sra:news

Social
Research
Association

Challenging Myths – a report from the SRA 2006 conference

In December, more than 180 social research and policy actors gathered for the main SRA event of the year – the annual conference. **Oliver Hayllar**, *chair of the SRA events committee reports.*

The theme and title for the conference was *'Challenging myths, researching reality – the role of social research'*, which provided an excellent platform for enthusiastic discussions by participants on key issues such as the role the media plays in shaping people's sense of reality and the use (and function) of social research to inform the research and policy communities as well as the general public. It also provided an opportunity for researchers to disseminate their research on social policy issues where myths or misconceptions prevail.

Barbara Doig opened her first conference as chair of the SRA by welcoming the three distinguished plenary speakers: Ian Diamond, John Curtice and Rena Bivens. Ian Diamond, chief executive of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), opened his presentation by highlighting key social changes that had taken place in the last few decades and in particular, changes to household and family structure. He demonstrated a framework for action that highlighted how research and policy actors will need to adapt, develop and work in partnership in the light of such changes and their consequences for research. He focused on the need for greater stakeholder involvement in all areas of research and policy development, and gave the policy example of tackling obesity to highlight his concerns. Finally, he re-examined the capacity of social research to examine and tackle social issues, looking at the current make

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up of the social sciences (in terms of the numbers of social scientists and their demographics) as well as social science resources, and the need to further develop both the skills and scope of both.

"The conference provided an excellent platform for enthusiastic discussions by participants on key issues."

Myths and perceptions

John Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University, a research consultant to the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and a leading expert on attitudinal research looked at another aspect of the conference theme – that of myths and misperceptions on social issues. Looking at the issues of (supposed) young people's voter apathy, attitudes towards tax as a social division and 'choice' in the public services, he highlighted how attitudinal research is key to understanding why people make assumptions about social issues and important in helping to identify why and how myths develop. He believes that ideological preference, the social circles in which people circulate, background and upbringing, supposed rational thought (where sometimes misperceptions develop because things are seen, quite wrongly, as making 'sense') as well as the actions of those with influence (in particular politicians and the media) are the reasons why myths develop.

Role of the media

Rena Bivens from the renowned Glasgow University Media Group developed further the issue of 'How Media Help Shape People's Understanding of Reality'. Using examples of her research on the ways in which mental illness and the Israeli and Palestinian conflict have been presented and understood, she demonstrated how the media play a vital role in constructing, through story lines, headlines and key statements, what people think about key issues. For example she highlighted how public views of those with mental illness are dominated by how they are often portrayed negatively in films (such as *Psycho* or *Fatal Attraction*), TV programmes and in the printed press.

Capacity to expand and develop

A question and answer session with the morning speakers followed these presentations, during which further questions were raised about the capacity of social science to expand and develop. Lunch followed, during which conference participants were able to mingle and look at the many displays by our sponsors.

There were two workshop sessions in the afternoon. These sessions covered the wide spectrum of topics under the conference theme. Some presentations explored myths in various areas of social policy, for example, Siddig Elzailaee (Working Lives Institute) examined whether refugees really were 'abusing the system', whilst Katherine Nice (Social Policy Research Unit, University of York) explored whether pensioners were really as financially vulnerable as commonly thought.

New techniques

Other workshops illustrated new techniques for doing research on social issues, which aimed to disprove commonly held myths. For example, Wendy Olsen (Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research) outlined a new method to apply objectivity to poverty studies whilst Ruth Bradshaw (Commission for Rural Communities) looked at new methods to challenge the myth of the rural idyll.

Research in practice

The conference ended with a panel discussion, chaired by Ceridwen Roberts, vice chair of the SRA, structured around the conference title. The three panellists, Cllr Clyde Loakes (leader of the council, the London Borough of Waltham Forest), Paul Ellis (head of research, Refugee Council) and Dermott Scott (director of the European Parliament's UK Office) outlined how they, in their own policy fields, use social research to combat common myths and misperceptions. The discussions by the panel and the floor focused on issues raised throughout day with much debate again on the role of social research in political decision-making, the role of the media in shaping perceptions and the interplay between the two.

The day was a great success and was ended with a well-received drinks reception sponsored by NatCen.

Select papers and presentations from the day are available on the SRA website www.the-sra.org.uk

Looking Forward

SRA chair, Barbara Doig, gives her quarterly report.

The first newsletter of the year is a good time to look forward, with a new executive in place. I would like to thank committee members who demitted office at the AGM. Richard Lewis has steered the finances and committee through challenging times with a sure touch; Chris Goulden has given sterling service as editor of SRA News and invaluable support on research policy issues; and Simon Maxwell has contributed so much to managing and advising on up-dating our office systems. I am particularly grateful that they are carrying on contributing to the SRA for a time into 2007. Thanks also to Fenella Hayes, Scottish branch representative.

I am especially grateful to members who return to the executive committee after a time away. So, welcome back to Judith Sidaway who has declared a particular interest in the concerns of independent researchers who are SRA members. And a warm welcome to the younger cohort of members who are joining the executive for the first time – Emmeline Cooper (currently with the Audit Commission and with local authority and private sector experience), Chris Dowsett (working for ONS and with a particular interest in media communications), and Julie Carr who represents the Scottish branch (from a mixed academic, central and local government background). Oliver Hayllar, who has been a co-opted member of the committee since the summer, is now a full member; as chair of the events committee he led the team delivering our recent successful conference (see front page).

We want to ensure that the interests of all members are represented, and to be as flexible as possible so that senior members of the profession, mid-career and the new generation of social researchers can all be active in the SRA in a way that fits in with working lives and domestic responsibilities. This is very important for securing long-term sustainability.

"I would welcome any views on the editorial slot"

2006 was a year of consolidation and development. We welcomed Dr Nigel Goldie as the first executive director of the SRA, continued to develop branch activities in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, updated our office systems and completed a report developing curriculum guidelines for training in research commissioning.

