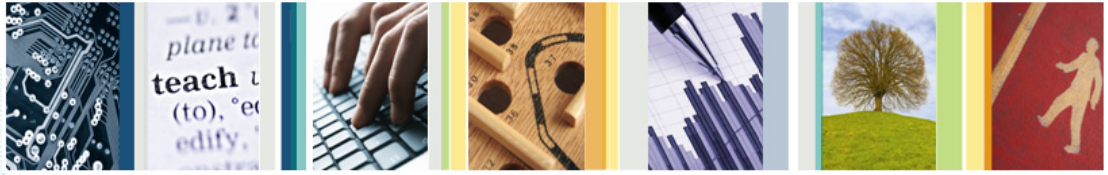


# MethodsNews

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## In this Issue

### 1 Directors' Corner

### 1 Viewpoint

### 2-3 News from the Methods Centre

- Innovations in social science research methods
- Out now: Methodological Innovations and Developing Understandings of 21st Century Society
- New director for the Methods Centre
- Consultation about the future of research methods

### 3 Other news

- Bob Groves appointed as the new Director of the US Census Bureau

### 3 Spotlight on Resources

- Methods for the Analysis of Media Content

### 4 Spotlight on Events

- Ideas workshop for research methods teachers

## Director's Corner

*Chris Skinner, Director, National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton*



This is my last column as Director of the National Centre for Research Methods. On 1<sup>st</sup> September I'll be stepping down from this position (although staying on as a part of the hub team) and Patrick Sturgis, Professor of Research Methods at

the University of Southampton, will take over. Time then for brief reflection over my 5+ years as Director. From this perspective, organisational matters naturally come first to mind. A distinctive feature of the Centre is its hub-node structure. This has many benefits. The central hub enables more coordination across the different methods activities which ESRC supports, compared to what was perceived to be a more piecemeal approach in the past. The nodes enable the Centre to connect widely with the research community and, through their rotation, for the Centre to take on emerging methodological priorities. But there have, of course, been a succession of associated organisational questions to face, e.g. how to handle the process of node rotation. I now feel that such structural features of the Centre are largely established and that we are at a happy and stable point in our development where we can simply get on with delivering what we set out to do.

Our engagement with the research community is particularly important to us and I've been pleased to see how this has strengthened in different ways over the years. This is particularly evident for the website. Its most popular feature continues to be the training and events database, but catching up quickly is the EPrints repository of Centre 'outputs' which is now receiving thousands of visitors downloading the Centre's outputs. I'm sure the user numbers will increase as we further 'populate' the repository. The increase in the number of people who have subscribed to our monthly Research Methods Ebulletin to 3000 is another encouraging sign of the interest in what we do and in methods more generally.

I very much look forward to continuing being part of the Centre and to working with Patrick Sturgis when he takes over as Director.

## Viewpoint

*Elizabeth Hoult (Canterbury Christ Church University) and Stuart Ashenden (University of Greenwich), joint co-ordinators of the SECC project*



Universities are increasingly encouraged to make links with, and demonstrate their impact on, the communities in which they are located. The South East Coastal Communities programme (SECC) is part of this agenda. It aims to develop and demonstrate a range of models of community based

knowledge transfer, deploying the intellectual capital available in HEIs for the benefit of people who have traditionally gained the least from having universities based in their localities. Core funding of £3M from HEFCE supports the pilot study. In addition to investigating delivery models, the project explores new possibilities for funding community facing activities. SECC embraces nine universities - three each based in the counties of Hampshire, Kent and Sussex. All are working on a common theme of improving health and wellbeing, but the academics involved in the local projects come from various subject areas. Underlying all of the approaches is the commitment to seeking long term sustainability to regeneration, rather than providing a short-term 'fix'. For example a writing project in Swale uses the principles of auto/biographical research to support a group of creative writers to write about health and wellbeing, thereby making local people's voices heard in the regeneration agenda.

Evaluating such work raises an important question: What do universities have to offer the realm of social and economic regeneration that other organizations are not already doing well enough? The answer is: research. Projects combine pro-active partnership with third sector organizations with a variety of research approaches including participatory approaches, action research and a general focus on user involvement. The range of methodological approaches is inevitably broad with so many disciplines and institutions involved. A number of interesting stories are emerging. It is clear that universities can provide a research-informed awareness of social and economic problems as well a critical perspective that comes from being outside of prescriptive policy, professional and political agendas.

