AUG:06

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sra:news

Social Research Association

What next for the RAE?

Readers outside the university sector may not have noticed that hidden away in the reports surrounding this year's budget statement by the treasury, was a short paper indicating that the government was considering making changes to the way the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which determines the research funding paid direct to institutions, would operate in the future. However, those within the sector certainly did. The RAE is a major feature of the funding regime for universities, and any changes are likely to have profound effects on how (and what) research takes place in universities and, by implication, how institutions (and their constituent departments) are to be ranked and rewarded for this. Given that the next round of the current RAE evaluation is due to take place in 2007/08, this is currently at the forefront of the minds of most academic staff.

***Pete Alcock**, Professor of Social Policy and Administration, University of Birmingham asks what is going on and whether we can make our views count.*

The first RAE was held 20 years ago in 1986. It has developed little since then, and has become established as an irregular assessment of university research (the current RAE covers seven years, the previous one five) based on what is referred to as a process of 'peer review'. This means that RAE panels are established for each subject, comprising leading academics in their fields, and these then judge the quality of research in departments (called Units of Assessment, UOA) which wish to make a submission to them. This judgement is mainly based on the four key publications listed for each member of staff over the assessment period, although other factors such as research income earned and PhD students supervised are also considered. Judgement consists of ranking departments according to a scoring methodology determined by the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC), which runs the exercise.

The ranking is then used by HEFC to determine the funding for research which it provides to universities for the following period, although how this distribution is determined is not revealed until after the assessment exercise has taken place. Of course the total amount of funding is cash-limited by government, and in recent RAEs there has been pressure to 'concentrate' this funding onto the strongest performing research outlets. The RAE is thus an exercise in selectivity of funding. Furthermore, it is not just about funding. There are considerable benefits to reputation flowing from a high RAE ranking, and you will see these advertised by universities in their recruitment material for students and staff.

Problems with current arrangements

There are all sorts of problems with the current RAE arrangements. For instance, staff in universities complain that they have created unacceptable pressures to publish in particular forms and at particular times to secure high RAE scores, rather than promoting the best academic enquiry. However, it is also important to bear in mind that a major reason for the original introduction of the RAE was to promote some accountability within universities for the high

continued…

What next for the RAE?

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levels of research funding that they receive – this is public money and arguably the public have a right to see that it is being used to produce quality research.

The main concern of the government with the RAE, however, is that it is very expensive to operate. It is expensive in direct terms – RAE panels meeting to read and discuss all the submissions costs the HEFC a significant sum. But it is even more expensive in indirect terms - the hidden costs within universities of preparing departments and staff to make the best of their research for RAE purposes. And then we are left with a funding model which cannot be changed for another five to seven years. This is why the treasury have now got their eyes on the RAE. Surely, they have been thinking, there must be a simpler and more responsive mechanism?

The RAE is thus an exercise in selectivity of funding

The answer that they have come up with is metrics. This is shorthand for using quantitative measures of research activity in universities, based on data already gathered and available in the public domain, which can then be used on an ongoing basis to assess the 'success' of research activity, and so to determine the funding to be provided to support this. Work that has been done using such metrics (in this case using research income received from external funding agencies as the measure) and comparing this to the outcomes of the last peer reviewed RAE assessment, has suggested that in practice both produce broadly similar outcomes. This is particularly the case for what are called the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and medicine) and these correlations are also closest for the larger universities. And, of course, it is STEM subjects in the larger universities who get most of the RAE research funding.

What is particularly interesting, and rather depressing, for social scientists is how little attention has been given to the particular needs of social science research

Consultation

Following on from the budget papers, therefore, the government, through HEFC, has issued a consultation paper outlining possible changes in the RAE to move towards metric-based assessment and seeking the views of universities and other interested bodies. The paper makes it clear that there will be no changes to the upcoming RAE2008, which will still be based on peer review under the current rules. But HEFC will be running a 'shadow metrics' assessment alongside the existing RAE and will compare the results. Thereafter, a move towards a formal metrics system will be considered, and any changes in funding from this will be phased in over several years after 2009/10.

This could be the last RAE in its current form, and its influence on future funding could be rather limited if a new mechanism is phased in shortly afterwards. The consultation, and its implications for future research funding, are thus receiving much attention in universities – and it is urgent attention as the period for consultation is short. Responses must be in by Friday 13th October – yes, Friday 13th, did anyone notice the date!?

What is particularly interesting, and rather depressing, for social scientists is how little attention has been given to the particular needs of social science research. The concerns, and interests, of the STEM subjects are largely driving change. The consultation document recognises that, whilst the metrics system based only on the measure of research income may be appropriate here, it may not be so helpful for arts and humanities. However, no realistic model for these areas is outlined, other than briefly in an appendix, and there is no specific mention of social sciences.

Metrics may work for social sciences, providing of course that they are the right metrics. But thus far there has been little debate on what these might be or how they might operate in practice. There is also much concern in some quarters about the recklessness with which peer review may be being discarded. Could peer review perhaps be combined with metrics, at least in areas like the social sciences? Questions such as this need to be asked, and answered, if an informed response to the RAE consultation is to come from the social science communities – but the timetable is short (and largely over the summer holidays). Can we make our views count?

Developing Ourselves

*SRA chair, **Barbara Doig**, gives her quarterly report.*

What do social researchers have in common with accountants, lawyers, physicists and hairdressers? The answer is the need for CPD – continuing professional development. Where social researchers differ is that we do not have a regulated professional requirement to undertake so many hours CPD each year. However, I suggest that we owe it to ourselves, our employers and our social research profession to undertake CPD.

