailing list – details are available on our website.

In amongst all the hard work of presenting, there was plenty of time available for networking with a wine reception at Manchester Museum and a wonderful conference dinner in the stunning surroundings of Manchester Town Hall.



Photo by Eel Sanderse (01617 363 255)



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