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## News from the Methods Centre

### Innovations in social science research methods: an international perspective

*Dr. Maria Xenitidou and Professor Nigel Gilbert, SIMIAN node of NCRM, Department of Sociology, University of Surrey*

'Innovations in Social Science Research Methods: An International Perspective' is the title of a collaborative fund project conducted within the Methods Centre. The aim was to identify prominent methodological innovations outside the UK. The project sought out research practices that have not yet filtered through to typical research methods courses or that impact on the research process in novel ways. These usually entailed (i) technological innovation, (ii) the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in new ways and (iii) interdisciplinarity.

The project's focus on innovative research practices ranged from data collection to analysis and covered all of the main social science disciplines. Information was collected between October 2008 and March 2009 and then written up. The project gathered evidence by reviewing previous reports, carrying out desktop research, conducting an e-mail survey with academics, practitioners, research methods experts and others (N=215) - registering data entries in the form of nominations of experts, institutions and links to explore (N=670) - and holding interviews with gatekeepers (N=36) and telephone interviews with nominated experts (N=40).

It was concluded, first, that innovative methodologies usually entail the use of technological innovation (visual, digital or online). This could be the advent of new software or the development of online methods and the use of the Internet to conduct research. Secondly, innovative methodologies often entail crossing disciplinary boundaries. This is observed in combinations of disciplines and methods such as in anthropology, psychology and ethnography. Thirdly, innovative methodologies often entail the use of existing theoretical approaches and methods in reformed or mixed and applied ways. This is observed in participatory methods, action research, professional work, and social and consultancy work. Finally, innovative methodologies reside both inside traditional academic institutions (universities) and outside (research centres, institutes, consultancy agencies and organisations), yet even in the latter locations methods developers and experts usually have academic backgrounds and previous or current affiliations, statuses or posts.

Overall, psychology figures prominently in methodological developments followed by survey methodology, ethnography, sociology and management. The 22 cases focused on may be classified into mixed (N=8), qualitative (N=7) and quantitative (N=7) types of research. The institutional structures identified as 'hosting' these developments are primarily academic followed by both academic and professional, then research centres and

finally professional and consultancy institutions. Most of the innovations arise from working across disciplinary boundaries, followed by developments within methods and disciplines and then by developments in technology. Innovations identified in the project are mainly in North America, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands.

A report including summary descriptions of the methodological innovations located by the project has been produced and a web version of it will be made available on the Methods Centre's website. Following on from this project a workshop will bring together some of the developers of these innovations. The workshop will be held just before the 4<sup>th</sup> ESRC Research Methods Festival in July 2010 and several developers will also be invited to speak at the Festival itself about their innovative methods.

### Out now: Methodological Innovations 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, has been published by Routledge, comprising written versions of nine presentations made at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Research Methods Festival in 2008. The articles are all concerned with the methodological challenges of capturing emergent patterns of social and economic relationships in a fast-changing environment. For more information please see <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=g912327565~tab=toc>

### New director for the Methods Centre



Professor Patrick Sturgis, who joined the National Centre for Research Methods in May 2008, will take over the directorship of the Centre from Professor Chris Skinner in September 2009. Patrick talks of his new role: "Following Chris's expert stewardship of the Methods Centre is certainly a challenging task but one that I am very much looking forward to. We are very fortunate that Chris will be staying on in a co-Director role in the second phase of the Centre's funding."

Prior to joining the Methods Centre, Patrick spent seven years in the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey. Patrick's graduate training was as a social psychologist. His research interests now focus on the application of social psychological concepts and theories to aid our understanding of a broad range of social and political behaviours. Having started his career in social research in the Survey Methods Centre at the National Centre for Social Research, Patrick also maintains a research interest in different aspects of survey methodology, particularly on the measurement properties of commonly used survey questions.

## Spotlight on Resources

### Consultation about the future of research methods



The Methods Centre is conducting a consultation on methodological research needs. Contributions are invited from all members of the social science research community to an update of a consultation conducted in 2006, on needs for

research in the field of research methods.

In the 2006 consultation the four most prominent research needs that were identified were policy evaluation, comparative research, mixed methods and data linkage. The results of these consultations have been and will be used to inform funding calls and scoping studies.

To contribute to the current methodological research needs consultation, please go to the Methods Centre's website <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>. The deadline for contributions is Tuesday 11 August 2009.

## Other news

### Bob Groves appointed as the new Director of the US Census Bureau

The United States Senate has approved the nomination of Dr Robert Groves, a distinguished survey methodologist at the University of Michigan as director of the United States Census Bureau. The Methods Centre has benefitted from Dr Groves's extensive methodological expertise through his membership of the Centre's Advisory Committee and his contribution to the 2008 Research Methods Festival.