So what is CPD – exactly what the Institute of Personnel Development says: 'continuing' because learning never ceases, regardless of age or seniority; 'professional' because it is focused on personal competencies in a professional role; and 'development' because its goal is to improve personal performance and enhance career progression. CPD is the cornerstone for success in obtaining employment, performing effectively, securing promotion, making a rewarding career within your profession and gaining transferable skills. The increasing emphasis on competency-based interviewing and assessment centres at all levels for recruitment and promotion, means that a rigorous review of your competencies based on evidence of your learning, identifying the gaps in your skills for your current role or career aspirations, exploring and planning the type of activities you should undertake to fill these gaps, recording your achievements, and finally, reviewing and evaluating your learning, should be integral to your professional life.

Various activities can count for your CPD including training courses, secondments, job shadowing, attending seminars, organising events, networking, keeping up to date with new methodologies, coaching, learning on the job through reviewing your performance at meetings and, for example, trying different strategies for negotiating. The key to CPD is reviewing and learning from these. It is too easy to find an excuse not to. Personally, I have found the discipline of thinking about my CPD invaluable, as I have undertaken a major career change over the last six months.

The SRA can help members on various components of CPD. We offer a range of courses, events such as the annual conference and evening seminars which provide a good basis for learning about contemporary research methods, new techniques for statistical analyses, emerging topics and opportunities to network. You can gain valuable insights into working with others, leadership, financial management, through joining the executive, sub-groups and special project initiatives. And you can keep abreast of developing issues across social research through this newsletter and the e-bulletin.

Given the importance of CPD, I was, therefore, immensely disappointed that we had to cancel the SRA summer event due to insufficient numbers. We will be seeking to learn the lessons whether about competition with other events, marketing, or something else. On the plus side, SRA Scotland's annual conference provided five hours of CPD to over 70 researchers from a range of employers including visitors from England, Ireland and Wales (see report on page 5).

So, whether you are embarking on a new phase of your career, considering how to improve your performance in your current job, or wanting to refresh your skills set, please consider how involvement with the SRA can help you.

We are delighted to announce that Dr Nigel Goldie has been appointed as the first executive director of the SRA. He takes up post in September. His appointment will ensure that the SRA develops its services to members and raises the organisation's profile especially in the period after securing charitable status.

As we look forward to the arrival of a new director, it is with particular regret that we say goodbye to Jean Harrison our splendid, first office manager who joined 18 months ago and who has played such a significant part in improving our systems and organising and supporting the executive. I am especially grateful for her guidance and help in my first few months as the new chair of the SRA. She has cheerfully tackled an enormous number of challenging activities on our behalf, and we wish her well in her new life in Switzerland.

Mark Abrams Prize

The SRA Executive is pleased to announce the 2006 competition for this prize, first awarded in 1986, to celebrate the work of the eminent British social scientist Dr Mark Abrams. Dr Abrams, who died in 1994, was born in 1906 so this year marks the centenary of his birth.

The prize is traditionally awarded for the piece of work which, in the opinion of the judges, best links survey research, social policy and social theory and as such carries on the work of Dr Abrams.

Entries and nominations are open to social scientists of any age and nationality working in the UK. Entries, which should be original work, should be in English and not more than 6,000 words in length (including an abstract of not more than 200 words) plus any tables or graphs. It is possible to submit recently published or forthcoming work. In the case of the former, this should not have been published earlier than 2005. No particular theme is set but preference will be given to theoretically-informed, survey-based work concerned with the UK. Secondary analysis of survey data would be especially welcome. The panel of judges will take due account of the age, experience and circumstances of authors and reserves the right not to award a prize. Last year's winning entry is on the SRA website.

The winner(s) of this prestigious award will receive £250 and one year's membership of the SRA.

Please submit SIX copies of your entry and one electronic version (preferably in WORD). Send entries, together with brief biographical details of the author(s) and contact details, to:

The Administrator
SRA Administrative Office
175–185 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8UP

Closing date: 30 September

If you have queries contact Gemma Pikett: Gemma@the-sra.org.uk Tel: 020 7812 0549 (Mon-Thurs)

Academy of Social Sciences launches new journal

For latest news, see online at www.the-sra.org.uk or subscribe to our monthly e-bulletin.

The Academy of Social Sciences recently launched its flagship journal, 21st Century Society, at the Institute of Education in London. Sue Duncan, Government Chief Social Researcher, herself an academician, was the guest speaker. The event was co-hosted by the academy and Routledge, the journal's publishers, which provided a champagne reception for the audience of over 60 academicians, representatives of learned societies, editorial board members and contributors to the inaugural issue.

21st Century Society aims to promote the social sciences and to synthesise, reflect and advance global public debates and will:

- Provide a focus for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research across the social sciences
- Promote the social sciences and represent current trends
- Provide a digest of the most important issues within the social sciences
- Provide a forum for debate on the intellectual and economic future
- Provide critical reflection nationally and internationally

You can find out more about the journal and download a free sample copy at http://tinyurl.co.uk/lo96

The editors invite contributions, which address challenging and important social science issues relevant to an international audience. These may be theoretical, methodological or empirical. Papers will be peer reviewed to ensure high quality. Where possible, papers should exhibit an interdisciplinary approach and link to disciplines outside the social sciences that have policy and practitioner relevance.

Submissions should be between 6,000 and 8,000 words including references, which should be formatted using the Harvard System. Email contributions to the editors at acssjournal@ioe.ac.uk

SRA Scotland: Involving service users and practitioners in research

Chris Nicol reports

Over 70 delegates attended the SRA Scotland annual event in Edinburgh in July to hear speakers present papers on involving service users and practitioners in research. Iain Ferguson from Stirling University, who has recently completed research into perspectives and experiences of mental health service users, chaired the event.

