Can a leopard really change its spots?

*Mark Yeadon reports from the SRA summer event*

The recent summer event, organised with the Local Government Association, tackled the subject of how social research can inform and measure the impact of behaviour change. Over 80 delegates from across the membership and beyond, including researchers from central government, academia and the private sector, turned out on a rare sunny day in mid-July at the salubrious surroundings of the LGA offices in Smith Square.

The day began with a series of presentations on different perspectives of changing and measuring behaviour, chaired by Mark Wardman (vice-chair SRA and Audit Commission). Professor Geof Rayner, former chair of UK Public Health Association and Visiting Professor, Brunel University, energetically kicked off discussions with a broad summary of the different approaches to behaviour change on health issues, arguing for a “systems” approach to behaviour change as opposed to an individual approach – in other words it’s more important and effective to change the world around us rather than change individual mindsets.

Dominic McVey, Director of Research, National Social Marketing Centre, although agreeing with many of Geof Rayner’s points, argued that effective targeting of individuals with the right sort of messages or “individual behavioural change models” can change behaviour. Most importantly, perhaps, Dominic said that we shouldn’t set our expectations too high and that an effective social marketing campaign would be one that changed the behaviours of just a few percent – not the world.

Dr Darren Bhattachary, Head of Consultation and Engagement, BMRB then provided a case study of where insights from communications research and the advertising world have helped shape effective social marketing campaigns on climate change issues. It seems that social policy makers may have something to learn from the people who help sell ideas and behaviour for a living.

In the final presentation, we were fortunate to be given a fast-paced advanced release of Andrew Darnton’s review for Government Social Research on behaviour change. Perhaps Andrew’s most important point was that no single model has all the answers but that...
different models have been proven to have an impact on different issues. A full account of Andrew’s findings is available at: www.gsr.gov.uk/resources/behaviour_change_review.asp

The event finished with a brief panel discussion, introduced by Dan Wellings, Research Director, Public Health, Ipsos-Mori who raised some key issues such as whether good behaviour change work on health matters is just old and good educational health practice and that we should seek to borrow the best bits from different behavioural change models.

Then, on to the terrace for a well earned drink on a bright summer’s evening. We would like to thank the LGA for its generous support and loan of its facilities. Hopefully, its behaviour won’t change next year!

Copies of the presentations are available at www.the-sra.org.uk

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**SRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

**Trends: Looking Back, Moving Forward – 30 years of the SRA**

Thursday 11 December, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London

As the SRA celebrates its 30th anniversary, we are taking the opportunity to reflect on the impact of social research over the past 30 years and future trends for the next 30. Plenary sessions and workshops will be held on issues such as:

**Social trends**
- Measuring the past: societal, political, economic or cultural changes in the UK over the past 30 years
- Measuring the future: societal, political, economic or cultural predictions for the UK

**Trends in social research**
- Innovations in social research: how research techniques have changed
- The changing face of social research and what will social research look like in 2038: how technology and society have changed research practice, the research industry and the skill set of the researcher over the past 30 years and trends for the next 30
- The impact of social research: the impact of social research on decision-making past, present and future

**Confirmed plenary speakers:**
- Michelle Harrison, Director, Henley Centre
- Julian Thompson, Research Director, Ipsos-Mori
- Teresa Williams, Head, Government Social Research Unit, HM Treasury

**Break-out presentations and workshop sessions include:**
- Sheila Peace, Professor of Social Gerontology, Open University – ‘Reflecting on user-involvement and participatory research with older people’
- GFK NOP – ‘Does he take sugar? Enabling disabled people to have their own voice in surveys’ and ‘From respondents to participants: the changing dynamic of the research relationship’
- Professor Susanne MacGregor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine – ‘Power and communication: influences on the impact of social research in the field of illicit drugs - a thirty year overview’
- NatCen – ‘The Health Survey for England: Evolving with the needs of the nation’ and ‘Twenty-five years of British Social Attitudes’ (British Social Attitudes Survey)
- Dr Rebecca Nash, Senior Fellow, Institute for Insight in the Public Services – ‘Scenario development – What will social research in the public sector look like in 2028?’

For further details or to book check www.the-sra.org.uk, email admin@the-sra.org.uk or call 020 7388 2391
There has been much discussion in social research recently about scientific rigour, transferring research knowledge into policy and practice, and what social research contributes to communication.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Academy of Social Sciences, recently held an event on ‘Developing Dialogue’. At this, Paul Wiles, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Home Office and Chair of the Government Social Research Heads of Profession Group, spoke about the role of the social sciences in government, emphasising the need for scientific rigour, quality in social science and its role in public engagement.

Paul also addressed government social researchers at their recent conference (see www.gsr.gov.uk) about the importance of the scientific method in social science, commenting that the search for knowledge in the context of government social research is a practical activity to serve practical ends.

Second movements happen in cycles; there is the 30 to 40 year ‘once in a career’ or lifetime cycle; there is the cycle (e.g. in a job) of seeing things happen a couple of times and knowing what to do; and there is the three to four-year cycle when everything is fresh and exciting. How do these come together? Science and society happened for me first round in the science-led context of the white heat of technology in the early 1960s, CP Snow’s novel The Corridors of Power about influencing the nuclear power debate and Rachel Carson’s book Silent Spring about the effects of DDT on the environment. These topics were not popularly debated but rooted in academia and cultural elites. Social science existed in separate ‘boxes’ for example poverty, housing and physical planning and design, and regional economic planning was the government flavour of the month. However, now science and social science interact in areas such as climate change, surveillance and anti-terrorism, GM crops and human fertilisation. There is a different context for a different kind of engagement with the public. Politics is on the brink of change after a decade of continuity; information technology has revolutionised communication; social research has transformed our understanding of how knowledge transfer works and the stages in the policy cycle. A new vocabulary is emerging.

