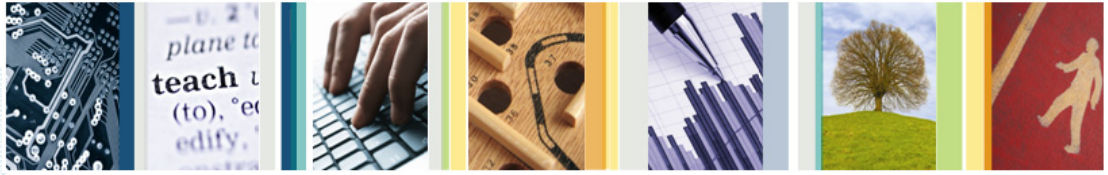


# MethodsNews

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## Director's Corner

*Patrick Sturgis, Director, National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton*



On September 1st I assumed the Directorship of the Methods Centre, as Professor Chris Skinner stood down after five years at the helm. So, let me begin my inaugural Director's corner piece in MethodsNews by paying tribute to Chris and the work he has done to establish

NCRM as a focal point for research and training in social science research methods in the UK over the past five years and more. The Methods Centre is large and rather complex in its organisational structure and I have been extremely impressed, since I joined the Centre last year, at the calmly efficient way in which its activities are planned and coordinated by the hub team. I am very pleased (and not a little relieved!) to say that Chris will continue to contribute to the Centre's activities, though in a reduced capacity that allows him to pursue his work on a much deserved ESRC Professorial Fellowship, commencing in February 2010.

I am fortunate to be taking up the Directorship of the Centre at what is a very exciting time for methodological research in the UK. Major public investments in path-breaking data resources such as the Understanding Society survey, the Timescapes qualitative longitudinal study, and the 2012 Millenium cohort study present new opportunities for methodological practice and innovation. Pressing issues of international importance, such as climate change and the global economic recession, demand new methodological thinking on a multi and cross-disciplinary basis. Novel forms of 'transactional' data and the increasing integration of genetic bio-markers with micro survey-data are just two examples of the kinds of qualitatively different analytical challenges faced by the 21st century social scientist. Over its second five years, NCRM will be in a strong position to meet these challenges, through the development of cutting-edge research methods and the provision of training in their appropriate application across the UK social science research community.

## Viewpoint

*Professor Mervi Eerola, Methodology Centre for Human Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*



The Methodology Centre for Human Sciences (IHME) in Jyväskylä has a unique mission among the Finnish universities to promote the methodological skills of doctoral students and researchers in human sciences. The human sciences in Jyväskylä cover not only humanities and

social sciences but also psychology, economics, education and health sciences. The centre started in 2008 with a small staff, a professor of quantitative methodology and an assistant professor of qualitative methodology. In May 2009 IHME organised the first ever Research Methods Festival in Finland. It was a success with about 600 participants from all over the country. This concept, inspired by the ESRC Research Methods Festival, will be repeated in 2011.

One of our first tasks has been to create a course programme for doctoral students. Quantitative courses cover topics such as new developments of causal inference in observational studies, multilevel modelling, aid of new technology in survey analysis, and methods beyond plain tabulations to analyse survey data. An intriguing question is how to combine qualitative and quantitative methods in a meaningful way. This is not an actual course topic but more naturally developed in working seminars. Our first attempt at this has been to bring together psychotherapy researchers to evaluate the impact of therapy: Quantitative psychologists have built, together with statisticians, individual-level state-space models for therapy data, and qualitative researchers, having qualitative knowledge of the dynamics of therapy processes, can then evaluate these results. Another attempt is a lecture series *Studia Generalia Methodologica* which offers different perspectives on human beings as objects of scientific research and their implications for methodological choices in different disciplines.

In Finland a new University Act will come into operation next year. It dissolves the long-standing role of universities as government agencies and calls for strategic profiling. Research methodology in human sciences can be profiled as such.

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## News from the Methods Centre

### **Resources on Interdisciplinarity in the Social Sciences**

*Dr Nick Bardsley, Senior Fellow, NCRM*

One strand of the Hub's research programme focuses on the interplay between research methods and interdisciplinarity in the social sciences. Initial work on scoping the interdisciplinarity literature has resulted in three documents which will inform the rest of the research work and provide a resource to other researchers with interests in the area. These resources are available in the Methods Centre's online archive at <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk>.

### Annotated bibliography – Dr Glynn Everitt

There is a vast literature on interdisciplinarity, much of it with a natural science focus. This bibliography summarises over 75 recent articles of relevance to the topic with a social science focus. It examines literature with a general methodological viewpoint as well as key articles in some specific fields where interdisciplinarity is seen as important, namely the environment, development and disability research. Key themes and emerging issues are drawn out from this literature. In addition, a glossary is included providing a path through the confusing proliferation of jargon related to interdisciplinarity. It distinguishes, amongst other things, between a-, counter-, cross-, inter-, mono-, multi-, pluri-, post-, supra- and trans- disciplinary research.