Rachel Ormston, of the Scottish Centre for Social Research (SCSR), started by examining how children can be involved in research. Drawing on a Scottish Executive research project in which she was involved, she highlighted the different rationales for involving young researchers in research:

- To empower and 'hear the voices' of young people
- To impact on decision makers
- To develop better policy

Potential stumbling blocks for those wishing to carry out this research include questions about ethics, which young people to involve, research standards and the additional time and money needed. She concluded that consultation with children and young people about the research design and research brief could be carried out, but would need more time. She also talked about the possibility of developing a sponsored research programme to support research models, which actively involve young people and children.

Next up was a conversation piece between Cathy Sharpe (Research for Real) and Louise Appleton (Scottish Executive) looking at officers in local government and health boards. They focused on using participatory action research to evaluate the success of new performance management systems in local government and the NHS.

The final session looked at the first-ever national survey of people with learning difficulties, which was commissioned by the Department of Health. Sally Mallam (BMRB) Ian Davies and Karen Spence (Central England People First) jointly presented a paper, which highlighted important issues for those considering involving service users in research. In their project, people from the survey group were involved in bidding for funding, planning and developing the project, training the interviewers and presenting the findings. They made three important points: involving service users in the survey design ensured that it was accessible to people with learning difficulties; people from the client group can help train the interviewers; involvement in final reports and presentations can help ensure that findings are useful and accessible for the client group.

Some delegates expressed interest in continuing the discussion about ethics, training and sharing good practice. If researchers in Scotland would be interested, in principle, in being involved, please email me and we will keep you posted.

Contact

For information about the SRA in Scotland and future events contact Lindsay Adams at scotland@the-sra.org.uk or Chris Nicol, Capital City Partnership, 0131 270 6030 chrisnicol@capitalcitypartnership.org

SRA Ireland convenes for the first time

Peter Humphreys reports

SRA Ireland held its first full branch meeting in May. There was a very good attendance with members from a wide range of organisations including the Institute of Public Administration, Equality Authority, National Disability Authority, Insight Statistical Consulting, Department of Applied Social Studies: University College Cork, Department of Legal & Social Studies: Tralee Institute of Technology, Combat Poverty Agency and the Office of the Minister for Children. Several members had travelled a considerable distance.

Everyone at the meeting expressed the desire to help practically to get the branch fully up and running. We agreed to hold an event in the autumn building upon the same theme as January (evidence-based policy development) because it is such a key issue but to include workshops comprising both research users and providers. We also made plans for a web-based survey of members and others to ascertain/audit training needs. We are exploring holding evening meetings in the autumn/winter hosted by a different organisation in turn to talk about their research. We agreed to write a letter explaining what we are doing in SRA Ireland to send as a promotional email to people on our different mailing lists (including the January seminar attendees). We also agreed that it was important to offer services outside Dublin.

So, if you are interested in knowing more about the SRA in Ireland, and even better would like to help, do get in touch with me at phumphreys@ipa.ie

Pathways to Work: the programme and the evaluation of reforms to Incapacity Benefits

The SRA June seminar provided an opportunity for researchers to find out about the reforms to Incapacity Benefit published in the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) Green Paper 'A New Deal for Welfare: empowering people to work' and to obtain an overview of the Pathways to work evaluation project currently being carried our by an international consortium. A packed audience at the Nuffield Foundation heard three very interesting presentations covering both aspects.

Firstly, Maria Strudwick and Liz Cole from the DWP's Disability and Work Division outlined the Incapacity Benefit reforms in the Green Paper and talked about the government's use of early findings from the Pathways to Work evaluation project. The main aims of the measures being to reduce the numbers moving onto benefit and to increase the numbers leaving benefit by offering work and health-related support.

Getinet Haile and Helen Barnes from the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), the lead organisation for the evaluation, gave an overview of the different elements of the project which includes quantitative and qualitative surveys in addition to cost-benefit and impact analyses.

Alissa Goodman from the Institute for Fiscal Studies gave the final presentation, outlining the early quantitative evidence on the impact of the Pathways to Work pilots. The presentation provided estimates of the early impact of Pathways on individuals' employment, earnings, receipt of Incapacity Benefits, and an indicator of the extent to which individuals' health affects their everyday activities.

Copies of the three presentations are on the SRA website at www.the-sra.org.uk

Sian Llewellen-Thomas

Who do you believe? Trust in government information


Suzanne Hall

In May, the SRA held an evening seminar exploring the reasons behind the lack of confidence in official information and why this matters. Drawing on the findings from a study conducted jointly between Ipsos MORI's dedicated qualitative unit, the HotHouse and the Research Methods Unit, work for the Statistics Commission 'Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust' as well as from Ipsos MORI's 37 years of survey data, the talk explained some of the reasons for this rise in scepticism.

Recent events, most notably the debate over the Iraq war, have prompted some to wonder whether there is a new crisis of trust in government. Suzanne Hall, Associate Director of Ipsos MORI, suggested this is not the case; nevertheless there are some worrying downward trends about some aspects of trust. In particular, the proportion of those saying the government can be trusted to put the interests of the country before the interests of the party has halved since 1986[1]. Given this lack of trust generally, it is hardly surprising that three in five people do not think that the government uses official statistics honestly or that official figures are produced without political interference[2]. While this may be a sign of a more sophisticated, healthy even, questioning of government motives there is also a great deal of unthinking dismissal.