Nigel will work with the executive on priorities for 2007 and beyond to secure the next step change to our services, activities and profile. These are likely to include a drive to increase membership numbers; implementing our three-year training programme targeted at experienced and mid-career researchers (see page 4); further improving services to members whilst providing training and development opportunities, including conferences and seminars. We will also clarify and firm up many aspects of our governance including inducting new committee members, the requirements of moving o charitable trust status and associated accountability, reporting and management arrangements. Communications between the committee and members during this period will be critical to the SRA's future success. We will develop a strategy for communications with members and with the external research and policy and practice communities.

My editorials are a small cog in our communications network. I have used the slot to report on our key activities and developments. I would welcome any views on what you would like to hear about in the chair's editorial slot. Should it adopt more of a 'leader' style commenting on research policy and practice issues of the day; or touch on issues which might be affecting social researchers' jobs in different sectors? Should it alert members to new developments or describe where the SRA sits alongside other researcher groups and organisations? Perhaps it needs to be a mixture of all of these? I would be grateful for your thoughts and will raise these questions with the committee during 2007.

Email Barbara with your comments: barbara.doig@gmail.com

SRA Announces ESRC Funding Award

We are delighted to announce plans for a new development programme for advanced training for mid-career and senior social researchers following our successful bid to the ESRC Research Development Initiative (RDI). Cathy Sullivan, chair of the SRA training committee, reports.

This is the first time that such an award has been made to a learned society and follows intensive efforts following our recent review to improve advanced training support for social researchers throughout their careers.

SRA training

Since 1978, SRA's training committee of volunteers has co-ordinated an annual training programme offering short courses for recent entrants to the profession and those needing refresher training. It supports some professional development through courses on contemporary issues and developments. This will continue.

Recently, there has been a welcome increase in research training provision both inside and outside the academic sector. As an established training provider, we have played a key role in this and will now extend our own provision. This forms the central focus of this ESRC-supported initiative, addressing a gap in training and development for more senior practising researchers in social policy and applied research fields. It will also enable us to work more extensively with our academic constituents who include research practitioners, trainers and supervisors.

Training development programme

The three-year award, from January 2007 to December 2009, gives us the opportunity to develop and deliver innovative advanced training in key areas of demand. We will achieve this through a suite of courses on topics which strengthen knowledge and skills in three areas:

- Research and project management: effective planning, management and utilisation of research
- Contemporary areas of development: such as participatory research, reviewing evidence, quality assurance and ethics
- Professional development: opportunities for advanced skills tuition, for example, qualitative data analysis, multiple methods and interpretation and explanation in social inquiry

The need for such training was identified in our recent review; the conclusions of recent ESRC-supported studies of training needs and employment of social science researchers (NCRM 2005; Purcell 2005); as well as the demographics review; and the emerging knowledge transfer agenda with its concerns about relevance and excellent social science.

We will target people with some confidence and experience of practising and managing research across social research sectors. Our programme will help improve the skills, motivation and contribution of mid-career researchers who will, in turn, encourage the growth of junior researchers. It will also provide an opportunity to tap into the knowledge and experience of senior social scientists as they leave full-time employment.

We are recruiting a part-time training development director to develop the extension programme. The director will report to a steering group and will identify and recruit suitable partner individuals or organisations as course developers to design and convene programme elements.

Timetable and regional delivery

Following a four-month set up and planning stage, we will offer regular training events until December 2009.

Our membership is UK-wide, although is concentrated in the South East reflecting the concentration of social research employment. Over the last few years, we have developed strong representation in Scotland, and are launching new branches in Wales and Ireland. A key aim of the programme is to repeat training activities twice in different regions.

Training forum

We plan to set up a training forum to encourage collaboration and provide a sustainable infrastructure for partnership work. This will share ideas on training design and practice issues, consider innovative research mentoring and other informal training models and connect with providers, trainers, employers and other institutions committed to training development. The forum will work collaboratively with other networks, through NCRM for example, or as part of regional developments.

Get in touch

If you have relevant experience and expertise and are interested in contributing to the programme as course developers or joining the training forum please contact Nigel Goldie, executive director (Nigel.Goldie@the-sra.org.uk) or Cathy Sullivan, chair of the SRA training committee (C.Sullivan@londonmet.ac.uk).

Improving training for commissioning research

A report of the ESRC-funded project on the development of training for research commissioning is now on the SRA website. Janie Percy Smith and Alison Darlow of Leeds Metropolitan University undertook this project on behalf of the SRA initiative on research commissioning and funding. It sets out a range of recommendations on how to undertake effective commissioning, and explores options for the development of different forms of training. The work of the SRA initiative group meanwhile continues, and further information is available from Janet Lewis (janet@jdlewis.freeserve.co.uk).

New post of training director for the SRA

We are currently recruiting for our first half-time post of training director. See page 4. Details are on the SRA website or contact admin@the-sra.org.uk

SRA workshop: Data Linkage: exploring the potential

March 19th at the Council Chamber of the Royal Statistical Society, London

Data linkage offers researchers the prospect of greatly expanded datasets at minimal cost, from both survey and administrative sources. This workshop will focus mainly on some practical aspects of linkage and examples of what it has to offer. Topics will include how to access administrative data, work underway to construct a matrix of identifiers to facilitate linkage to administrative data and methodological challenges/developments. Speakers include Lars Nesheim (UCL), George Smith (Oxford University), Ben Hickman (LGA), Peter Elias (IER) and Iain Bell (DWP). There is a registration fee of £10 for this event. Numbers are limited and interested people should apply with their name, organisation and full email address to NCRM's workshop administrator, J.M.High@soton.ac.uk, for a place. A waiting list will be kept and anyone offered a place but subsequently unable to attend should let NCRM know immediately as we expect this event to be oversubscribed.

SRA annual conference 2007

The conference will take place in the first week of December, (likely on the 5th), at SOAS, London. We will issue a call for papers shortly. Keep an eye on our website at www.the-sra.org.uk

Getting Going on ACT!

