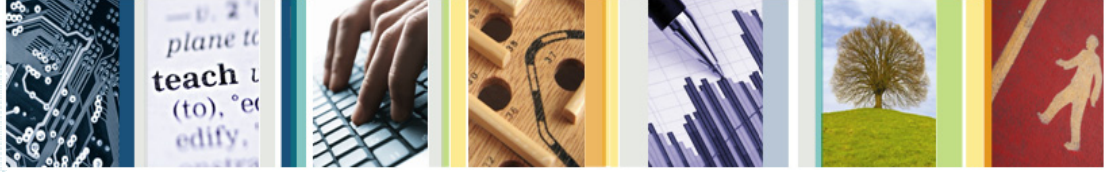


# MethodsNews

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## Directors' Corner

*Sue Heath, Co-Director, NCRM*



In April the National Centre for Research Methods celebrated its first five years: an important landmark for all of us at the Hub, especially for those of us who have been involved from the very beginning. An article later in the newsletter reflects on this milestone, putting the spotlight on our celebratory event.

Looking back over our achievements since 2004, The Methods Centre's training and capacity building agenda has had a particularly important impact on the UK social science community. Over the last five years, several thousand of social scientists at all career stages have engaged with the Centre's varied programme of activities, contributing to the enhancement of methodological skills amongst the UK social science community. I have particularly enjoyed leading the residential training event for early career researchers which we have run at Southampton on an annual basis since 2005 (three summer schools and one autumn school under our belts to date). Each of these events has brought together researchers from diverse disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, and the resulting dialogue has on each occasion been extremely stimulating, challenging and, not least, highly enjoyable.

An important group of participants at our training events over the first five years has been those researchers who are also involved in the teaching of research methods to undergraduate and postgraduate students. In the Methods Centre's next five years we will be placing a stronger emphasis on 'training the trainers', in recognition of the importance of this task to the future of social science research in the UK. For starters, an event will be held in London in July designed to highlight a range of readily accessible resources which methods teachers can draw upon in teaching research skills. Full details of this event, along with details of the 2009 autumn school, will be announced on the Centre's website shortly. Here's to the next five years!

## Viewpoint

*Máire Ní Bhrolcháin, Professor of  
Demography, University of Southampton*

**To identify causal processes** is probably the underlying motivation for much social science research. Nevertheless, the formal basis for sound causal inference remains extremely tenuous in social science. Most of our data are observational - based on recording events etc. as they occur - rather than the product of experimentation. Inferring cause and effect from observational data is phenomenally difficult. But it has become almost customary in some social science areas to treat causation as if it can be inferred routinely from regression coefficients, provided what are thought of as "all relevant controls" are present. But such off-the-shelf causal inference has been severely criticised in recent decades from a variety of perspectives - statistical, econometric, philosophical, as well as broader social science concerns. Causal inference, and the statistical technology surrounding it, is currently an active research area. If asked to say how a social scientist might fruitfully look for causal evidence, my answer would go something like this. First, clarify the question: is it about the determinants of aggregate change? or of areal, group or individual differences or similarities? Approaches will vary accordingly. Second, can the question be answered? Some questions are too vague, too poorly documented, or too plain difficult to investigate right now. Third, assemble an accurate descriptive factual basis for the study, with high quality measures. Fourth, where appropriate, use the most up-to-date statistical methods available - methods in this area have increased in sophistication in recent years. Fifth, never rely solely on a regression analysis to infer a causal effect. Use a variety of approaches and data sources and try to identify and test as many as possible of the implications of your causal hypothesis. In addition, identify and check out alternative explanations. Sixth, remember that causal inference is demanding and often highly contested even in disciplines with much better data and resources than we have. Finally, I believe that caution in inferring causes could raise the profile and status of social science much more than well-intentioned overstatement of evidence.

*Further reading: Ni Bhrolchain, M. and Dyson, T. On Causation in Demography: Issues and Illustrations in Population and Development Review, vol 33(1) 2007:1-36*

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## News from the Methods Centre

### Calling for new Networks for Methodological Innovation

Once again we are inviting applications from researchers interested in setting up a Network for Methodological Innovation (NMI). The NMI projects from this call will start their work in 2010. NMIs are commissioned with the aim of stimulating discussion on new methodological challenges and reviewing developments within specific methodological fields. They consist of a series of network-based events and related activities over a period of up to one year. The Methods Centre funds two networks each year with a maximum budget of £24,000 per network.

In line with the Centre's broader remit, networks for methodological innovation contribute to the envisaged step change in the quality and range of methodological skills and techniques used by the UK social science community. They are orientated towards stimulating new ideas and improving understanding of methods and of the connections between methods and disciplines.