Factors which have played a part in increasing levels of mistrust include an increased awareness by the public of spin and prior ministerial access to official statistics, which raises fears that this allows time for them to be 'moulded' so they tell the 'correct' story. Other factors discussed include the enormous amount of information that is available to people, which may potentially enable people to make better informed choices, but in fact leaves many confused. Misrepresentation of data by the media also causes public confusion and doubt.

The talk went beyond simply reporting the situation as it stands and encompassed a wider debate as to how trust in government information may be improved. The seminar suggested that, while Gordon Brown's announcement in November 2005 of independence for the Office for National Statistics is an important first step, other measures are needed. This includes pre-announcing the publication of official statistics, an auditing and regulatory body to provide an objective assessment of competing claims about official information, and most importantly, communicating these changes to the public.

Suzanne Hall, Jessica Vince, Sarah Knibbs, Ipsos MORI.

1 British Social Attitudes Survey
2 ONS Initial Findings on Public Confidence in Official Statistics

Government Statistics and Research: independence for some or all?

The removal of statistics from any chance of political interference takes a step nearer with proposed legislation for an independent ONS. But nothing similar is proposed for government research. ***William Solesbury*** *wonders why.*

Alongside the March budget, Gordon Brown announced the government's proposals for the independence of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). This had been promised last November. ONS is to be removed from ministerial control by establishing it as a non-ministerial department reporting directly to parliament and governed by an independent board, appointed by open competition, with responsibility to approve all statistics against the ONS code of practice. Details are in the paper Independence for statistics: A consultation document (downloadable from www.hm-treasury.gov.uk). It argues:

'Statistics make a crucial contribution to good government in a modern democracy: assisting in the formulation and evaluation of policies; in the management of the services for which the Government is responsible; encouraging and informing debate; and allowing people to judge whether the Government is delivering on its promises... Statistics must therefore be, and be seen to be, of the highest professional quality and integrity' (paras 1.3 – 1.4)

It goes on to state six key principles: statistics should be of high quality and of high integrity, their production should be accountable and transparent, there should be flexibility and efficiency. The bottom line here, and the objective of legislative independence for ONS, is that producing and presenting official statistics should be free from political interference, so that their objectivity and impartiality are assured. This had been argued by the Statistics Commission in its report Official Statistics: Perceptions and Trust, 2005, which was informed by MORI opinion research.

All well and good. But statistics are only one form of evidence that government uses in its work. Past criticisms of the manipulation of, for example, unemployment statistics has led to the present reforms. But there have likewise been criticisms of the interpretation, if not manipulation, of research findings – for example, the results of the evaluations of the crime prevention and Sure Start programmes. Are not the above criteria of quality, integrity, accountability, transparency, flexibility and efficiency equally valid here? Is there not an equal case for better quality assurance of the results of research that government undertakes or commissions?

This proposition may seem far-fetched. But just reflect that standards for evidential quality already apply in other contexts. The Advertising Standards Authority (www.asa.org.uk) requires communications to be 'legal, decent, honest and true', adjudicates on complaints and can require the withdrawal of adverts. ASA is particularly tough on the use of spurious science in advertising cosmetics or drugs. In journalism, the Press Complaints Commission (www.pcc.org.uk) requires the press not to publish 'inaccurate, misleading or distorted information'. The Consumer Association's Which? Magazine puts the claims of products and services to the test, and in extremis local authority trading standards officers can take legal action. Recently, there has been a tightening up of guidance on the use of expert testimony in the courts.

What is common in these diverse fields is a 'code of practice' setting quality standards and then a 'procedure' for adjudication where the standards may have been transgressed. The proposals for ONS and official statistics also have the code of practice, but a procedure aimed not to rectify transgression ex post but to ensure compliance ex ante. In comparison, government research has neither. Seemingly, maintaining good standards in producing and using research relies instead on the professionalism of its researchers and the integrity of their official and political masters: in short, self-regulation.

That's not entirely true. For there is a document from the Office of Science and Technology called Guidelines on Scientific Analysis in Policy Making, last revised in 2005 (www.ost.gov.uk/policy/advice/guidelines_2005). These guidelines 'address how evidence should be sought and applied to enhance the ability of government decision makers to make better informed decisions'. They include no quality standards. Rather the 'key messages' are that departments should:

- 'think ahead and identify early the issues on which they need scientific advice…
- get a wide range of advice from the best sources…
- publish the evidence and analysis…' (para 4)

In all this, much emphasis is put on peer review by fellow scientists – another form of self-regulation. Trust in (natural) science took a beating in the BSE and foot and mouth disease crises, and over-reliance on untested and unrepresentative sources was revealed subsequently to have been part of the problem. The guidelines seem to be responding by seeking to eliminate those practices. But their expansive and leisurely – might one say 'academic'? – injunctions seem ill-matched to the cut and thrust of most policy development.

The question of scientific advice to government is under scrutiny by the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee (details at http://tinyurl.co.uk/yrkr) Its terms of reference explicitly include social science, and it has taken evidence from social researchers both inside and outside government, alongside natural and biomedical scientists. It is also considering three case studies of the use of evidence in policy making: the proposed introduction of ID cards, drug classification and a EU Directive on the use of MRI equipment. The use, or some would say misuse, of research is a live issue in these cases. The adequacy of existing quality assurance procedures has arisen time and again in the committee's sessions. Some of the proposals floating around there include creating a government-wide research service (as the economists are organised), appointing chief scientific advisers in all departments, transferring responsibility for research from departments to an independent agency (analogous to the proposed status for ONS), instituting ex post audits of the use of evidence in policy (on the analogy of the National Audit Office's role regarding the use of resources) or something less formal (like the Factcheck organisation in the US).