The SRA is a membership organisation and keeping in touch with members is crucial. For years, we have relied on an Access-based membership database. This provided good but limited service, mainly storing contact and membership renewal information. Last year, we decided to buy ACT! - Sage membership software, which we could integrate with the Sage accounting software already in use.

ACT! is now installed and operational with all data from the old system through an initial cleaning prior to transfer. However, there is much cleaning required to eliminate duplicate entries and standardise how addresses are entered. For example, government departments are recorded in many ways with varying acronyms, abbreviations and titles, often reflecting the many re-organisations which have occurred. So, do not be surprised if we send you a form asking for basic information. This will be to ensure that the data we hold about you is accurate and consistent.

The new system is much more than a database, as it will become the primary office system for running the affairs of the SRA. All emails with members will be handled through ACT! so a record will be kept of all transactions, course and conference attendances and so forth. This means for example, we will be able to gauge potential interest in a proposed high-level course by contacting all those members having attended one at a basic level. This targeting can be done across any of the fields of information that we have on members such as research interests, where they live, nature of their work and so on. Already, we have sent a targeted email to all 200+ members with an interest in areas of activity relating to Home Office functions to seek their views as part of a DTI review of research in the Home Office.

As well as exploring how to provide a more responsive service to members, we are also seeking to provide new services through the functionality within ACT!. If you have any views on what might be provided please send them to me at nigel.goldie@the-sra.org.uk.

Nigel Goldie, SRA executive director

Academy of Social Sciences Committee of Learned Societies: events and activities

Annual Debate "What is Scientific about Social Science?"
Monday 12 March, London (during the ESRC Festival of Social Science)

Seminar on Evolutionary thinking in the Social Sciences
Wednesday 14 March, Bath

Joint events with the Royal Irish Academy
Two events have been proposed, on the topic of research assessment, one to be organised by the RIA in Dublin on 3 May and one to be organised by the Academy of Social Sciences in Belfast in June.

Further information: www.the-academy.org.uk

Gowers: a step in the right direction

The British Academy welcomes the publication of the *Gowers Review of Intellectual Property*. The intellectual property regime is crucial for the development of, and access to, knowledge. In particular it impacts on the way in which researchers in the humanities and social sciences are able to use research material. The academy commented, "We are pleased that the *Gowers Review* has recognised that the UK copyright system should be more flexible in its application, and endorses the principle that 'fair uses' of copyright can create economic value without damaging the interests of copyright owners". These arguments were made powerfully by the Academy both in its response to Gowers, as well as in its subsequent report, *Copyright and Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

The report of the *Gowers Review* is available from http://tinyurl.com/bvds2. The academy's submission to Gowers is available from www.britac.ac.uk/reports. *Copyright and Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences* together with its accompanying guidelines, is available at www.britac.ac.uk/reports/copyright or in hard copy from Jo Blore: j.blore@britac.ac.uk / 020 7969 5225.

SRA News: May issue

We welcome all contributions. Please email news and other items to Chris.Dowsett@ons.gsi.gov.uk by 31 March.

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

BOOKS FOR REVIEW

Sex, drugs and young people: International perspectives
Edited by Aggleton, P., Ball, A., and Mane, P., (Routledge) 2006

The Sage Handbook of Fieldwork
Edited by Hobbs, D., and Wright, R., (Sage) 2006

Anthropologies of modernity: Foucault, governmentality and life politics
Edited by Inda, X., (Blackwell) 2005

Action research living theory
Whitehead, J., and McNiff, J., (Sage) 2006

Voices for democracy: struggles and celebrations of transformational leaders
Edited by Keller, P., and Van Der Bogert, R., (NSSE) 2006

Policy analysis for practice: applying social policy
Spiker, P., (Polity Press) 2006

Landscapes of voluntarism: news spaces of health, welfare and governance
Edited by Milligan, C., and Conradson, D., (Polity Press) 2006

Contact the SRA if you would like to review any of the above. If you write a short review, you get to keep the item!

SRA SCOTLAND

Chris Nicol reports

The SRA database indicates that there are nearly 350 people in Scotland linked to the organisation. Over recent years, to cater for this client group, the Scottish committee has developed a portfolio of training programmes which have proven to be very successful, including a range of different events often delivered in conjunction with organisations such as the Royal Statistical Society and the Scottish Executive together with a programme of evening seminars.

Over the last six months, the committee membership has changed. We have some new faces and some new members taking on key responsibilities such as London representative and training coordinator. The committee is made up of a small core of people and we would welcome new members to help expand this. If you want more details about how to get involved, or have a topic that you think might be appropriate for a seminar please get in touch.

Since the last SRA news, we have run three events. In October, Jane Robertson from Stirling University delivered an interesting paper on the quality of life for people with dementia.

In November, Chris Creegan, from the Scottish Centre for Social Research discussed a study looking at advocacy in the children's hearing system. This was a formal presentation of the reports findings and was held in conjunction with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration.

We held a joint session with the Social Research Section of the Scottish Executive which looked at e-tendering. This session familiarised suppliers with the e-tender system, highlighted the 'dos and don'ts' of e-tendering, and provided tips on using the system more effectively.

Forthcoming events are on the website. In February, Roona Simpson, University of Edinburgh will discuss 'Delayed childbearing in Britain'. Pat Macleod of TNS will provide the evening seminar for March looking at work she was involved in for the Scottish Executive on 'Improved Public Transport for Disabled People'.

We are putting together the Scottish training programme for 2007. If you are interested in hearing about the training events as they become finalised or if you have any other questions on events or seminars please contact Lindsay Adams on scotland@the-sra.org.uk

For further information about the SRA in Scotland, contact Lindsay Adams as above or Chris Nicol (chrisnicol@capitalcitypartnership.org) or 0131 270 6077.