According to Gladwell, we need to get connectors, mavens and salesmen engaged in spreading the word about social research so that we can have our “magic moment when ideas, trends and social behaviours cross a threshold, tip and spread like wildfire”; and social research reaches out to wide and appreciative audiences.

The SRA is committed to improving the quality of social research through training and development and organising events of different kinds. Our members work across academic, public, private and third sectors. We work collaboratively with other learned societies, the Academy of Social Sciences, funders of social research and the range of other social research stakeholders in the public and private sectors. The SRA is developing its strategic objectives for the next few years. We want to play a full role in the forthcoming challenges for social research.
New code to underpin quality of government social research

The Government Social Research Unit has published a new Government Social Research (GSR) Code which will underline to clients, sponsors and others the quality and professionalism of the service’s output. A specialist addition to the Civil Service Code, the code emphasises that GSR members must be rigorous and impartial, and that their work must be relevant to the concerns of government and parliament, accessible both in language and availability, and carried out in a legal and ethical manner. It requires GSR members to carry out their work with integrity, to be provided with the necessary training and development to produce first class research and advice and, finally, to be outward-facing in their engagement with other analysts. The GSR Code is at www.gsr.gov.uk.

ESRC mid-career development fellowships

The Mid-Career Development Fellowship Scheme provides the opportunity for excellent researchers to gain support to take their research to a new level or in a new direction, for example, to work at the interface with another discipline. (For the purposes of the scheme, ‘mid career’ is defined as between five and fifteen years of active postdoctoral or equivalent experience). The scheme welcomes applications from academics seeking support for a programme of work linked to substantive career development. The scheme also provides a route for researchers seeking to move into academic research from professional practice in allied fields, enabling them to complete a PhD if required. Awards will be made for up to two years and, in exceptional cases, three years. Applicants seeking more flexible working arrangements can apply for full or part-time awards. The Research Grants Board welcomes applications for purely theoretical research, and that academics can apply for 100% of their time under both the Small and Standard Grants Schemes. More information: http://tinyurl.co.uk/73gp

Data sharing review

A new report on data sharing has been published by the Information Commissioner, Richard Thomas and Mark Walport. The report commissioned by the Prime Minister and Justice Minister is at: www.justice.gov.uk/reviews/datasharing-intro.htm

It shows strongly that there is a lack of transparency and accountability in the way organisations currently deal with personal information; that there is a fog of confusion surrounding the Data Protection Act, particularly the way it interacts with other strands of law; that greater use could be made of the ability to share personal data safely, particularly in the field of research and statistical analysis; and that the Information Commissioner needs more effective powers, and the resources to allow him to use them properly.

The report makes a series of recommendations, which are targeted at transforming the personal and organisational culture of those who collect, manage and share personal information.

News from the ESRC

The ESRC is consulting on its strategic plan for the period 2009-2014. The closing date for comments is Monday 15th September. To help you take part, you are invited to look at what the ESRC has achieved against its last plan. This is set out in its document “Summary of Progress against Objectives in ESRC Strategic Plan 2005-2010”.

Last time there was a consultation, the SRA held a consultative seminar and members discussed their needs with Adrian Allsop of the ESRC from the perspective of non-academic social researchers. Much of what we said was taken on board very satisfactorily. So do help us have a similar impact this time. We are holding a seminar on 11 September but also send your comments by going onto the ESRC website www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

Equality and Human Rights Commission research

The research division of the EHRC has commissioned 27 projects with a view to becoming the leading sources of research in equalities, human rights and good relations. It plans to develop a new newsletter, establish research networks in new areas of work and expand its database of researchers interested in contracting. To receive email bulletins contact: research@equalityhumanrights.com
SRA SCOTLAND:

*Julie Carr reports*

Following the last meeting, the SRA Scotland committee is continuing to develop and deliver a Scotland-based programme of training, seminars and events for social researchers in Scotland and the north of England.

Following the success of the qualitative courses held in Glasgow, Liz Spencer from New Perspectives ran a further series in Edinburgh. Due to the ongoing demand for these courses on in-depth interviewing, focus groups, analysis and reporting/presenting, we will repeat them in October. The positive feedback from course participants means we have decided to re-run the ‘new’ module of three quantitative courses in November. The quantitative modules cover a two-day course on the introduction of quantitative methods including survey design and one-day courses on survey sampling and statistical analysis. These are aimed at both early career stage researchers who are keen to develop their research skills, as well as more experienced researchers wanting to refresh their existing skills. Other courses in the pipeline include Research Design in the Real World by Rachel Ormston (ScotCen) and Steven Hope (Ipsos MORI) and a new SRA Scotland course being developed by Dr Cathy Sharp (Research for Real) on Research Project Management.

SRA Scotland’s seminar programme recently included an interesting presentation on *Why hold devolved elections: Lessons from the 2007 Scottish elections* by Professor John Curtice from the University of Strathclyde. The next seminar will be held on 14 October and will be given by Professor Alastair McIntosh (Visiting Professor of Human Ecology, University of Strathclyde), who will speak about Social Methodology and Some Challenges of Climate Change. The committee is always keen to hear from SRA members in Scotland and the north of England. If you would like to suggest any seminar topics that you think may be of interest to the wider social research community or would like to volunteer to deliver a seminar, Katherine and Stephen would be pleased to hear from you (katherine.myant@scotland.gsi.gov.uk; mcmurraystephen@hotmail.com).