Politicians are always drawn to organisational change as a solution to problems. That approach – and, in particular, the independent ONS model – may be appropriate for research. But, before any such radical changes are made, we need a more vigorous debate about the qualities that we can realistically expect of government research. Is this a debate that the SRA might lead?

CONSULTATIVE SEMINAR 26th September 2006

The SRA and the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) are holding a consultative seminar in London to discuss the findings of the NCRM's initial report for the ESRC on the research which is needed in social and economic research methods.

In this consultative seminar NCRM will present their initial findings and invite comments and feedback from members of the SRA. The initial report can be found at: www.ncrm.ac.uk/publications/documents/researchneeds-workingpaper.pdf

If you would like to attend please contact Annabel Preston at NCRM (email info@ncrm.ac.uk or fax 02380 598908). Places are limited so do respond quickly if this interests you.

Diary

The SRA runs an extensive training and events programme. Details are at **www.the-sra.org.uk** or contact the SRA administrator **admin@the-sra.org.uk**

London

Training:

Media Skills for Social Researchers *11 SEPTEMBER*

Introduction to Focus Groups *4 OCTOBER*

Self-Completion Questionnaires *OCTOBER*

Data Protection – including Freedom of Information Issues *NOVEMBER*

Effective Research Management *NOVEMBER*

Introduction to Social Research Commissioning *NOVEMBER*

Seminars:

Workplace Employment Relations Survey; DTI *SEPTEMBER*

Access to Justice: LSC and BMRB *OCTOBER*

Randomised Control Trials: Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture; Joint event SRA/RSS *9 NOVEMBER*

SRA Annual Conference 2006; Challenging Myths – Researching Reality: The Roles of Social Research *6 DECEMBER*

For the latest news and diary dates, why not subscribe to the SRA monthly e-bulletin at www.the-sra.org.uk

Mind the Gap: researchers and interviewers

Chris Dowsett, Research Officer, Social and Vital Statistics, Office for National Statistics, considers how to improve communication.

Social research is a funny business. Researchers, interviewers and others come together in perfect harmony to explore the rich fabric of life. Well, perhaps perfect harmony is a bit of an exaggeration. In fact it's not harmony at all - more like a tug of war. Researchers rushing to get the questionnaire together; interviewers struggling to get respondents to agree to a survey, whilst everyone else runs for cover.

The benefits of more regular communication could help both groups

When social research rose to the challenge of the natural sciences, it came with some baggage. That is, lots of different groups had their own ideas about how social research should be conducted. Positivists said one thing; idealists said another. Right or wrong, interviewing is very much a part of today's social research. Many organisations use field and phone interviewers to conduct surveys with members of the public. Their work is an invaluable way of collecting some very important information about what is happening in communities.

Working separately

As interviewers go out and collect the information, researchers are working behind the scenes to produce questionnaires, analyse the data and produce reports. Unfortunately, these two important social research professions usually work separately, and it's common to see them working in isolation.

Speaking with some government interviewers, it doesn't take long to realise that there is confusion in the air caused by researchers and interviewers leading different lives. The interviewers I spoke to work for the Office for National Statistics. They receive written instructions on the surveys but feel more could be gained through some face-to-face contact. As one member of staff put it, "I feel that a regular meeting with the researchers that create the questionnaires could really help. Sometimes we have questions about parts of the survey that the instructions don't cover. If a research representative was available we could ask them for clarification."

The benefits of more regular communication could help both groups. Interviewers could have their questions answered and explained. Researchers could improve their understanding of the issues interviewers deal with and try to improve the questionnaire to help.

Understanding the issues

As a member of the research team, I felt it was important to spend some time in the field to understand what interviewers have to go through. I spent a day out with a field interviewer to begin to get to grips with his day-to-day experiences. I could have spent months, and I still don't think I would have experienced it all, but it was a start.

The day was a real eye opener, although I only touched the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Going out into the field introduced me to a different world; it gave me an insight into field interviewing and the challenges that await interviewers every single day.

Sitting with the interviewer for a couple of surveys, I became acutely aware of the difficult situation he was in. Respondents started off hesitant but then quickly turned into curious experts about every topic. It made me laugh how some respondents would barely let you through the door but, given half a chance, would talk at you until they were blue in the face.

I still think about that day and those experiences now, six months on, whenever I create a question or put together a new survey. I find myself asking whether I could have done any more to make it easier for the interviewer. Could I have provided more explanations? Are any of the questions too long and likely to confuse respondents?

Positive step

Bridging the gap between researchers and interviewers can be a positive step for social research. It can help researchers appreciate and consider the interviewer when putting together surveys. Alternatively, it can give interviewers a chance to clear up confusion or ask any questions. It doesn't take much. A simple phone call or trip can make all the difference, and can only help in collecting the highest quality information from surveys.

New Blood for the Social Sciences?

Are the UK social sciences feeling their age? asks ***Dr David Mills****, University of Birmingham*

The cohorts of academics appointed in the post-war expansion of higher education are now reaching retirement, leading to a generational concern about who might be replacing them. These anxieties were voiced by the ESRC in 2004. The council submitted evidence to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Science and Technology showing that the academic social sciences had a disproportionately high percentage of staff over 50 compared to the other sciences, severely impacting on its future research capacity. Parliamentarians wanted to know how the ESRC was going to respond.

The ESRC decided to commission a review of the demographic profile of the UK social sciences. Was a future staff recruitment crisis likely given the age-profiles of some disciplines? How significant was it that more than half of all staff in education were aged 50+? What were the implications of increasing numbers of non-UK national staff for the sustainability of certain disciplines – especially in economics and anthropology? How appropriate was the ESRC's current model for funding research training? Was there an over- or under-supply of PhDs in certain fields?