Bob Groves's appointment on 13 July ended weeks of opposition from two Republicans over his role in next year's high-stakes count. In May Dr Groves had ruled out the use of statistical adjustments in 2010 to make up for undercounted populations, but Republican senators from Alabama and Louisiana blocked a full confirmation vote, because they wanted assurance from the White House that sampling would not be used. These Republican senators were concerned that sampling would be used for manipulating the census data for political gain.

The Methods Centre wishes Dr Groves all the best in his new undoubtedly challenging role.

### Methods for the Analysis of Media Content

This online resource introduces the user into methods for the analysis of media content, in particular news. The substantive concern is with the portrayal of policy, politics and politicians, but this also enables the application and methodological assessment of innovative approaches to media content analysis.



*Photo: Gordon Brown and Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi at a Downing Street press conference, 10 September 2008; Crown copyright.*

The website offers both original research and links to tools and other resources for the analyses of media content. The resources on the website cover the entire research process: the collection of data, its preparation of data for analysis, the selection of the analytical approach and its corresponding methodological tools. The case studies presented are the 2003 UN weapons inspection reports on Iraq, the debate about the dismissal of a German MP for his use of anti-Semitic clichés and the so-called Berlusconi-Schultz debate which functioned as a test case for the strength of a EU-wide public sphere. The methodologies used and developed within these case studies cover content, discourse and frame analysis and comparative methodology. In addition to presenting the methodologies the website gives an overview of the data collection including data sources, collection tools and data organisation; data preparation including file format converters, splitting files and other tools; and data analysis including content analysis software, internet resources, lexical and statistical resources. The website also includes links to further information and other useful resources.

This website was originally developed in 2004 by researchers from Loughborough University as part of the ESRC funded Research Methods Programme. In 2009 the ESRC funded ReStore project took over the resource and since then it has been updated and maintained by a team based at the University of Southampton.

To view the resource please go to <http://www.restore.ac.uk/lboro>

## Spotlight on Events

### Ideas Workshop for Research Methods Teachers, 13 July 2009 at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, London

Professor Sue Heath, Co-director, National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton



What do Belfast, British ex-pats and the King of Pop all have in common? Well, they all received a mention at the recent Methods Centre ideas workshop for methods teachers, which brought together lecturers from

diverse disciplinary and methodological backgrounds for a spot of end of term inspiration.

Belfast is the destination for an annual field trip for undergraduates on the Social Research pathway at the University of Plymouth. In collaboration with researchers from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, Malcolm Williams' students undertake a street survey whilst there, putting into practice what they have been learning in the months leading up to the trip. It is perhaps surprising that methods-related field trips are such a rarity in UK social science teaching, although the high number of students taking methods units at many universities often militates against running similar scale events. We were nonetheless challenged to consider how more modest trips could be incorporated into our teaching.

British ex-pats got a mention in a presentation by Jo Haynes from the University of Bristol. Jo spoke about how postgraduate Advanced Qualitative Methods students apply their data analysis skills to archived data held by ESDS Qualidata. Students are given a choice of data sets to work with and are required to select a

specific theoretical framework and analytical approach in developing their own interpretation of the data. Students find this challenging, but nonetheless produce imaginative and insightful work in response to the task: for example, a sophisticated analysis of social distancing strategies amongst Brits abroad as revealed by data from Karen O'Reilly's study of British migrants living on the Costa del Sol. Jo's talk was followed by a workshop led by Libby Bishop and Bethany Morgan from Qualidata, in which they introduced the archive and profiled a teaching resource on interviewing styles. Available on the Qualidata website, the resource uses interview extracts from archived projects to introduce students to some of the methodological issues raised by different interviewing methods. We undertook one of the student exercises, generating lively discussion about the benefits of exposing students to archived data.

The final session of the day, led by Mike Thelwall from the University of Wolverhampton, focused on a variety of readily accessible tools for analysing web content at an aggregate level. Tools such as those available from the website [blogpulse.com](http://blogpulse.com) can generate trend data on public opinion as expressed by bloggers in a matter of seconds, and allow the user to then 'drill down' to actual blogs. Mike explained how his students use these tools in project work, not only as a means of generating fascinating data, but of engaging students with fundamental issues such as sampling bias, representativeness and the validity of (web-based) sources. And the reference to the King of Pop? Go to [blogpulse.com](http://blogpulse.com), enter the search term 'Michael Jackson' and check out the power of the blogosphere!

Many thanks to all the speakers and to those who attended the day for making it such an enjoyable way to end the academic year.



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