The SRA Scotland committee looks forward to seeing you at future SRA events in Scotland.

For more information on the SRA in Scotland contact:
Lindsay Adams: scotland@the-sra.org.uk, copied to lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk
Julie Carr: julie.carr@scotland.gsi.gov.uk
Sarah Miller: sarah.miller@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

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SRA CYMRU:

*The organising committee reports*

The events and training programme goes from strength to strength. Professor Peter Sloane from the Welsh Economy and Labour Market Evaluation Centre at Swansea University led a recent seminar on ‘Graduate Earnings and Rates of Return to Degrees’. The seminar was well attended and received.

The autumn programme includes research carried out by Age Concern Cymru followed by a seminar on using research to inform policy and practice development in Cardiff Local Authority (dates to be confirmed).

We plan to hold joint events with Evaluation Cymru (the Wales branch of the UK Evaluation Society) in North Wales on 24 September and South Wales on 1 October. Both will focus on an “Evaluation of Healthy Living Centres in Wales” and are being organised in collaboration with the BIG Lottery Fund and the Welsh Assembly Government. We plan to run training on questionnaire design on 11 March. Further information about all events at www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_cymru.htm

We want to develop our programme, so if you have any suggestions for events, or would like to present your work, please contact us. SRA membership in Wales continues to grow, along with the SRA Cymru network mailing list for those who wish to receive information about news, training and events.

A fond farewell and good luck to Naomi Copestake who has provided the administrative support for SRA Cymru for the past year. She returns to Cardiff University for the final year of her degree. Thank you for all of your help, Naomi – particularly for organising this year’s evening seminars! Nathalie Ellis has joined us from the Open University as this year’s student placement – so a warm welcome to her. We look forward to seeing you at future events in Wales!

For further information about SRA Cymru, contact: Beverley Morgan (Beverley.Morgan@wales.gsi.gov.uk) at the Office of the Chief Social Research Office (OCRSO), Welsh Assembly Government.
Training and professional development programme

By Janie Percy Smith, Training Development Director

Over the past year, the SRA has piloted an exciting programme of advanced level courses, the development of which has been funded through the ESRC’s Researcher Development Initiative. This series of ‘expert development workshops’ has run in parallel to the SRA’s mainstream programme of predominantly introductory courses. Courses that have run this year include:

- Quality in Social Research
- Ethics in Social Research
- Advanced Qualitative Data Analysis
- Knowledge Transfer Strategy

We have learned some useful lessons from the experience of running these courses over the past year and also from the feedback from tutors delivering them and participants’ evaluation forms. All of the above courses will be repeated in the coming year together with a further eight new topics.

For 2008/09 we have integrated the two kinds of training into a single programme of introductory and advanced level courses on a wide range of topics that we hope will be of interest to social researchers at all levels and working in a variety of different settings. We will also be piloting a number of ‘master classes’ – short, intensive events aimed at senior researchers and research managers on tricky, topical issues.

SRA courses typically attract researchers from central and local government, government agencies, colleges and universities, research institutes, voluntary sector organisations and private sector research companies. Feedback from participants indicates that this diversity is a strength of our courses, facilitating learning from others’ experiences and also exposing participants to issues and practices that are common in other settings or sectors with which they may not be familiar. The courses continue to be very competitively priced with discounts available for students and independent researchers.

Other new features of the programme for the coming year include:

- A schedule of dates for courses confirmed well in advance that will not change except in extreme circumstances
- Course details including summary, programme and information on tutors available on the SRA website well in advance of the course
- A certificate of attendance for all participants who would like one
- A significant number of courses that will run in locations outside London including Leeds, Bristol, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Newcastle which we hope will be attractive to those based outside London

We very much hope that SRA members and other social researchers will find the training programme appealing, useful and relevant to their needs. The programme for 2008 appears on the next page – details of 2009 courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk.

Honorary MBE for Sharon

Congratulations to Sharon Witherspoon, Deputy Director of the Nuffield Foundation on being awarded an honorary MBE for her contribution to social science. She has worked for many years as a social researcher both as a research ‘doer’ and in her current role as a funder of quality social science. The “honorary” title is because she is not a British citizen.
## Training and professional development opportunities 2008

See [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) for details of 2009 training

### Introductory courses and one day courses for those new to research or to the topic

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to research commissioning</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>18th September</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to research project management</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>13th October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Essentials of survey design</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>10th October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qualitative longitudinal research</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introduction to community profiling</td>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>9th December</td>
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### Advanced courses – 1 and 2 day courses for mid-career and senior researchers

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<th>Location</th>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge transfer strategy</td>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>25th September</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretation and explanation</td>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td>4th/5th November</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participatory research</td>
<td>Glasgow</td>
<td>26th and 27th November</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced qualitative data analysis</td>
<td>Newcastle</td>
<td>20th and 21st November</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approaches to evaluation</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>December</td>
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### Master classes – 2-3 hour facilitated, high level discussions for senior researchers and research managers

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<tr>
<td>Ethics in social research</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>September</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better research commission</td>
<td>London</td>
<td>December</td>
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### New books in Social Research

- **Situating Social Theory**
  - Tim May and Jason L. Powell
  - Co-Director of the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures, University of Liverpool, UK
  - This new edition examines social theory in the context of its traditions and historical development, and explores its contemporary relevance in explaining society and understanding social relations.
  - The text has been substantially revised and includes three new chapters, two of which depict theory in action, and a new conclusion. May and Powell have also added new material on both emotion and globalisation.