To answer these questions, the Edinburgh University team appointed to do the review (Professor Jonathan Spencer, Professor Anthony Coxon, Professor Mark Easterby-Smith, Dr Anne Jepson, Phil Hawkins and David Mills) decided to assemble a range of evidence. We began by commissioning our own dataset from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). We wanted to count academics according to their disciplinary classification for RAE purposes, rather than using the standard dataset that counted staff by their highest qualification. This would tell us where they worked rather than where they had been trained. The difference between the two was highly revealing. We then conducted our own web-survey of 320+ departments, and interviewed a further 100 senior staff to prepare a detailed picture of the research, staffing and capacity-building agendas facing the social sciences. We also surveyed the directors of ESRC's research centres and programmes, and involved more than 60 ESRC postdoctoral fellows in focus groups, in order to look at future issues facing the social sciences. The task was an ambitious one, but one for which a team of three anthropologists, a quantitative sociologist, a management scholar and a web-survey specialist, were well equipped.

We recognised that the research was going to be used by the ESRC and the disciplines themselves to make decisions about future strategy. We decided that detailed data on each discipline would be invaluable, both because each field faced its own particular recruitment and capacity-building problems, but also to help the ESRC move away from a 'one-size-fits-all' training regime. We therefore ended up preparing 18 detailed case studies of individual disciplines.

A key finding colouring the whole report is that the social sciences are remarkably diverse. Their internal demographic structure, their patterns of recruitment and their problems of retention are all different. This diversity can be seen as structured on two dimensions. Disciplines can be divided into those with a primary orientation to research within UK higher education (e.g. sociology, anthropology, geography), and those in which academic research overlaps with a significant concern with professional practice outside academia (e.g. education, management and business studies, social work). In these practice-linked fields, staff are often appointed who have a strong background in professional practice – whether as school teachers or social workers – and are inevitably older. Hence, the skewed age profiles of these disciplines were not necessarily the problem that it first appeared. Of greater concern was building autonomous research capacity in such fields, especially where there is a great demand for policy and consultancy research.

The second division we identified (partially overlapping with the first) is between disciplines whose graduates often go on to work in other areas of academia ('exporter' disciplines'), and ones whose academic workforce significantly depends on staff trained in other disciplines ('importer' disciplines). Thus some staff trained within sociology, psychology, economics and anthropology tend to find academic employment outside those disciplines – commonly in business schools, education departments and social policy units.

Disciplines therefore, need quite different kinds of support, and the best way to develop exactly their portfolio of training initiatives is for ESRC to engage creatively with each subject community. ESRC now seems committed to fostering a dialogue between practitioners and academics across the social sciences, and to listen and act upon the recommendations of the people who know best: social scientists themselves.

The Demographic Review of the Social Sciences is available at www.esrc.ac.uk

Qualitative Longitudinal Research: new developments

*By **Bren Neale**, Reader in Child and Family Research, FLaG (Families, Life Course and Generations) Research Centre, University of Leeds*

In recent years there has been a growing appreciation of Qualitative Longitudinal (QLL, or Qualitudinal) research within the social science community. This has arisen out of two recent developments. Firstly, methods research in the UK has been given a boost through the ESRC Research Methods Programme and the recently established National Centre for Research Methods. This centre has six 'nodes' sited at different universities around the country, including two qualitative nodes ('QUALITII' and 'Real Life Methods' which includes a prospective QLL study of Young Lives and Times at the University of Leeds). These initiatives have done a great deal to push the boundaries of social scientific knowledge by encouraging researchers to reflect upon and refine their research practices.

QLL research can be defined simply as qualitative enquiry that is conducted through time

Secondly, there is a growing awareness that, in our complex, rapidly-changing world, lives are not static but lived in and through time. Building a dynamic perspective into our research enquiries has become increasingly important, for it is only by looking across and through time that we can begin to grasp the nature of social change. Furthermore, it is only by looking qualitatively through time that we can begin to understand the micro-processes of social change and the complex relationship between biography and history as real lives unfold.

QLL research can be defined simply as qualitative enquiry that is conducted through time. Crucially, it involves a qualitative exploration of the temporal dimensions of experience – pathways, transitions, turning points, transformations and so on, and the processes, causes and consequences of change or continuity in the social world. QLL research forms an integral part of the UK longitudinal research strategy, enriching and complementing large-scale quantitative longitudinal (QNL) studies that chart widespread trends and changes in patterns of social behaviour (Holland et al. 2007 forthcoming).

The distinctive nature of QLL research, then, enables us to move beyond the quantifiable aspects of change to capture 'change in the making'

QLL research involves working at the 'micro' level, seeking to understand the changing world views and experiences of individuals or the changing fortunes of small groups or communities. Because it is sensitive to everyday contexts and the complexities of real life it can capture how change is actually created, lived and experienced. Berthoud (2000) suggests that the aim of longitudinal enquiry is to capture a 'movie', rather than simply a 'snapshot' of social life. The 'movie' produced within QLL research has a distinctive quality. It offers a 'close up' of the fabric of real lives as opposed to the quantitative 'long shot'. The focus is on the plot and detailed story lines of the key actors rather than the grand vistas of the epic picture. In this way the 'movie' attempts to capture the fluidity of life and the ebbs, flows and detours that occur as people move through the stream of time (Neale and Flowerdew 2003). The distinctive nature of QLL research, then, enables us to move beyond the quantifiable aspects of change to capture 'change in the making' (C. Wright Mills 1959).