### Five Strategies for Practising Interdisciplinarity – Dr Armin Krishnan

The different strengths, weaknesses and rationales of different strategies for conducting interdisciplinary research are examined in a social science context. The approaches examined are cross-disciplinary research, where knowledge and methods are borrowed from one discipline and applied in another; interdisciplinary collaboration without synthesis, also known as multidisciplinary research, where disciplines contribute independently to a shared research goal; transdisciplinarity, where research is primarily problem driven, often with the involvement of agencies external to universities, and methods and disciplines follow suit; interdisciplinarity in the sense of sustained effort to integrate concepts, theories and methods; and finally sustained efforts to reduce the number of disciplines, termed 'super-' or 'mega-' disciplinarity.

### What Are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations on the Disciplinarity versus Interdisciplinarity Debate – Dr Armin Krishnan

Talk of interdisciplinarity is often marred by a lack of clarity over the meanings of the key terms deployed. This paper probes the uses of both 'interdisciplinary' and 'disciplinary,' and argues that greater clarity can be achieved if we consider 'disciplinarity' from the different perspectives that can be deployed to study disciplines. Accounts of disciplines are then given from philosophical, anthropological, sociological, historical and management perspectives. The paper concludes with some reflections on why disciplines might be seen as under attack and what their survival strategies might be.



### **4th ESRC Research Methods Festival - Draft programme now available!**

The 4th ESRC Research Methods Festival, organised by the Methods Centre, will be held on 5-8 July 2010 once again in the excellent location of St Catherine's College, Oxford, UK. As at previous festivals, an impressive line up of presenters will speak about issues at the cutting edge of developments in social science research methods. In addition to speakers from Methods Centre, confirmed speakers in the late evening "In Conversation" sessions include Tom Cook (Northwestern University), Michael Agar (Ethknoworks) and Ann Oakley (Institute of Education). The programme is still evolving, but further information about the festival sessions will be made available as the programme is firmed up. The festival webpage is updated as the session abstracts and other details come in. The page can be found in <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/TandE/other/RMF2010>.

Bookings for the festival will open at the start of March 2010. Early bird rates apply from 1 March to 16 April, and are as follows: £50 per day (£20 on the first day of the festival) and for full-time students £30 per day (£10 on the first day of the festival). Early booking is recommended as we expect the festival to be as popular as in previous years.

## Spotlight on Resources

### BIAS node collaborating with ISER and LSE

The Methods Centre's nodes continue to collaborate with researchers and research centres across the UK and internationally. The BIAS node, based at Imperial College London, is currently working with the Institute for Social & Economic Research (ISER) on two projects. The aim of the first project is to analyse the impact of health scares on individual behaviour and public health using the 1995 UK Pill Scare. The objective is to analyse whether the pill scare resulted in a change in fertility rates and birth health outcomes. The main objective of the second study is to analyse the relationship between the unemployment rate at the time of a baby's conception and health outcomes at birth using birth register and geocoded data from 1989 to 1998. In addition to these two studies BIAS is collaborating with the Statistics Department of the London School of Economics on a causal analysis of the Counterweight project (CWP) dataset. The CWP is a lifestyle intervention trial aimed at developing and testing a strategy to manage obesity in primary care. The aim of a causal analysis of CWP is to understand whether a programme like CWP should be rolled out at the national level, i.e. whether an average UK practice would benefit from a similar programme for obesity management.

For more information about these projects please get in touch with Sylvia Richardson at BIAS.

### MethodsNews newsletter changing shape in 2010

The next issue of the MethodsNews newsletter will come out in a new format and to a new schedule.

After the first five years of MethodsNews existence it is time to review and refresh this publication. Until now MethodsNews has been four pages in length and has come out four times a year. We intend to reduce the number of issues to three per year but double the number of pages.

The first issue of the new weightier MethodsNews will come out in March 2010. The focus of the content is on methodological research conducted within the Methods Centre, although we will continue to report on other research methods related news that should be of interest to MethodsNews readers.

If you wish to contribute to the MethodsNews newsletter, please get in touch with the MethodsNews editor Kaisa Puustinen.

### Survey Question Bank [www.surveynet.ac.uk/sqb](http://www.surveynet.ac.uk/sqb)

The Survey Question Bank (SQB), the successor to the ESRC Question Bank (Qb), and now part of a wider ESRC initiative, the Survey Resources Network (SRN), continues to develop new content and functionality. The SQB is a searchable library of survey questions along with associated material that provides context and understanding.