This year, applications are invited on any methodological topic, although suggested topics are: interdisciplinary working; mixed methods and data integration; new forms of data and/or data collection; and finally, research evidence for policy. Applications are welcome from all social science disciplines. The call opens on 5 May and the closing date for applications is 26 June 2009.

For more information about previous years' NMI projects and to apply, please contact [info@ncrm.ac.uk](mailto:info@ncrm.ac.uk) or see <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/other/NMI>

### NCRM video archive online

Over the years the Methods Centre has been filming presentations from our own workshops and other events. The purpose of this is to make the presentations available for a larger audience, especially as many of the filmed events have been fully booked and the waiting list has been long. Currently the video archive contains filmed presentations e.g.

- Do We Still Need Probability Sampling in Surveys? by Professor Bob Groves (Michigan State University) at the Research Methods Festival 2008
- Disciplinary and Methodological Mashups: Muddles or Marvels? by Professor Peter Halfpenny (NCeSS) at the Research Methods Festival 2008
- Data linkage with the National Pupil Database by Andrew Jenkins and Rosalind Levačić (Institute of Education) at the NCRM workshop Data linkage: Exploring the Potential

To browse and to view the videos, please go to <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/TandE/video/>

### Hot off the press! Researching Young People's Lives

A new methods book for youth researchers has just been published by Sage. 'Researching Young People's Lives' has been written by four experienced youth researchers, including NCRM Co-Director Sue Heath, Professor of Sociology at the University of Southampton. This new book provides an overview of some of the key methodological challenges facing youth researchers and an introduction to the broad repertoire of methods used in youth-orientated research.

For further information and to buy the book, please go to <http://www.uk.sagepub.com>.

### Special issue coming out: Methodological innovation and developing understandings of 21st Century Society

A special issue of *21<sup>st</sup> Century Society*, the journal of the Academy of Social Sciences, will be published in June by Routledge, comprising written versions of nine presentations made at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Research Methods Festival in 2008.

Collected together under the theme of 'Methodological innovation and developing understandings of 21st Century Society', the articles are all concerned with the methodological challenges of capturing emergent patterns of social and economic relationships in a fast-changing environment. The contents are: Jacqueline Scott, Jane Nolan and Anke Plagnol, 'Panel Data and Open-ended Questions: Understanding Perceptions of Quality of Life'; Wendy Sigle-Rushton, 'Comparative Methods in Research on Gender and Welfare States'; Maria Iacovou, 'Cross-national comparative research with longitudinal data: research into youth poverty'; Robert Haining, 'Spatial methodologies to support local policing in the UK: glimpsing the future'; Gwenda Simons and Brian Parkinson, 'Time-Dependent Observational and Diary Methodologies and their Use in Studies of Social Referencing and Interpersonal Emotion Regulation'; Rebecca Eynon, Ralph Schroeder, and Jenny Fry, 'New Techniques in Online Research: Challenges for Research Ethics'; Les Back, 'Representing Multicultural Community'; Christopher Miller and Marilyn Taylor, 'The realities of comparative research: reflections from a cross-national study of non-governmental public action'; and Aisha Taplin, 'Promoting Reciprocal Relationships: Examining the "Give and Take" in Social Science Research'. Angela Dale, has also contributed a comment on current debates in methodology. Graham Crow, Nick Bardsley and Rose Wiles, the NCRM hub-based guest editors of the special issue, note in their introduction to the collection that the diversity of the papers reflects well on the range of methodological traditions and disciplinary perspectives that are contributing in creative and exciting ways to capturing the changing nature of our new century.

For more information please see

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/17450144.asp>

## Other news

### ESRC initiative to enhance quantitative methods

*Professor John MacInnes, ESRC Strategic Advisor for undergraduate Quantitative Methods*

Over the last decade the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has promoted improvements in quantitative methods (QM) training for postgraduates and staff. It has now launched an initiative aimed at undergraduates, both to ensure an adequate supply of students for postgraduate training, and to equip social science graduates with the numerical literacy to critically interpret the mass of data they encounter in everyday life.