- **Essentials of Social Research**
  - Linda Kalof, Amy Dan and Thomas Dietz
  - All at Michigan State University, USA
  - This introductory text is written for those with no prior background in social research methodology. It covers the fundamentals of social research, including types of research, reasoning and data, basic logic of quantitative and qualitative inquiry, major data collection strategies, and the assessment of research findings.
  - ISBN: 978 0 335 21782 3 | Sep 2008 | 192pp | £44.99 **£15.99**

- **Qualitative Research Design for Software Users**
  - Silvana di Gregorio and Judith Davidson
  - Research and Training Consultant at SDG Associates; University of Massachusetts-Lowell, USA
  - This book is an essential guide for anyone using qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), particularly useful for those who want to go beyond a basic introduction to discover how to get the most out of software and how to identify the methodological issues they need to consider. Uniquely, the book examines issues related to both academic and non-academic uses of QDAS.

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To view further details or place an order, visit [www.openup.co.uk/sociology](http://www.openup.co.uk/sociology)

(Valid until 30th September 2008)
Life as a career social researcher

**Darren Yaxley**, a member of the SRA’s Events Committee, reports on the success of a recent SRA event sponsored by GfK NOP which aimed to help researchers get the most out of their careers.

This interactive event was designed to provide insight and advice on career development for researchers looking to progress. With two excellent speakers, panoramic views of London and a strong turn-out from across the membership, the evening was deemed a success.

Nigel Goldie, the SRA’s Executive Director and acting as chair, started proceedings by introducing Alison Palmer, GfK NOP’s Qualitative Director, who stood in for Nick Moon and even delivered the presentation he had prepared. Nick’s presentation focused on the skills and experience that are required of researchers today and asked whether demands upon researchers are different now to 30 years ago.

Alison was followed by Janie Percy-Smith’s entertaining guided tour of her 30+ year career that has taken her from an independent researcher to the SRA’s Training Development Director. As well as looking back over her own career, Janie also suggested a number of key pointers for a successful career by urging those present to conduct well-designed and managed research and to ‘get off of the fence’ by telling clients what the data means rather than falling back on equivocation and recommendations for further research.

The presentations were followed by more interactive breakout sessions to discuss the key skills needed to be a researcher. Discussions focused upon the need for communication and networking skills as well as the possibility of secondments within different organisations – all areas in which the SRA is well placed to help.

A brief roundup and discussion about what the SRA can do for social researchers’ career development closed the event. As well as requesting more free networking events for members, two developments that came about as a result of the discussion were:

- The Wiley-Blackwell 30th anniversary prize to recognise ‘most promising young researcher’ (to enter visit www.the-sra.org.uk)
- The SRA’s own Facebook group (www.facebook.com) which gives researchers the opportunity to join us and let us know how they want the organisation to benefit them

After the discussion, the event’s sponsors GfK NOP, laid on drinks and nibbles. We’d like to thank GfK NOP for its support and for the support of the speakers for helping to make the event a success. We also hope that those attending enjoyed the event and left with some new and interesting insights.

**Coming up: dates for your diary**

- **24 September/1 October** Evaluation of Healthy Living Centres in Wales, North Wales/South Wales
- **September** User involvement and networking in disability research, GfK NOP Offices, London, 5–7pm
- **14 October** Social methodology and some challenges of climate change, evening
- **October** Diversity in social research, London, Nuffield Foundation, 5–7pm
- **18 November** RSS/SRA Cathie Marsh memorial lecture “Are web-based surveys the survey method of the future?” London, RSS, 4.30–7pm followed by drinks reception

For further details check www.the-sra.org.uk or email admin@the-sra.org.uk

**Do you have an idea for an event? Would you like to influence the events the SRA runs?** The SRA’s Events Committee welcomes ideas and is seeking new members for the committee.

Contact admin@the-sra.org.uk with your ideas or to register your interest in getting involved.

**On the move**

Philip Cowley, Professor of Parliamentary Government at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, is to join the Government Social Research Unit as an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) placement fellow.

Alex Oliver joins the Institute for Insight in the Public Services as Head of Service Transformation, tasked with client development and the growth of the specialist service transformation offers at BMRB Social Research and Henley Centre HeadlightVision government consultancy.
SRA News: Aug 2008: 9

Research Methods Festival 2008

A report by Ceridwen Roberts

More SRA members than ever before went to the third Research Methods Festival in Oxford in July. Funded by the ESRC and organised by the National Centre for Research Methods [NCRM], the festival ran from Monday to Thursday with over 800 social scientists and social researchers from all sectors attending. The topics covered all aspects of social science endeavour from multilevel modelling and application, through experiments in social science, systematic reviews, researching risk, crossing disciplinary and methodological boundaries, ethical issues in qualitative work or in e-research as well as sessions on publishing, teaching and the tricky issue of resources and many more.

I could only go to two days but got thoroughly to grips with issues in capacity building and the quality and purpose of evidence on my first day and public engagement on my second day. The sessions on capacity building were very thought provoking. As many of you know, there is growing awareness of the frailty of certain disciplines in the social sciences. Demographic changes are playing a part as in some disciplines such as socio-legal studies where there are aging cohorts of empirically trained researchers most of whom will have retired in the next five to ten years, but this is only part of the story.

As Professors Joan Orme, Andrew Pollard and Chris Huxham told us, some disciplines which are later practitioner-entry subject areas like social work or education and management and business studies have the problem of how to “tool up” very experienced practitioners with the skills to undertake more academic-based research. They also struggle to get recognition within academia of the valuable more practice-based studies they do.