SRA IRELAND

Peter Humphreys reports

We held our first branch meeting of 2007 in early January, and agreed priorities for the coming year including:

- Organising our spring conference on evidence-based policy development, which has already attracted support from the Department of the Taoiseach
- Evening seminars in organisations represented in the branch to share information on current research developments
- Developing research and training courses
- Undertaking a web-based members survey
- Building up the branch outside Dublin.

In Autumn 2006, the IPA hosted the first conference of local authority researchers, and that new network is very keen to link in with and support the SRA.

Already we have members in a wide and growing range of bodies across the island of Ireland, including:

- Centre for Housing Research (www.centreforhousingresearch.ie)
- Combat Poverty Agency (www.cpa.ie)
- Comhairle (www.comhairle.ie)
- Equality Authority (www.equality.ie)
- Insight Statistical Consulting (www.insightsc.ie/)
- Institute of Public Administration (www.ipa.ie).
- Institute of Technology Tralee (www.ittralee.ie/)
- KW Research and Associates Ltd. (kwresearch@eircom.net)
- MORI Ireland (www.mori.com/sri)
- National Children's Office (www.nco.ie)
- National Council for Special Education (www.ncse.ie/)
- National Disability Authority (www.nda.ie)
- Northern Ireland Policing Board (www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/)
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (www.nisra.gov.uk/)
- One Family (www.onefamily.ie/)
- PMG Consulting (www.pmg-consulting.org/)
- University College Cork (www.ucc.ie/en/)
- University of Ulster (www.ulster.ac.uk/)

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 either myself at phumphreys@ipa.ie or Candy Murphy at cmurphy@onefamily.ie

Cathie Marsh Memorial lecture

Oliver Hayllar, chair of the SRA events committee reports.

This recent RSS/ SRA Cathie Marsh Memorial lecture focused on Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) and their use within social research and policy evaluation.

Chloe Chitty (assistant director of RDS NOMS, Home Office) outlined the historic use of policy evaluation research including RCTs in the field of UK correctional policy. She believes RCTs are the 'Gold Standard' for evaluation research but have too often been ignored due to the lack of awareness on the issues surrounding the quality of research and too much focus being given to doing research which provides quick results. She highlighted some of the drawbacks of various non-RCT research approaches and highlighted the challenges facing RCT research development.

Education research

Carole Torgerson (Department of Educational Studies, University of York) outlined the use of RCTs within educational research; highlighted the common practical, ethical and financial oppositions to RCTs; and reviewed their use within key educational research studies such as the High/Scope Perry Pre-School study.

Philip Davies (executive director, Campbell Collaboration and senior research fellow, American Institutes for Research) gave an overall summary of the worth of RCT research summarising that their use is vital "…because RCTs can help get policy initiatives right more often than wrong".

Continued developments

Susan Purdon (Quantitative Methods Advisor, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), acted as discussant for the papers and raised concerns about the firmness of Government's commitment towards undertaking RCT evaluations as well as issues to do with the need to ensure the continued development of high quality evaluation research of both RCT but also experimental design.

Following a question and answer session there followed a drinks reception sponsored by NatCen.

Looking ahead

The date for this year's RSS/ SRA Cathie Marsh Memorial lecture is Tuesday 6th November with the theme to be confirmed in the next issue of SRA news.

Further details about the Cathie Marsh Memorial lecture can be found on the SRA website or from Oliver Hayllar o.hayllar@natcen.ac.uk

Carole Willis – an appreciation

Carole Willis, who has died aged 55, was an assistant director in the Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate with special responsibility for research, statistics and evaluation on crime, disorder and policing.

Carole initially studied mathematics, statistics and sociology at Imperial College London. She then began her career at the Home Office carrying out research on police/community relations and race relations. She was involved in studies, which covered difficult issues of that time such as stop and search and tape-recording police interviews with suspects. She was also involved in analysis of the British Crime Survey.

In 1988, Carole moved to the Law Society of England and Wales to establish a new research function to study the legal professions. This appointment was a far-sighted one on the part of the society, and under her direction, the English and Welsh professions, through a variety of methodologies, became some of the best documented in the field. In addition to collecting regular statistical data, the unit commissioned NatCen (then SCPR) to carry out the first survey of private practice and a panel study of solicitors' firms. The Policy Studies Institute carried out a cohort study of those entering the legal professions.

Carole returned to the Home Office in 2000 and, as well as again tackling controversial research areas, had responsibility as head of profession for supporting the training and career development of researchers there.

She was remarkable in her ability to promote social policy research. With persistence, perceptiveness and strategic awareness, Carole tackled that complex and sometimes frightening relationship between research and policy. She engaged with and enabled policy colleagues and ministers to understand the role and value of good research. Persuasive, elegant, funny and ever optimistic, Carole made both a strong personal and professional contribution to criminology and socio-legal studies.

She is survived by her husband Bill Saulsbury, previously a researcher with the Police Foundation, and their daughter Faye.

Judith Sidaway, independent researcher and formerly head of the Research Unit at the Department for Constitutional Affairs

Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences: The Way Forward

Professor Stephen Gorard introduces the second annual conference to be held on 12th to 14th September at the University of York.

Call for papers: details at http://trials-pp.co.uk/ or email: educ505@york.ac.uk

In September, the University of York hosted the first annual conference on Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences. It focused on challenges and prospects for the conduct and use of trials to improve public policy. It was preceded by extended workshops on designing and analysing cluster randomised trials, and on synthesising evidence from a series of trials. Keynote speakers were Thomas Cook (Northwestern University) and Philip Davies (then at the Treasury and now the Campbell Collaboration). The peer-reviewed papers were both substantive and methodological, and included work on voter motivation, crime prevention, benefits schemes, job-seeking, adult literacy, children's services, health promotion, economic evaluation, and forensic settings. See website above for copies/details.