The digital revolution has transformed data capture, dissemination and analysis. There is more and better data than ever before. Thanks to excellent relations between academics and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), not only can microdata be downloaded from the archive at the click of a mouse, but also analysed online or with user-friendly analysis packages that do away with command syntax. Unfortunately, teaching has not kept up with these changes. Some students' negative experience with school maths has not helped. Yet one paradoxical result of the digital revolution is that even the most advanced researcher no longer has to crunch numbers. Several studies have found that university social science 'quants' teaching is often low status, low priority and, unsurprisingly, achieves low results. Unless 'embedded' in a substantive disciplinary approach, students often find it irrelevant or worse. That lack of QM material in their other courses often reinforces this view. This marginalises QM as the rather techy preoccupation of staff defined by their methodology rather than their substantive interests. Moreover, many staff who started before the digital revolution took off do not even have the basic QM skills that many departments expect their undergraduates to master: hardly a desirable situation.

As ESRC 'Strategic Advisor' for undergraduate QM, I'm now completing a survey of existing QM provision, developing a mailing and discussion list for undergraduate QM teachers and drafting proposals to go before a stakeholder workshop in October on how best to promote and support undergraduate QM teaching. To join the mailing list, or find out more about the initiative, email me at [john.macinnnes@ed.ac.uk](mailto:john.macinnnes@ed.ac.uk).

### Call for Round 4 Researcher Development Initiative

Applications are invited for training and development activities under Round 4 of the Researcher Development Initiative. The Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) is designed to support the training and development of researchers across the social sciences at all stages of their career. Through the RDI, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) wishes to support a range of training and development activities and to integrate these activities more effectively where possible with other ESRC training capacity building activities and resources.

The scheme is open to applications from individuals and departments within ESRC recognised institutions, learned societies in the social sciences and other organisations or individuals with an appropriate organisational affiliation. Applications are permitted where co-sponsorship has been or is sought from learned societies and other stakeholders. The call closing date is 4pm, Tuesday 9 June 2009. For further information, please go to <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>.

## Spotlight on Resources

### Methodspace.com - connecting the research community



SAGE has launched Methodspace.com, a new social network for research methods. Hosted on social networking site Ning.com,

Methodspace aims to connect the online research community. Whether you are looking for resources in research methods, want to discuss a particular approach, or just connect with other researchers, this is the place to go.

One of the key benefits of Methodspace is its ability to connect the research community from around the world, regardless of their geographic location or the discipline that they work in. Research Methods is the common thread that unites every researcher: from undergraduate to professional it is something they all encounter at some stage in their academic journey. Often, it's difficult for researchers in a single institution to connect with others using the same techniques or methodologies. Methodspace facilitates discussion, collaboration and debate. Since its launch in March 2009, it has so far attracted more than 900 students, lecturers, and professional researchers from around the world, and it's growing! Sharing information on Methodspace is easy to do. Members can use the blog to post information about their research activities, while the forums give members the chance to share their research problems, and to offer their advice to other users. Members can also set up or join groups in a specific topic or discipline, again making it possible for the community to build relationships with like-minded peers.

SAGE - as the world's largest publisher of research methods, with more than 1200 books, journals and reference works - will also be providing other resources through Methodspace, including providing access to free content (a journal article and book chapter every month); information about upcoming events and workshops in research methods; and information on organizations and links to resources. Ultimately as a social network, Methodspace aims to make it easy for the research community to collaborate in research methods. It is the community of members who will drive the discussions and debates, and help each other through sharing their knowledge and experiences. Registration on Methodspace is free. Join the debate at <http://www.methodspace.com>

## Spotlight on Events

### **Celebrating Methods: National Centre for Research Methods - Five years in 21 April 2009 at the British Academy**

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods has been working over the last five years to improve the range and quality of research methods used by the UK social science research community. The Methods Centre celebrated its first five years on Tuesday 21 April 2009. The evening reception was hosted at the British Academy in London and it gathered 70 people across the social science research community with interests in methods.



*Photo: Council Room at the British Academy was packed with guests at the Celebrating Methods evening reception*

The Methods Centre researchers had organised a poster exhibition to showcase their past and current research projects and the guests had an opportunity to discuss the researchers' work over canapés and wine.

Professor Ian Diamond, the Chief Executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) praised the Methods Centre's achievements and underlined the importance of the work carried in the Centre by remarking "If the Methods Centre did not exist, it would need to be invented".

Professor Sir Roger Jowell, the founder of the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and the Founder Director of Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, also congratulated Professor Chris Skinner, the Director of the Methods Centre, and the rest of his team for the achievements over the first five years.

The Methods Centre has established itself among many social science researchers as a first point of contact regarding research methods. Since its beginning the Centre has promoted coordination among the growing number of ESRC supported initiatives with remits related to research methods, and continues to do so.

The National Centre for Research Methods' current funding from the ESRC is until 2014. In the next five years the Methods Centre will continue to deliver its successful research and training programmes, and in doing so will carry on serving the UK social science community.

For further information and to see photos from the event, please see <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>



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