Sharon Witherspoon argued that the relationship between academic lawyers and practising lawyers reveals the consequences of the push to publish. Empirical research in the law is difficult to do – there are access and confidentiality problems with the courts and records – and so it takes time. So, it becomes very unattractive for academics because of their incentive structure and of course this is a vicious circle as they are not able to teach this imaginatively and so inspire future researchers. These problems are compounded by and contribute to a lack of funding opportunities in this area. It was hard not to feel that we are in danger of losing wholesale competence in researching all aspects of our legal system.

Given the increased emphasis on the courts in public policy, this seems both extremely worrying and short sighted. But as Professors Orme, Pollard and Hexham’s presentations showed, some disciplines are “fighting back”. Large programmes such as the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and AIM [Advanced Institute of Management] research as well as training under the Researcher Development Initiative and the Research Methods Programme have begun to impact on the numbers of quality researchers in these areas.

The role of evidence was examined in a session devoted to its quality and purpose. Jane Lewis and Angela Dale discussed how to measure quality in qualitative and quantitative research. Both agreed that, historically, quality has been easier to measure in quantitative work as there was considerable diversity in methods in qualitative work, yet rigour here is equally important. The theme “fit for purpose” ran through their talks. As Angela said, “A survey is of adequate quality if it can answer the specific question with an adequate degree of accuracy,” and she warned against wasting money on more accuracy or indeed information collecting than is necessary. Quality means different things for different audiences, however, and it’s possible that meeting different views of quality in the same project causes tensions. The solution? Perhaps it is recognising that this tension exists but also being very explicit about the different audiences for the work and their different needs.

This was a theme picked up by Sandra Nutley who focused on the questions from a user perspective. Drawing on her recent book, Using evidence: how research can inform public services she outlined her continuum of research use from generating “knowledge” which is used to change “awareness” at one end to the practical implementation of knowledge in policy and practice. And she showed how there are many different ways of “using” research. In this sense, how research is used has to be bespoke to the situation. Sometimes this means co-production but often it does not.

There was continuity here with the sessions on public engagement. This has come right up the policy agenda recently, not least with the launching of the “Beacons for Public Engagement” (www.publicengagement.ac.uk).

continued on page 15
FINDINGS

Uncertainty in everyday life

By Peter Taylor-Gooby, Director, ESRC Risk Programme

Experts tell us that, though we (in the west) are richer, healthier and longer-lived than ever before, we live in a ‘risk society’ (Beck) or a ‘runaway world’ (Giddens). The hardest dangers to predict are the most pressing: new technology such as nanotechnology or GM food, globalised communications, terrorism and pandemic disease, international economic competition, unemployment, energy prices and destabilising currency shifts. ‘Hollowed out’ government is less able to regulate the new technologies, safeguard borders or manage its economy. These changes give rise to two questions:

• How do people cope with greater uncertainty in their social lives?
• How does government make decisions and enlist people’s support for them?

The research of the ESRC’s Social Contexts and Responses to Risk Priority Network examines these questions.

Our focus on everyday life leads us to consider the influence of media, relationships and family life on risk responses. Jenny Kitzinger analyses media treatment (news and documentary and drama and soap opera) of risk issues over a six-month period. Framing and imagery play a crucial role in influencing how people respond to risks, for example the labels (‘cross-pollination’ versus ‘contamination’ or ‘biodiversity’ versus ‘weeds’) used in the GM debate, or references to ‘human embryo’ as opposed to ‘blastocyst’ in the stem-cell controversy.

Brian Parkinson and Gwenda Simmons analyse how our impressions of the emotional response of people close to us affect how we make decisions, from choosing a restaurant to getting a new job. A study by Jane Lewis using qualitative interviews and national survey data shows how the availability of support as well as the relationship itself contributes to security in second marriages. The capacity to be independent rather than dependent strengthens the relationship.

While class and age influence responses to debt, illness or inadequate services from a shop, families are also important. Andreas Cebulla’s study on national survey and qualitative data shows that younger people’s risk perceptions and responses are also associated with the way their parents dealt with similar issues. Soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan face the sharp end of risk. Detailed interviews by Jens Zinn indicate that attachment to military culture and self-identity as a successful soldier strongly affect success in managing risks in civilian life.

People are not simply rational calculators but inhabit a rich world of cultural, emotional and social influences which affect responses to risk. How do these issues relate to policy-making? Increasingly, government is withdrawing from direct interventions to pursue policies which put greater responsibility on individuals to do what they think best. However, research by Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt on regulatory frameworks for pensions and the internet shows ambivalence among service-users. They wish to be treated as responsible individuals, resenting a ‘nanny state’, but also want interventions which protect themselves and their families.

In a different area, responses to hazardous technology, Nick Pidgeon and others examine community attitudes to nuclear power stations and show evidence of concerns even among those who seem most accepting. My own work on the impact of NHS reform shows that it is not just perceptions of quality of service and the incentives facing providers’ incentives but also more value-based assumptions about the extent to which providers share values with users and are committed to their interests that influence the degree of public trust.

Risk and uncertainty are always present in social life. SCARR research takes us in two directions: responses to risk cannot be a simple matter of rational choice. Government must take account of the complexity, ambivalence and cultural and value-laden aspects of response to everyday life risks and ensure that decisions are based on detailed consultation and participation of those affected.

Further details at www.kent.ac.uk/scarr

References

Learning about Risk, Jens O. Zinn and Peter Taylor-Gooby (eds) 2006, Forum Qualitative Research.