The annual conference is co-funded by 'Training in pragmatic social interventions: problems, promises, and protocols', part of the Researcher Development Initiative (RDI) set up by the ESRC, and led by Professor Stephen Gorard and Dr Carole Torgerson at the University of York. The RDI supports training and development of researchers in the social sciences at all stages of their careers. Established by the ESRC's Training and Development Board, RDI contributes to developing a robust national training infrastructure intended to systematically drive forward research training. RDI aims to facilitate the production and deployment of activities and resources, including student-led activities; training for research students and researchers; regional training events; and developing and using new training tools

and packages. The RDI is linked closely with other ESRC training activities and resources, such as the National Centre for Research Methods, and the Research Methods Programme (see www.rdi.ac.uk/).

The project is open to all, and we hope that readers will register interest in events, and the free quarterly newsletter 'Trials in Public Policy', by contacting http://trials-pp.co.uk/. There is a helpline for those conducting or planning a trials-based evaluation, a gateway to resources and methods articles, a register of trials, publicity for our free training events that can be held in your own institution covering both teaching and learning about trials, and we have set up working groups looking at issues, including research methods training curricula, reporting trials, and definition of terms.

The randomised controlled trial is considered a valuable research design in assessing the effectiveness of public policy interventions, but it is also widely regarded as problematic for evaluating complex interventions of the kind often encountered in education, criminal justice and the wider social sciences. The response to these concerns has been to support the development of a model for complex interventions, calling for the consideration of a fuller research cycle involving theory and in-depth study as well as the trial itself. This has been used successfully as a basis for trials in education and health promotion, and has important similarities to the more recent 'design experiment' methodology applied to educational innovation. The term 'trials' here is understood very widely, and includes randomised-controlled trials, natural experiments, design studies, and even thought-experiments.

Researchers at the University of York recognised the need for wider understanding of the use of trials in public policy, and instituted a supportive collaboration (York Trials Methods Group, www.york.ac.uk/res/trialmethods/) among departments undertaking trials. The group is currently undertaking trials in education, psychology, crime, social work, health studies and economics. Its collaboration provides mutual support and expertise via meetings and workshops, and has a training function to support the academic development of junior staff. Future activities include workshops, debates, internet discussions, web-based resources, published protocols in downloadable form, and methodological papers. In order to provide and create these resources, we have assembled a team of experts in the conduct of public policy interventions based across the UK and abroad. Across a range of fields in public policy, we wish to contribute to the growth of the number of researchers who hold mature and reasonable views on the value of rigorous interventions, who can be appropriately critical and appreciative of progress in this area.

Training Researchers on Ethics and Ethical Practice in Social Science Research

By *Christine Milligan*, *Dave Archard*, *Hazel Biggs*, *Nayanika Mookherjee* and *Carole Truman*

Core to all good social science research is a commitment to ethical practice in the development, undertaking, analysis and dissemination of that research. The growing range and sophistication of social research also highlights the need for more explicit understandings of what constitutes good practice for all social scientists. Greater awareness of the complexity of human-centred research has created demand for more formal ethical review processes both in universities and other institutions. But while ethical review is important, it is only part of the story. Understanding how to deal with situations where adherence to formal ethical guidance may be problematic (for example in some non-UK research) and how to cope with the unexpected ethical dilemmas that arise in the field are also of crucial importance if we are to undertake ethically sound research.

With this in mind, a team of academics from Lancaster University and the University of Bolton put together a successful bid that has won them a prestigious ESRC Research Development Initiative (RDI) award. The team held its first workshop in December 2006. The workshop proved extremely popular and was fully booked within ten days of advertising it! Thirty participants came from across the UK to enjoy three days of training and discussion. The team will deliver a further series of workshops over a three-year period with the aim of enhancing social researchers' knowledge and understanding of what constitutes good ethical practice in undertaking people-centred research.

Over the three years, the RDI will offer a series of interrelated three-day workshops and activities that approach ethics in three distinct ways:
1. They will aim to increase researchers' knowledge and critical understanding of research ethics as process
2. They will aim to increase researchers' knowledge and critical understanding of research ethics as practice in undertaking ethically sound research
3. Consideration of the ethical implications and issues raised by different methodologies forms a guiding principle of the RDI.

Though training will primarily address research conducted within Higher Education, it is not restricted to this sector. Applications from researchers working in the private, statutory and voluntary sectors as well as user groups are also most welcome. Participants on the first workshops in December 2006 came from a wide variety of post-graduate and post-experience researchers spread across higher education and government.

The programme

Training is organised around six core themes that will include:

1. Ethics as Process (including training for members of ethical review committees; ethics review procedures as well as key legal and regulatory procedures)
2. Ethics as Practice in UK research settings (designing good ethical research; informed consent; anonymity and confidentiality; and safety and risk in the field in UK settings)
3. Ethics as Practice in non-UK settings (research design and ethical dilemmas in non-UK settings; cultural sensitivities; and understanding safety and risk in the field in non-UK settings)
4. Ethical Practice when working with vulnerable groups (increasing awareness of difference and ethical concerns when working with a range of vulnerable populations)
5. Ethics and Participation (ethical issues surrounding participatory research and regulation; and ethics and ethnographic research)
6. Ethics and the Media (ethical issues arising in research using both traditional media sources as well as the internet)

Though each theme will be repeated once over the three-year period, the second workshop will offer a more advanced level training to enable participants to increase their depth of knowledge and understanding around a core theme of interest. Each workshop forms a coherent

self-contained package that can be taken individually, or as a series of interrelated workshops and activities aimed at increasing the researcher's knowledge and understanding of what constitutes good ethical practice in the undertaking of human-centred research.

So, participants will have the option of attending a single event, a two-event package that offers induction and advanced level training around a specific theme, or a combination of events that best meets their own specific training needs.

Participants will also have the opportunity to engage in more informal discussions aimed at encouraging the exchange of knowledge and ideas with their peers and members of the RDI team over optional drinks and an evening meal.