QLL research is not new; it is part of a rich ethnographic tradition, spanning fields as diverse as social anthropology, community and theatre studies (see, for example, Kemper and Royce 2002; Stacey 1960 and 1975; Saldana 2002). However, it has rarely been written about or given focused attention and the complex array of time-sensitive methods for sampling, data collection and analysis are not well documented or understood. Developments have tended to occur in piecemeal fashion, without a coherent theoretical base or common language to describe the approach. As a result, the potential of QLL research has yet to be fully realised.

This state of affairs looks set to change. Funding bodies are beginning to invest in QLL studies, including ESRC funding for a five year QLL initiative (Timescapes: Changing Relationships and Identities through the Life Course) that will enrich the canon of longitudinal studies in the UK and establish a specialist archive of QLL data for secondary use. ESRC has also funded a three-year research fellowship, including a seminar series, designed to develop QLL research. The first seminar (September 2005) was international in scope and explored the principles of the method across a range of research designs and from different disciplinary perspectives (sociology, education, social anthropology and theatre studies). These included prospective panel studies that track individuals intensively over relatively short periods of time, or extensively over decades; and repeat cross sectional studies that revisit a group or community to discern continuities or changes over time. Reflections were provided from acknowledged leaders in the field (Janet Holland, Rachel Thomson, Julie McLeod (Deakin); Anya Peterson Royce (Indiana), Andrew Pollard and Johnny Saldana (Arizona)).

The potential of QLL research has yet to be fully realised

The second seminar (January 2006) gave detailed attention to the practical, analytical and ethical dimensions of QLL research. We explored the challenges of building time into qualitative research design, the different ways of generating and working with QLL data, and its long-term use. We also explored the ethics of this method e.g. maintaining confidentiality over time, seeing consent as an ongoing process, sustaining long-term relationships that affect both researchers and participants, and involving participants in data archiving decisions.

The final seminar in the series (6 October at the Institute of Materials, Carlton House Terrace in London) will explore the contribution that QLL research can make to policy making and evaluation across a range of areas (the dynamics of poverty, entry into work, the long term impact of state benefits and the changing lives of probationers). The seminar aims to sharpen our thinking about the potential offered by QLL research to 'make a difference' in the real world. Sue Duncan, Chief government social researcher, will chair the day, with a summing up from Barbara Doig.

These developments are to be welcomed and indicate the value of QLL not simply as a method but as a distinctive way of knowing and understanding the social world.

To reserve a place at the QLL policy seminar, contact Marie Ross (m.b.ross@leeds.ac.uk) who can also provide details of papers from the seminar series and the QLL email discussion list.

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BOOKS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books or reports, simply write a short review of about 300 words. In exchange, you get to keep the item. Contact the SRA if you are interested. We also welcome unsolicited reviews of any other publications.

Sex, drugs and young people: international perspectives

Edited by Aggleton, P., Ball, A., and Mane, P., 2006, Routledge

Social research methods

Walliman, N., 2006, Sage

Migrant nurses: motivation, integration and contribution

Winkelmann-Gleed, A., 2006, Radcliffe

A short introduction to social research

Henn, M., Weinstein, M., and Foard, M., 2006, Sage

Action research living theory

Whitehead, J., and McNiff, J., 2006, Sage

Anthropologies of modernity: Foucault, governmentality and life politics

Edited by Inda, J., 2005, Blackwell

Researching Children's Experience: approaches and methods

Greene, S. and Hogan, D. (eds.)
2005, London: Sage

Reviewed by Rebecca Whear, Warren House Group

The aim of this edited collection is to examine the theoretical and ethical issues that surface during research into children's experience, and to provide examples of methodological approaches in such research from a range of social science perspectives and disciplines. It is written primarily for researchers and students interested in the new sociology of childhood, in which the child's view of their world is paramount. The authors hope to increase awareness of the importance of researching children's experience and to provide practical assistance for those engaged in such work. As such, the book should help address weaknesses in the literature: methods of such research are often described but without sufficient discussion of the rationale for their use.

The book is divided into three sections. Part one discusses the methodological issues involved in researching children's experience, including perspectives from anthropological, sociological and developmental psychology. It also considers the ethical issues involved in this research. Part two highlights methods for conducting research into children's experience using naturalistic, ecological and ethnographic approaches. Part three explores approaches to analysing material generated from the methodologies discussed in part two. I was particularly interested in the chapter on ethics, given the particular sensitivities of working with children, and the contributions on focus groups and creative methods of analysis, which show how the rich meaning in children's accounts of their lives can be drawn out.

The book has a clear structure and the language is mainly comprehensible, although a glossary would assist those new to the area. It fulfils its aims comprehensively and in a user-friendly manner. Writing as someone commencing a PhD in children's services, I found the book informative and practical, highlighting both the advantages and disadvantages of various techniques and encouraging me to explore such approaches in my own work.

Statistics for Researchers with a Guide to SPSS

George Argyrous
2005, Sage

Reviewed by Rachael Dutton, Research and Evidence Based Practice Co-ordinator, Social Care and Health, Dorset County Council

This book offers a wealth of information, guidance and learning experiences and is certainly one of the most user-friendly statistical learning packages I have seen. Packed full of examples and try-it-out exercises, it is not only the book itself that is interactive but the datasets supplied on the CD-Rom in Excel and SPSS formats mean you can take advantage of direct hands on learning.

The integration of teaching in how to use SPSS placed alongside the statistical concepts, measures and tests works really well. It is also great to see the prominence that is given to how to report and communicate findings effectively. The light touch approach to technical theoretical explanation is balanced well with the emphasis on clear explanation of concepts and approaches. Argyrous cleverly cuts through statistical jargon that can so often an insurmountable barrier for people who are trying desperately to fathom what statistics is all about.