David Abbott explores these issues further in the following article on risk and financial planning.
Making financial plans and thinking about risks: the role of ‘faith’, ethnicity, disability and sexuality

By David Abbott, Senior Research Fellow, University of Bristol

Few of us do not save nearly enough for our retirement and recent research confirms that the ‘credit crunch’ is already depleting the numbers further. However, the government increasingly expects us to plan financially for unexpected events and old age. We’re expected to act as responsible citizens. Give us adequate information and we’ll make good choices won’t we?

Researchers at York and Bristol University have been examining the complexity of people’s real life decisions. We know that how much money you have strongly affects your ability to make financial plans for the future. We also know from other research that gender plays an important part in how people think about risk and possible future risky life events. We’ve been exploring the relevance of other aspects of people’s lives such as being a practising Christian or Muslim, gay/lesbian/bisexual, disabled, Black or Asian.

Do people make decisions that make sense to them and their social and cultural situation, but which don’t always make sense to the rational policy maker?

In focus groups and one-to-one interviews, we asked questions about planning for rainy days and financial security. We wanted to know if ‘faith’, sexuality, disability or ethnicity made any difference to these choices.

Christians and Muslims both referred to their beliefs in how they approached money. Muslims had a strong preference for minimising borrowing, avoiding interest on savings and taking only essential insurance policies. Giving money was important to both Christians and Muslims: “If you give to the poor, God gives you more and that’s my theory really,” said one Muslim woman.

Some Christians saw risky events more as part of ‘God’s plan’, than things which could be avoided. Muslims said that ‘being careful with money’ was an important aspect of their cultural background: “It’s heavily indoctrinated, parents really do put it down to the kids – to save and not be too frivolous.”

Few thought that they faced significant risks in money, job security or ill health. Most said they were more concerned with having enough money to be comfortable in old age/retirement. This was especially true for the gay/lesbian and bisexual people in the study. Their emphasis was on being able to maintain a ‘good lifestyle’ into old age and to ensure enough financial security to be independent, perhaps in the absence of more ‘traditional’ family networks to support them.

There was general distrust of the private financial sector and its products – especially insurance. When asked about ‘safety nets’ all groups highlighted family, partners, friends, equity in owned property and a basic ability to ‘bounce back.’

Whilst there was strong consensus that the state should protect against unemployment or illness, very few people thought it would be an effective means of support for themselves and would be reluctant benefit claimants.

However, disabled people said that their place in the labour market felt precarious and they did not feel that there were other jobs they could readily do. The extra costs of disability made it difficult to save and they reported facing exclusion and discrimination in financial services and products like insurance.

So, what difference does being religious, gay, disabled, Black or Asian make? Faith appears to have a positive impact – risks are feared less, but planning is helped by dislike of debt and desire to live within means. Roughly half the gay people interviewed said that they thought their sexual orientation influenced their choices. Black people felt they were making the same choices and having similar chances as white peers. Asian people, particularly men, prioritised working hard, saving hard and minimising debt and said this was part of their upbringing. Disabled people faced risky and uncertain futures and were least well placed to protect themselves from risk.

The research shows how complex decision making is for people. Faith, sexuality, ethnicity and disability sit alongside other important factors – upbringing, how parents acted, having children.

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Ethics review in social care research

Jan Pahl, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Kent, worked for the Department of Health as an independent consultant on the implementation of the Research Governance Framework in social care. In the following article, she explores the issues.

The past few years have seen a proliferation of procedures for reviewing the ethics of social research. Most researchers recognise that their research can raise real ethical issues, but at the same time they often experience the process of submitting their proposals to research ethics committees (RECs) as confusing, frustrating and irritating. The aim of this article is to outline the development of ethics review in social care, and to help both researchers and members of RECs to understand better the system within which they operate.

The development of ethics review can be traced back to the 1999 Alder Hey Hospital scandal, which revealed that hospitals were retaining parts of dead babies for research purposes. The resulting public outcry led the Department of Health (DH) to set up the Research Governance Framework (RGF) for Health and Social Care (DH, 2003). This covered ethics review, among other governance topics and assumed that research in social care would be swept into the same system as research in the NHS.

At the time, the NHS already had a well-developed system of RECs. Staffed largely by senior medical and nursing professionals, and concerned mainly with clinical trials, these RECs took the randomised controlled trial as their model for research. Since 2006, the NHS RECs have been managed by the National Research Ethics Service (NRES).

Concern about applying the RGF to social care came both from social researchers and from managers and professionals in the social care field. In response, the DH initiated a programme of information-gathering and consultation which would help to inform the implementation of the RGF in Social Care. At the time, little was known about the nature and extent of research in social care. No national system was in existence for ethics review or research governance. Some councils had well developed research departments, while others did not do research at all.

Baseline surveys in 2002 and 2005 mapped out, for the first time, the types of research going on within councils and the ways in which this was managed. For example, even in 2005, only half of all councils recorded research centrally (up from a third in 2002). In 2005, 39 per cent of research in councils was subject to ethics review, bringing together researchers and members of RECs to understand better the system within which they operate.