The training team

The core training team consists of: Dr Christine Milligan (PI), Prof Dave Archard, Prof Hazel Biggs, Dr Nayanika Mookherjee (all from Lancaster University) and Prof Carole Truman (Bolton University). The team has a wide range of interdisciplinary expertise that includes applied social sciences, health, geography, law, philosophy, sociology and women's studies. Each member of the team is research active and is able to draw on their combined knowledge of different aspects of research ethics as applied to a wide range of different groups and settings, using different methodological approaches, in both the UK and elsewhere. Each workshop will be convened and delivered by one or more members of the training team but will also draw on the interdisciplinary expertise of a wide range of other academics from across Lancaster University.

A key feature of each workshop is that it will offer participants the opportunity to hear from, and engage with, an invited expert in

the field from elsewhere in the UK. An exciting range of speakers has already been confirmed for the first half of the RDI to include:

- **Dr Althea Allison** – OREC Manager for Thames Valley, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight
- **Dr Jane Barrett** – Clinical Director: Medico-legal Investigations
- **Dr Rosaleen Duffy** – Dept Politics – Manchester University
- **Dr Lea Esterhuizen** – International Institute of Human Rights
- **Prof John Gledhill** – Professor of Social Anthropology, Manchester University
- **Prof Martin Hammersley** – Dept Education, Open University
- **Ms Cath Joynson** – Communications Officer, Nuffield Council
- **Dr Rachel Pain** – Dept Geography, Durham University

Dissemination

The training team plans to hold a one-day seminar towards the end of the RDI aimed at disseminating information and good practice.

A key feature of the RDI is that it aims to share ethical practice in social research as widely as possible. With this in mind, all speakers and trainers are being asked to contribute their course materials toward the development of an online ethics resource. This will be made accessible to all researchers from across the UK and wider, and should provide a resource for supervisors, trainers and researchers located in universities as well as other institutional settings. The resource will be developed during the final six months of the initiative and it is anticipated that it will be online by the end of 2009.

For further information about this training initiative see http://tinyurl.com/yh66ou

To book a place on one of the workshops, email Sheryl Coultas: s.coultas@lancaster.ac.uk

An Academician Life for you?

The Academy of Social Sciences has been in operation since 2000 and was formed from the earlier umbrella organisation 'ALSISS' (Association of Learned Societies in Social Sciences) to which the SRA has been affiliated for many years. The academy's council has recently appointed another wave of academicians to add to its list of around 400. But how do you become an academician, and what are the benefits of having the letters AcSS after your name? *Carol Riddington*, SRA representative on the Committee of Learned Societies, gives an insight.

What is the Academy of Social Sciences?

The academy represents the broad range of people working in the UK who are part of the social sciences. This includes social scientists working in education and institutes as well as practitioners. Individuals are represented through membership of organisations such as the SRA and for some, by being an academician.

If you are not yet an academician, then as a member of the SRA, your views as a social scientist can be made known via the College of Learned Societies. I represent the SRA on the Committee of Learned Societies. The chair of the committee is Professor John Benyon (representing the Political Studies Association). I keep in regular contact with the SRA's executive committee to feedback outcomes from the Committee of Learned Societies as well as to take any particular issues the SRA's executive committee wishes to raise back to the academy. Academics also have representation via the Committee of Academicians. Both committees report to the fifteen member council

(of which Ceridwen Roberts is a member). The council is chaired by Professor Miriam David and the president of the academy is Professor the Lord (Bhikku) Parekh.

How do you become an academician?

Nominations are sought every six months. They can be received by an academician or one of the member learned societies. The SRA can submit up to five academic and five non-academic nominations every year.

To be nominated, the SRA's executive committee seeks suggestions from its membership. Expressions of interest should be sent to the SRA. Those who are then nominated by the SRA complete a nomination form (downloadable from the academy website) and send this to the SRA for processing and forwarding to the academy by the required deadline.

Applicants have to demonstrate that they have contributed to the social sciences and are committed to meeting the academy's aims in furthering social science. Each learned society nomination has to be supported with a 'justification for nomination' by the executive committee.

Most academicians are scholars from higher education or institutes. Few practitioner social scientists appear to be put forward, and the academy wishes to address this by encouraging more learned societies and individuals to nominate such people. In the past, the SRA has nominated practitioner social scientists such as Alan Hedges, Nick Moon and Brian Gosschalk.

Evidence of contribution to social science

Applicants have to provide evidence of suitability. According to the academy's guidance 'Evidence of distinguished work may be drawn from a wide range of activities such as:

- a distinguished publications record
- supervision of doctoral studies
- major research projects
- innovative practice in teaching social science
- significant contributions to professional associations or learned societies
- innovative work in public or private sector practice
- application of social science research in new areas
- consultancy work for major clients drawing on sound social science research
- involvement in public bodies
- provision of evidence or policy advice to government departments
- innovative work of a more theoretical nature which extends the boundaries of fields of knowledge and enquiry in social science, particularly where this helps to establish interdisciplinary fields or new social science disciplines
- managing or directing an independent or government research organisation or similar body
- developing of public understanding of, and engagement with, social science.

Why become an academician?

Although becoming an academician is recognition by fellow social scientists of your eminence and your contribution to the field, this recognition does not simply stop at having more letters after your name. It requires you to contribute to shaping and developing the future of social science in the UK as well as advancing the academy's work. Once your details have been included on the database and you receive your formal acknowledgment you can:

- provide an authoritative voice for the academy to draw upon when seeking advice and assistance in consultations
- go on a list of names and experts which the academy can recommend to the ESRC for evaluation and consultancy work
- be recommended to journalists seeking expertise in your field of work
- receive preferential rates for academy publications
- receive the academy's regular Social Science Bulletins
- have the right to nominate scholars and practitioners for election as academicians
- initiate or join academy specialist groups
- participate in the Home Office interchange scheme
- apply for a New Zealand/UK travel grant.

The annual fee of £175, paid by all academicians, helps to fund the organisational admin.

So what's stopping you nominating a fellow member of the SRA?

The SRA has not nominated a member for some time, and I am sure that there are several members, especially practitioners, who could be put forward for consideration.