All features of the former Qb have been retained - including access to, and the ability to search for, survey documentation in PDF format; 'topics' pages with attendant expert overviews; and survey methods fact sheets - and all are in the process of being migrated to the new SQB web pages and then enhanced. An important development will be expansion of the topic overviews and methods fact sheets aimed at the beginner/intermediate user. The SQB plans to add a minimum of 10 overviews/fact sheets per year, drawing on the expertise contained within the SRN but also commissioning external experts to write new material. Expressions of interest to SRN from subject or methods experts able to offer material are always welcome!

A key, forthcoming enhancement to the SQB will be the improved search facilities that it can offer. These remain in development but a new search interface will be available before Christmas that will allow the user to search across the survey documentation held by the SQB (questionnaires, interviewer instructions etc.) in a more focused fashion by allowing the user to specify survey title, keyword, country, survey mode, survey type and document type when searching. At the same time, work is being undertaken to expand the number of documents that can be searched to include the majority of the Economic and Social Data Service's (ESDS) holdings. This will widen the SQB collection in terms of the number of survey series covered but it will also deepen the coverage in the sense that material from pre-1990 will become searchable. Development in early 2010 will be focused on a second, more ambitious search interface that will allow users to search across a subset of key, recent social surveys held in the ESDS Nesstar catalogue. This facility will return question-level information from the surveys that will allow the user to link to the relevant part of the PDF questionnaire, to the frequency output of the variable that is derived from that question and also to the frequencies of that same question in different surveys.

In the meantime, links to survey resources are being added to the SQB site on a regular basis. Those keen to keep abreast of developments are encouraged to sign up to the SRN JISCMail list via <http://jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/survey-resources-network.html>.

For more information, contact Jack Kneeshaw, SQB Service Manager [kneejw@essex.ac.uk](mailto:kneejw@essex.ac.uk)

## Spotlight on Events

### The 1<sup>st</sup> International Visual Methods Conference, University of Leeds, 15-17 September 2009

*Dr Rose Wiles, Co-director, National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton*



*Photo: Leeds at night. Copyright Rick Harrison 2008.  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sovietuk>*

The 1<sup>st</sup> International Visual Methods Conference took place on 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> September at the University of Leeds. This conference was the final event in Jon Prosser's 3 year Researcher Development Initiative project 'Building Capacity in Visual Methods'. The conference was extremely popular; it was expected that it would attract around 100 participants but instead attracted around 260 participants. As someone who had attended one of the first visual methods training courses at Leeds as part of the project I was extremely pleased to be able to attend this conference.

The conference was truly international with participants from countries such as Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Canada, the USA and even New Zealand. People came from a range of backgrounds and disciplines and included graphic artists, photographers and museum curators as well as researchers and academics from social science and arts disciplines and researchers working in the third sector. This made for a very interesting mix of people and

presentations! It demanded that participants be open to different ways of thinking about how to approach research, or indeed what is or isn't a suitable subject for research or a suitable method to explore it. This was challenging at times. I went to sessions ranging from the visualisation of human movement to an exploration of text on young people's T-shirts. One of the sessions I found most interesting was a presentation exploring ethical issues raised in using photography to represent the experiences of residents in care homes for older people, contrasting current practice with that of Peter Townsend's work 50 years ago. Two of the central themes of the conference seemed to be around issues of ethics in visual research and participatory methods. Sessions on these topics were extremely popular and raised a number of the important, challenging and largely unresolved issues with which visual researchers engage.

There were a number of extremely good plenary sessions. For me, Donna Schwartz's plenary 'visual arts meets visual methods' was one of the most interesting sessions of the conference. As well as having an exhibition of photos entitled 'In the Kitchen' at the conference, Donna showed the photographs she has taken as part of her 'on the nest' project which focuses on adult transitions to parenthood and, at the other extreme, the transition to becoming 'empty nesters' as children leave home.

Like all good conferences, this conference had a conference dinner. I didn't attend but by all accounts it was a fairly lively event! Overall I found this a really friendly conference which had a great 'buzz' about it. One person commented that this was the nicest conference she had been to in a long time and I would certainly agree with that. I don't know what it was that made it so; perhaps something to do with the mix of people. I left the conference as people were debating what the possibilities were for running the conference in the future. There was certainly a hope and expectation among participants that this should be an annual event.



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ESRC National Centre for Research Methods  
School of Social Sciences  
University of Southampton  
Southampton, SO17 1BJ

Telephone: +44 (0)23 8059 4539  
Fax: +44 (0)23 8059 8908  
Email: [info@ncrm.ac.uk](mailto:info@ncrm.ac.uk)  
Web: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>

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