

RESPECT! *Professional and Ethical Codes for Technology-Related Socio-Economic Research*

The SRA is one of seven partners involved in a study starting this month and funded under the Fifth Framework through DG INFO SOC (Information Society, previously DG13) — known as RESPECT. This study is a departure from those often funded through this stream, in that it is addressing professional issues related to the conduct of research rather than a substantive topic. Sally Dench describes the project in more detail.

The project came out of the experience of other partners on various EU funded projects, raising issues of ethics, intellectual property rights and professional expertise. Not everyone involved in funding or conducting EU research studies comes from a professional research background or exhibits ethical and methodologically knowledgeable approaches.

The SRA is the only partner which is a membership organisation. It was asked to participate so that the wealth of experience of the SRA as an organisation could be drawn on directly (e.g. in drawing up and revising the ethical guidelines) as well as the wider knowledge and expertise of the membership. We will be looking at ways of involving SRA members in the project, for example, through direct contacts, seminars, commenting on final outputs.

The other partners are research institutes involved in a range of different types of research, each bringing a specific area of knowledge and experience to the project:

Institute for Employment Studies (IES) — the other UK partner, an independent research institute based in Brighton.

Centre de Recherches Informatique et Droit (CRID) a Research Centre for Computer and Law which is part of the University of Namur in Belgium.

Institute for Information, Telecommunications and

Media Law (ITM), part of the University of Munster in Germany.
Hoger Instituut voor de Arbeid (HIVA) — a social science research institute attached to the University of Leuven in Belgium.
Institute of Sociology, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.
Forschungs und Beratungsstelle Arbeitswelt (FORBA) — an independent research institute based in Vienna.

The overall objectives of this study are to develop common European standards and benchmarks for technology-related socio-economic research; foster high standards in cross-national and cross-disciplinary research relating to the Information Society Technologies (IST) programme; encourage the mobility of socio-economic researchers within the EU; and contribute to the broader ethical and professional debates within the socio-economic research community. The proposal is phrased in terms of technology-related research due to the programme under which it is funded. However, it is anticipated that the outputs will have wider currency providing a set of practices under which many other EU funded programmes should operate.

The overall outputs will be a set of codes of practice and a user manual derived from the following work packages:

- Intellectual property rights — this will include developing guidelines on how to conduct research on the internet and other media, corresponding to the copyright and related laws in force and soon to be enacted in EU member states. The law will remain complex with areas of harmonisation and various exceptions and limitations.
- Ethical issues — this will review and synthesise existing legislation, guidelines and codes relating to research ethics. This resulting code will address issues covered by the newly revised SRA guidelines. It will also take into account the variety of economic, cultural, legal and political settings within which

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www.the-sra.org.uk

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For more information about the SRA visit the SRA website www.the-sra.org.uk

The SRA website is sponsored by Bostock Marketing Group (BMG) www.bostock.co.uk

SRA NEWS – next issue

Copy deadlines for the next issues of the newsletter are:

30 June: September issue
30 September: November issue
31 December: February issue
31 March: May issue

We welcome all contributions. Please send all copy to the Editorial Committee, c/o SRA Administration Office.

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Report from the chair

Ceridwen Roberts

I am delighted to congratulate Ron Iphofen and his working party of senior SRA members for the production of the revised SRA Ethical Guidelines. Originally produced in the early years of the SRA in the 1980s, the Executive decided that developments in human rights and data protection legislation, let alone the changing world of social research meant we needed to update these. The Guidelines can be found on the SRA website and we hope everyone will visit this as soon as possible and brief themselves on the key points. Ron recently gave a paper about this at the seminar on *Ethics and Research Guidelines* organised by the Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences which was very well received. This is reproduced in this edition. It repays a read!



The SRA work on ethical guidelines now goes international. As Sally Dench reports on page 1, we now hold an European Commission contract to look more widely across the Union at ethical issues in research and, working in collaboration with others help to establish guidelines which are European wide. More news on this as the project unfolds. This is quite a coup for the Association.

The Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences is growing fast and establishing a reputation for encouraging a strategic look at the health of the Social Sciences in Britain. As its website (www.the-academy.org.uk) reveals, *'its mission, in partnership with its member Learned Societies, is the advancement within the United Kingdom of the social sciences in understanding today and shaping tomorrow'*. One of the key things the Academy has initiated to this end is a **Commission on the Social Sciences**. This has been meeting and working under the chairmanship of Prof. David Rhind for the last year or so. A variety of background papers on topics such as the 'fluctuating fortunes of the social sciences since 1945' and 'the social sciences and the media' have been produced and again, these are worth reading, and downloadable from the web.

The Commission has now written to the SRA and others asking us and our members to respond to a number of questions by the end of May. This your Executive will do and we would welcome any contributions and thoughts from you. Have a look at our website for these.