If you wish to nominate a member of the SRA, email Sangeeta Parmar at: sangeeta.parmar@the-sra.org.uk. Include details of the person's name, contact details and why you think they should be nominated. In order to process applications for the summer academy nominations, the SRA executive needs to receive details by 30 April.

Being part of the social science community

The academy organises events and opportunities for members. Visit the academy website to find out more about these and how to be active in this vibrant community.

For more information about the academy and becoming an academician, see www.acss.org.uk

Podcasting for Social Researchers

Have you ever fancied yourself as a DJ or radio presenter? Or enjoyed talking about your work to all and sundry, but not been able to muscle your way onto your local radio station or the Today programme? Well now you can, thanks to the rise of podcasting or do it yourself radio, which is enjoying a global online audience of millions and helping researchers tell the story of their work. **Paul Ayres**, *Research Officer, Intute: Social Sciences reports.*

In the last few years there has been a massive increase in the amount of audio content available online. It's something we noticed at Intute: Social Sciences, initially via teaching and learning communities, which were recording lectures in universities and making them available to students to revise from.

During ESRC Social Science week in 2006, we produced Social Sciences Voices, a look at the range of audio possibilities across all the social science disciplines and in a number of contexts. We also produced Economics in Action, in collaboration with the Economics Network and the Royal Economic Society, which featured economic researchers being interviewed about their work, with the aim of promoting the study of economic issues to younger people.

These one-off productions produced a lot of positive feedback and showed that there was an audience out there for audio programmes about issues that were important to researchers. In the autumn of 2006, we started a regular Intute: Social Sciences Podcast, a fortnightly, ten-minute programme featuring social science information news, interviews and updates about the latest social science websites.

What are the potential uses of podcasting for the research community?

Promoting research outcomes

Those who fund research are looking for more and more in terms of public engagement and impact on policy. Podcasts can provide this with short focused interviews, in language that is jargon free, but still intellectually sound. Remember that most audio downloads are three-minute pop songs, so it is best to provide shorter, ten-minute tasters of your research highlights, rather than an hour-long monologue.

Researchers talking with researchers

Podcasts also offer the potential to spread information within research communities, enabling debate, discussion and knowledge sharing. Regular subject-based programmes are more complicated to produce, as audio editing, sourcing material and presenting, rather than just talking, require extra effort. However, such an approach can produce a forum for researchers to engage on issues of substance, free from the soundbite culture of the mainstream media.

Events and marketing

Seminars, panel discussions and other public events can easily be recorded and made available online, increasing the potential audience for these events to anyone in the world. All participants, including the audience, should be made aware that the session is being recorded and will be made publicly available. This may impact on the candidness of some contributions from speakers, but it will open up the dialogue about research beyond those who can make it to a specific place, at a specific time.

There are limitations on audio as a medium. It can be seen as inefficient, as a ten-minute podcast takes ten minutes to listen to and could be summed up in a press release. Podcasts and online audio have also been criticised as suffering from the 'try me virus' effect, whereby Internet users may download your programme, but not listen to it, or choose not to return for the next one. However, this criticism could be levelled at websites or traditional research outputs, as visiting a website, downloading a report or purchasing a book, does not mean that it has been read or used.

The chance to reach people who would not normally hear your ideas, the freedom to portray your work in the way you wish and the opportunity to bridge the gap between research and the real world, mean that podcasting could become a vital part of research dissemination in the years to come.

Find out more:

Intute: Social Sciences Podcast www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/podcast/
Social Science Voices: www.sosig.ac.uk/voices/
Economics in Action: http://whystudyeconomics.ac.uk/blog/

A Short Introduction to Social Research

Henn, M., Weinstein, M. and Foard, N. 2006, London: Sage Publications

Reviewed by Annie Irvine, research fellow, Social Policy Research Unit, University of York

Based on a module from a distance-learning Masters course in research methods, this book is aimed at 'those lone researchers who are specifically charged with conducting small-scale research and who have access to a very limited budget'. It aims to help readers design 'realistic, viable and manageable' projects, using appropriate methods. Suggested audiences include researchers at Masters or early PhD level, and people who are asked to conduct a one-off piece of research at work.

As the title states, the book is indeed short and introductory. It provides an accessible and well-signposted overview of the theoretical, practical and ethical elements of designing and conducting a research project. However, it is not a stand-alone text: its origins as a course guide are apparent, and postgraduate students would certainly need to read further into their specific methodological areas (recommended reading lists are provided). There is considerable citing of classic methods texts and renowned authors in the field, and the keen student would wish to refer to the originals.

The book aims to be 'interactive and participative' and includes a number of self-study exercises. Inevitably, these are as useful as one makes them. Examples drawn from existing research studies (older and more recent) are valuable in bringing concepts to life and adding interest. The attention given to critical social research and the use of documents and official statistics perhaps provides distinctiveness among the range of introductory texts available.

Though it may be somewhat rudimentary for PhD students, this book fulfils the claim of its title and would be ideal preparatory reading for a Masters course. For the non-academic conducting a small-scale project in the workplace, the book provides a broad and user-friendly orientation to research design, the range of quantitative and qualitative techniques, and the theoretical and ethical debates underlying social research practice.

SPSS Survival Manual: a step-by-step guide to data analysis using SPSS version 12

Julie Pallant
2005, Second edition,
Open University Press

Reviewed by John F Hall, retired: previously principal lecturer in sociology and director, Survey Research Unit, Polytechnic of North London

In the late 1960s, two postgraduates at Stanford, Norman Nie and Dale Bent, *"fed up with the 'put a 1 in column 72' type command language of the programs at the time, devised a language that a political scientist would want to write to specify an analysis. They scraped together some funds and hired Tex Hull to help with coding the program. People got to hear about the program, which was superior in user interface to much that was available at the time, and requested copies[1]..."*

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was first released in the USA in 1968: in 1970 Tony Coxon brought a copy to the UK where it was installed by David Muxworthy and the late Marjorie Barritt at Edinburgh (the only university with an IBM computer). The rest is history, as they say.