The DH consultations involved those who worked in social care, those who used the services and those who did research in that field. At the same time, leading organisations in the social care field worked together with the DH to produce materials which would help in the development of ethics review and research governance. These materials included the RGF Resource Pack, a Risk Assessment Tool, and training for research leads within local councils. (Social Services Research Group, 2005)

In 2007 a Planning Group was set up to advise DH on a system of ethics review, bringing together people from the social care field and from NRES. This proposed:

- A central Social Care REC ‘owned’ by the social care field but located within and funded by NRES, as a ‘flagged’ committee
- Regional and local systems for ethics review, based on existing systems in local councils
- Collaborative systems between councils and the NHS, or between councils and universities, drawing on the ESRC Research Ethics Framework

The proposals have been accepted by the DH, and work has begun on establishing a central Social Care REC within the NRES. This will provide a resource for multi-site social care studies that do not have access to existing systems of ethics review, including research which is:

- Undertaken by individuals/groups not located in or linked to a higher education institution
- High-risk, own-account research by local councils and their staff in areas without RGF systems
- National research surveys conducted by central government and regulatory bodies
- All social care research that falls under the Mental Capacity Act

Although nested within the NRES, the central social care REC is to be located firmly within social care. This means that it will be distinctively social care in membership, ethos and operation, with a social care body, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), acting as the appointing authority. It will be equivalent in standing to the other RECs in the NRES system, so that proposals do not have to go to more than one REC. Access to the REC will be either via the NRES systems or directly to SCIE, where it will be based.
In conclusion, there are some general points which have emerged from the debate about ethics review in social care. Research poses real ethical issues, but often it is hard to predict the ethical problems which will arise in any one project. It would be better to maintain a light touch in the process of ethics review, and to provide an ongoing advice service for researchers who meet unexpected ethical dilemmas, as the SRA does with its Ethics Forum.

Ethics and methods should be considered separately. Many research projects have been turned down or sent back because no one on the REC understood the methods. NRES guidance makes it clear that RECs should be concerned with ethics not methods. Some research is poorly planned, but this should be dealt with by funding bodies or research managers.

Finally, it is important to remember that social science research has an important contribution to make to our understanding of the society in which we live and to the development of better services. Money and time spent on preparing papers for RECs is money and time taken from research. Ethics review should be a support, and not a barrier, to research.

References

Additional reference
Guidelines for social care researchers, with a wealth of valuable links, have been produced by RDInfo. See: www.rdinfo.org.uk/SCFlowchart/FlowchartSC.html

Some questions from the SRA for the new ‘Social Care REC’

The SRA recognises this new Committee could be a useful resource for people working in social care, especially researchers who are not linked to a university or higher education institute and it ethical scrutiny. But we have a number of concerns:

• It is essential that the current recognition that this new Committee is only one of a number of research ethics committees in the field of ‘social care’ prevails, so that university-based ethics committees, operating on the framework set out by the ESRC, will continue to offer advice and scrutiny on most university-based research, while the new Committee will largely serve those working in local authorities or in other settings. Will university researchers be able to continue to choose to use their own university’s ethics committee except when the research falls under the Mental Capacity Act or NHS?

• There is an ambiguity about ‘multi-site’ research. It is not clear whether university-based researchers carrying out work on a variety of sites (in, say, 4 or more local authorities) will have to submit their applications to the new Committee. Some local authorities may insist on this, others may not. Since the new Committee will require at least 60 days to review research applications, this will slow down multi-site research if this is required and may make it less attractive to undertake. Researchers may come to prefer dealing with one ethics committee, but much will depend on how the new Committee acts. Meanwhile, the situation will be unclear.

• The Mental Capacity Act obtains in cases of “intrusive research” involving one or more adults unable to consent for themselves. In these cases, ethical scrutiny will have to be carried out by an NHS ethical scrutiny committee or this new Social Care ethical scrutiny committee. But it is unclear until we have case law as to what constitutes ‘intrusive research’. What will happen, for instance, in cases of research on Attendance Allowance claimants for example where a measurable proportion of the sample may lack capacity of some sorts? It is also unclear why university ethical scrutiny committee could not consider these cases. Further consultation on this and clarification is needed.

• The new Committee will also cover national research surveys carried out by central government and regulatory bodies. Since ‘social care’ is not a discipline, but a field of study, this may have unintended effects. Will the Department of Work and Pensions surveys of benefit claimants be considered ‘social care’ or not? Will surveys carried out by bodies who inspect social care be considered ‘research’?

• The new committee will need to ensure that it has sufficient number of experienced social researcher members so that it can reflect wider social research practice. Some of these should be psychologists who are used to considering the complexity of assessing capacity in a range of settings, and some should also understand quantitative research, the area that may be hardest hit (which would also affect research on the ‘outcomes’ of social care interventions, which is in terribly short supply).

• Finally, it is important that the REC is not put under pressure to exceed its remit as the distinction between research governance and research ethics on the one hand, and research ethics and methods and research design on the other hand is analytically clearer than empirically distinct. One issue that often arises in ‘social care’ – the need for continuing discussion about ethical issues that arise in the course of a project – is not part of the remit for ethical scrutiny by a Committee. It requires instead arrangements like advisory committees or broader teams for researchers, who retain responsibility. The requirement for scrutiny must not over-reach itself and devalue and restrict researcher development.
Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Culture
Claire Grant, 2007, Routledge

Reviewed by Pat MacLeod, Director, Social Research, TNS System Three

Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Culture arguably, is not written for the lay reader. Instead, it is intended to stimulate debate on the possibilities of justice in the media age. The author’s intention is to identify gaps in which others can develop new theories and establish a new vocabulary for this area. Specifically, she emphasises the importance of studying the relationships between punishment, culture and communication. The central premise is that there is a need to re-interpret previous theories to incorporate the effects of media and increasing individual connectivity, to properly understand modern crime and punishment.