The cherry on the cake is the complementary materials that are provided from PowerPoint slides for instructors to the brilliant flash presentations found on the companion website – bite-sized lectures on demand! These are great for getting across key concepts and meanings, furthering understanding and reinforcing learning.

This is not only an excellent starter kit for the uninitiated, but a highly accessible guide for the inexperienced needing more detailed understanding of how to apply statistics for research in practice.

Families in Society: boundaries and relationships

McKie, L. & Cunningham-Burley, S. (eds.)
2005, Bristol: Policy Press

Reviewed by Lucy Hanson, Research Officer, Scottish Children's Reporter Administration

This book is a broad discussion about relationships: their formation, change and contestation. It moves away from looking at the family alone and attempts to show the contemporary nature of relationships and families. The book is divided into four parts. Part one: families in society. The most interesting chapter here is an exploration of the relationships between families and education. Shucksmith et al argue that there is an expectation of families to be more and more 'school-like' at home, yet new policies are not necessarily feasible for families under stress. This may well induce an increase in the exclusion of families in need. Part two: children, families and relationships. This section includes an analysis of the variety of boundaries that relate to a child (Hill) and also children's perspectives on relationships inside and outside the household (Sweeting and Seaman). The final chapter examines children who manage parental substance misuse (Bancroft et al). Here, children look to uphold boundaries between themselves and parents that are often broken down by the adult. Children create new boundaries or use various strategies in an attempt to control their parents' behaviour and protect themselves. Part three: health, illness and wellbeing. How boundaries are actively built or challenged in face of diagnosis (dementia) or just getting older (women in their fifties) and how these boundaries operate in relation to an individual's well-being. Part four: relationships and friendships. Acknowledging that significant relationships also lie outside the family, this section looks at the boundaries within other intimate relationships, and includes how boundaries are currently being reshaped through the rise in solo living.

The feeling I got from this book is that it is not so much boundaries but relationships between institutions that are changing, for a variety of reasons. The concept of boundaries is really a tool for bringing all the different scenarios together. Therefore, it is not especially theoretical about boundaries or about families. Families in Society is not particularly policy-orientated either, although there is a nice summary of issues at the end of the book. Generally, a light read on a range of topics, and of interest to those considering contemporary relationships in general.

Systematic Reviews for the Social Sciences: A practical guide

Mark Petticrew and Helen Roberts
2005, Blackwell

Reviewed by Connie Smith, Senior Research Specialist, The Scottish Parliament Information Centre

This book is both an explanation of and a practical guide to constructing and doing systematic reviews. I started it aiming to improve on my sketchy understanding of what constitutes a systematic review. As such, I found the chapters on the purpose of systematic reviews, developing the review question and identifying and assessing studies for inclusion most informative. I was impressed that the authors included estimates of the costs and timescales for reviews.

There is detailed guidance on appraising studies, 'synthesizing the evidence' and 'exploring heterogeneity and publication bias'. These are fairly technical and of particular use for those carrying out systematic reviews.

Through dealing with systematic reviews, the authors also address more general concerns about good research practice. They cover effective search strategies and provide references to research databases and other sources. This makes the book relevant to a wide range of researchers.

The writing style is open and accessible with explanation of technical terms in the text and also a glossary and illustrative examples. Woven throughout, are insights and considerations of research for policy and practice. For me, this made the book more engaging and relevant.

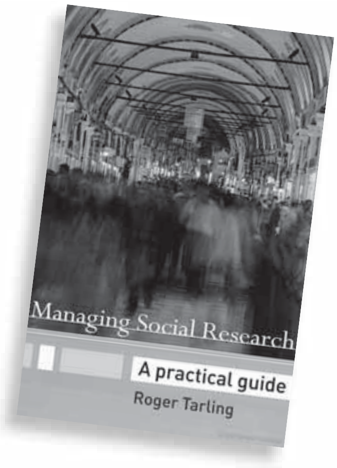
Systematic review is a complex field. This book has given me a route into understanding this area of research and a basis to improve critical appraisal of others' work. To paraphrase a quote from Donald Rumsfeld used in the book, "I know what I know and know some of what I do not know. As for the unknown unknowns..."

Managing Social Research: A practical guide

Roger Tarling
2006, Routledge

Reviewed by Elizabeth Breeze, University College, London

This book is intended as an introduction to project management. The author duly warns us that social research is not an entirely linear process but, with a topic to each chapter, the contents list may give the impression that it is. The manager should remain aware that timetables, risks, progress need to be reviewed continually and be ready to troubleshoot. On the other hand, one does not need to wait to the end to start writing the final report for funders.



The book is well written in eminently readable style. We are given some perspectives from both the commissioning side of research and the researcher seeking funding. We are advised to take time to get the contract right in the first place – to be sure what the funders expect of the researcher and vice versa. Ambiguity can bring problems and bad feeling later. There is also wise guidance on stakeholder and risk analysis. There are useful resumés of current guidelines for copyright and confidentiality and some tips on the way various government departments work. The concordat for research staff is described – it is refreshing to see explicit concern for junior researchers in the precarious research world. It is inevitable that some of this will become out of date, and Professor Tarling will be called upon to produce a second edition.

There are some items of the book that seemed rather elementary for people who are going to manage projects – my assumption was that project managers would usually have been involved in research previously. On the other hand, it does no harm to reiterate the basics, and more experienced readers can always skip sections if they think they do not need to learn about that aspect. It is a book that can be used for reference but someone who has not managed a project before would benefit from reading it through before they start.

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