SPSS currently has around 3,000,000 users worldwide. Usage now extends far beyond the social sciences for which it was originally conceived and written. Not many people know this, but Yorkshire Water uses SPSS to predict where sewage backups are most likely to occur in cellared houses next time it rains heavily!

As predicted, Julie Pallant's book has deservedly sold in thousands: the 2nd edition has already been reprinted twice to meet demand. It is written in a very user-friendly style with clear explanations of the what, when and why of descriptive and inferential statistical procedures which will be particularly helpful to those working by themselves on their own reports and dissertations.

One word of warning: the title is a slight misnomer. This excellent book is not about SPSS, but about using SPSS to perform a wide range of statistical analyses. It assumes some prior knowledge of basic statistics and is heavily biased towards inferential statistics and statistical modelling (with some associated graphics) for researchers and students in psychology, health sciences and related areas. The bibliography confirms this.

Unless they are confronted with a compulsory statistics element or need to use advanced statistical analysis and modelling, it is not entirely suitable for researchers or students in social policy, political science, sociology or anyone whose analysis and reporting depends largely on percentages from frequency counts and contingency

tables or, increasingly these days, graphic presentations.

The book skips over file design, data checking and editing: there is not very much on derived variables or graphics, and nothing at all on tabulation or macros. Without exception, all the examples and exercises use the SPSS drop-down menus (which incidentally explains why some useful, indeed essential, features of SPSS are not covered, since they are only available in syntax). For many frequently used procedures, this could be an extravagant waste of precious time when (except for those unable to spell or type, who should use PASTE) syntax is usually far quicker and safer.

Apart from a new chapter on log-linear regression and two additional paragraphs on the new Visual Bander facility for creating groups (plus a couple of new data sets, a few additional exercises and some typesetting changes) the book is unchanged from the first edition. Readers are therefore referred to my review[2] of the 1st edition and to the extensive additional comments[3] trimmed from it.

Whilst working through some of the exercises in the early part of the book (for a recent presentation[4] to the SPSS users' group, ASSESS[5]) I found some cumbersome and confusing instructions and at least two errors. First, variables in the data set survey.sav used in the data transformation exercises have already been transformed: second, the variable names for the correlation exercise do not match those in the data set. This is careless, especially in a text book, and should have been spotted years ago. I also timed these exercises comparing drop-down menus with direct syntax: drop-down menus were invariably slower (typically by a factor of 10 or more). Only the scatterplot was questionably as quick.

Users of the book will learn a lot of statistical theory (and get their assessments finished) but, unless they use syntax or explore the help menus, they won't learn much about what SPSS can really do. This won't stop them continuing to buy it in thousands, nor should it.

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1   Information kindly supplied by David Muxworthy.
2   www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/sra_nov_2002.pdf (SRA News, Nov 2002: see pages 10–11)
3   Available from the reviewer on hallj@wanadoo.fr
4   Hall, John F, Old Dog, Old Tricks: using SPSS syntax to avoid the mouse trap: paper (110 pp, 4.8mb) and PowerPoint slideshow (7.5mb) available from reviewer as above, or from ASSESS website below.
5   ASSESS 20th annual meeting at York University, 10 Nov 2006. See website http://www.spssusers.co.uk/

Researching Real-World Problems: A Guide to Methods of Inquiry

Zina O'Leary
2005, London: Sage Publications

Reviewed by William Solesbury, King's College London

Social researchers' use of the term 'the real world' always raises my hackles. What other world is there for them to study? So I approached this book with some scepticism. But within a few pages I was completely won over. For what O'Leary, from the University of Western Sydney, offers is advice on doing social research that is thoroughly realistic – in both its ambitions and its scope. Her starting point is the variety of societal problems, what research might contribute to their solution, what skills that requires. Thereafter, she addresses methodology under three headings: Laying Foundations (defining researchable questions, reviewing existing evidence, developing a research design,

timetable and budget), Researching Problems (understanding problems, exploring solutions, stimulating change) and Making Meaning/ Making a Difference (analysing and interpreting data, communicating research results).

Along the way, she deals with the familiar stuff of research methods books – sample sizes, interview methods, action research, statistical inference and so on. But what is unique and refreshing is how she frames them, contextualising each in their potential for helping the task of problem solving. This approach leads her also to embrace methods more familiar in consultancy or training than research, such as SWOT analysis, role-play, and story telling. And it brings out clearly the conscious choices that should be made in finding a methodology that is fit for a particular purpose. Some excellent tables and graphics help here – for example, in unpacking problems, differentiating sampling strategies, involving practitioners, comparing methods of data collection, or choosing presentation formats. She also has some great quotes at the start of each section.

Its title 'a guide to methods of inquiry' captures the book's virtues well. It is about 'inquiry', a broader activity than research as mostly practised. And it is a 'guide' that, like a good travel guide, provides information to enable you to choose what you want to do. As such, even the most practised social researchers would find this book thought provoking.

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EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT

SRA News will include any copy that may be of interest to its readers in the social research community. We will notify you if we are unable to include an item. Copy submitted for publication is accepted on the basis that it may be edited to ensure coherence within the publication. The views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

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30 September (November issue) and 31 December (February issue).

SRA TRAINING DATES

20 Feb	London	Access & Sampling for Diverse Populations *(now taking bookings)*
20 March	London	Effective Research Management
March	Birmingham	Introduction to Qualitative Analysis
20 March	London	Telephone Research Methods
19 April	London	Health & Safety for Researchers
25 April	London	Participatory Research Approaches
23 May	London	Qualitative Data Analysis
5 June	London	Reviewing Evidence Study Day
26 June	London	Cognitive Interviewing Methods

Booking details see **www.the-sra.org.uk** or email **admin@the-sra.org.uk**

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For more on the SRA see online at www.the-sra.org.uk