This is a slim volume that, nevertheless, covers a broad range of topics. These include an assessment of what the author calls ‘true crime detection’; consideration of the nation state and the assimilation of outsiders and exploration of the internet and criminal justice. The central premise is that there is a need to re-interpret previous theories to incorporate the effects of media and increasing individual connectivity, to properly understand modern crime and punishment.

I found the book difficult for a number of reasons. The language was very technical; as a lay reader it became almost impenetrable at times. The wide-ranging arguments, critiques and ideas required a high level of mental agility to follow. The author did not set out to develop or revise theories of contemporary crime and punishment. At the same time, I would have liked more drawing together of the arguments; for me the book felt incomplete. However, as I said at the start, the lay reader is not the intended audience and the contribution it makes in the field of contemporary crime and punishment is for others to judge.

Comparative Health Policy (2nd edition revised and updated)
Robert H. Blank and Viola Burau
2007, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan

Reviewed by Professor Anthea Tinker, Institute of Gerontology, King’s College London

Research on comparative social policies is very difficult to do and even more difficult to write about. There are so many ifs and buts which mean that true comparisons are tricky. This book makes the point clearly when it says: ‘Comparison can help by juxtaposing health customs and health policies in different countries. This allows us to get a better idea about the range of variations that exists and also helps to avoid both false particularism (‘everywhere is special’) and false universalism (‘everywhere is the same’).’

The authors have chosen to examine health systems in nine countries. These are Australia, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden, Singapore, the UK and the USA. In addition, some comparisons are made, but not in such detail, with France and Italy. The topics covered include the historical and cultural aspect of health policy; systems of funding, providing and governing health care; policies of allocating health resources; health care in the home; and the diverse policies that constitute public health. The last is a welcome addition as few books on health policy give such prominence to this important topic. Indeed, the conclusion of the authors is that ‘if a system really wants to achieve the goal of maximising the health of its population, resources would be better directed towards alleviating poverty, reducing crime, changing lifestyles and so forth’. In a book about health care policy, this is a salutary conclusion.

The book is well written and has some excellent features including demographic data (up to date with the exception of that for older people where data is given for 1988) and a long and useful index, glossary, guide to further reading and websites and index. Policy makers as well as academics will all find something of interest in this book.

Making Policy in Theory and Practice
Bochel, H and Duncan, S (eds.)
2007, Bristol, The Policy Press

Reviewed by Professor Anthea Tinker, Institute of Gerontology, King’s College London

All researchers dream of making an impact with their research. Although in theory, we recognise that other
factors intervene, most of us would like our research to influence policy makers. This book by Hugh Bochel, an academic, and Sue Duncan, until recently a senior civil servant, is a salutary reminder that policy making is a complex exercise. They have gathered together a group mainly of academics but also some researchers in government to analyse how policy is made both in theory and practice. They cleverly use the Cabinet Office’s 1997 document ‘Professional policy making for the twenty first century’ as their starting point. The nine recommendations or ‘competencies’ are used as chapter headings each with a case study. These key features are forward-looking, outward-looking, innovative, flexible and creative, evidence-based, inclusive, joined-up, open to review, open to evaluation and capable of learning lessons.

With fascinating insights into actual events and what shaped them, the book avoids the stereotypical dry text book approach. There are some real gems in the book for researchers such as the summary on page 113 of the types of involvement the public may have in participation and consultation. This contrasts with examples of decisions being taken in response to high profile media cases. Even the emphasis on evidence-based research is more complicated than would appear. For example, ‘Good quality policy making depends on high quality information, derived from a variety of sources – expert knowledge; existing domestic and international evidence; existing statistics; stakeholder consultation; evaluation of previous policies; new evidence; or secondary sources’. But despite all of this, there is the argument that snap judgements and first impressions based on instincts may prove to be successful.

With nine pages of references and 33 pages of references/bibliography, this book is more than a series of case studies. It brings together, in a clear way, much of the literature which will stand the test of time as both a textbook and a valuable source for decision makers.

ITEMS 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 Annie Irvine, book review editor: aj513@york.ac.uk

Working with Vulnerable Adults
Bridget Penhale and Jonathan Parker, 2008, Routledge

Health, Risk and Vulnerability
eds Alan Petersen and Iain Wilkinson, 2007, Routledge

Studying Society: The Essentials
Karen Evans and Dave King, 2005, Routledge

continued from page 9
There is clearly a whole continuum of activities which are described as public engagement and discussion was lively as to when joint production of research is appropriate and when public engagement is more akin to active involvement in the discussion and consequences of research findings with the people affected. Robert Evans from Cardiff was particularly interesting here as he argued persuasively, from my point of view, that “there must be a gap between what social scientists and the general public know”. He suggested that there are three waves of science studies – the age of authority, the age of democracy and the age of expertise – and suggested we needed to operate with the third as our model. By implication then, not everyone’s knowledge is of equal worth in all situations. People have specialist knowledge about different things, and in meaningful public engagement, there needs to be effective understanding of the boundaries and limitations as well as the potentialities of interaction and exchange. This was an encouraging message to many of us in the room.

A short article based on a few sessions can only be one person’s sense of this rich festival of social science. Do try to attend the fourth one: 5–8 July 2010, but meanwhile, go to the website and look at the many presentations which you will find there from this year www.ncrm.ac.uk/RMF2008

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All these affect how we plan – or don’t plan – for rainy days. Policy makers who assume that we will all ‘just do the right thing’ when it comes to money and planning may be wide of the mark.

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- Deborah Quilgars and Anwen Jones, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp
- The research is part of an ESRC Network: Social Contexts and Responses to Risk: www.kent.ac.uk/scarr
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