The questions are very diverse but one we will be focusing on is 'what factors undermine the effectiveness of British social science?' The Commission is offering an opportunity for all social researchers to tell it what makes social science research hard to do successfully in this country and equally, of course, what makes it work.

There are many areas of concern which members mention – in particular:

- too many short term funded projects which create difficulties in training and retaining good researchers who have no career structure;
- the issue of poor quality commissioning which can lead to considerable waste of time and resources;
- the limited number of social science funders and the danger that their increasingly proactive approach may stifle innovative research ideas;
- the fragmented nature of the 'profession' with many working 'bedded out' in isolation from other social researchers;
- the problem of developing ongoing research capacity and traditions of research understanding in small departments and units.

The Commission also asks for examples of good practice predicated upon social science research findings or theory. It wants too, to hear of examples of engagement of the social sciences with the wider community. It is much harder for the SRA Executive to know of all the many examples of this which would inform the Commission's case for the social sciences. So we really do need you to tell us about your experiences and the valuable contribution your research has made to practice, policy and society. Please write and tell us quoting any tangible evidence and published reports.

Quite rightly, the role of the media comes under scrutiny too. One of the Commission members is David Walker of the *Guardian* who wrote the discussion paper on the media. Here the Commission is concerned to understand why reporting is so variable. Some research gets favourable and accurate coverage. Other studies are misleadingly reported. And, of course, there is the key problem that many journalists report good and bad research equally uncritically. What can or should we do to help improve the level of media, and therefore public, understanding of the significance of the social research they report and read? Views from you are important and will enable us to make a useful SRA contribution to the Commission. Send them via email or snail mail to the SRA office.

So there is a lot going on in the politics of social research. As usual some of these wider issues will be covered in a variety of SRA fora including the summer event on 3 July. Do come along to this. It provides a really good opportunity to meet the SRA Executive and many other members in a relaxed and enjoyable setting and to take part in a stimulating debate.

**To advertise in SRA
News please contact
Suzanne Cohen on
020 8880 5684 or
admin@the-sra.org.uk**

MARK ABRAMS PRIZE – Call for Entries

The Mark Abrams Prize was first awarded by the SRA in 1986 to celebrate the 80th birthday of Dr Mark Abrams, the founder of Research Services Limited (RSL) in 1946 and a leading figure in social and market research in Britain in the post-war period. We are now calling for entries for the 2002 prize.

The prize of £800 will be awarded for the most original contribution to quantitative social research in terms of:

- Substantive content
- Methodology
- Impact on policy or dealing with a policy issue.

The competition is open to researchers, trainee researchers and students across all sectors of social research. In judging entries, account will be taken of the age and experience of the authors. Entries will be assessed by a panel of five judges, including a representative of the SRA Executive Committee.

The authors will be offered the opportunity to present their paper at the 2002 SRA Annual Conference, where the prize will also be awarded.

Papers

All entrants should submit a one-page abstract of their paper by 31 July 2002. The deadline for papers is 30 September 2002. Papers should not be longer than 5000 words, and should be written in English and suitable for reproduction on A4 paper. Please provide five copies. A brief curriculum vitae should be enclosed for each author. Please send synopses and papers to the address below, or contact Suzanne Cohen for further details.

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Announcement of Competition Results

The winner will be informed in writing and the prize will be given at the Annual Conference in December 2002. An announcement will be carried in the February 2003 issue of the SRA newsletter with a summary of the winning paper.

SOSIG: Making Sense of the Internet

The Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG) is a free internet service which aims to provide a trusted source of selected, high quality internet information for students, academics, researchers and practitioners in the social sciences, business and law. Funded by the ESRC and JISC it offers:

- **An Internet Catalogue** – to help locate high quality information sources on the Internet, pointing to over

18,500 web sites and internet resources, each selected and described by a subject specialist.

- **A Social Science Search Engine** – for effective internet searching - a database of over 180,000 social science web pages.
- **Grapevine** – an online community centre where you can find details of conferences, short-courses and over 7,500 social researchers.
- **My Account** – a chance to publicise your own information on Grapevine, and to sign up for regular emails telling you of new web sites, events and researchers in your particular area of interest.

Established in 1994, SOSIG is one of the longest running internet services for social science and with a million hits a month, is now considered by many as an essential research tool. Based at the ILRT, University of Bristol, the service is built collaboratively by staff at universities and research organisations across the UK, including The London School of Economics, The Institute of Advanced Legal Studies and The Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.

This year SOSIG has launched a number of new features:

- A new section on **European Studies** (The EuroStudies Gateway) run by staff at the European Research Institute and Information Services at the University of Birmingham.
- **Expert's Choice** - a new promotional feature highlighting the favourite web sites of social science researchers and practitioners – find out which web sites Charles Kennedy, Frances Cairncross (chair of the ESRC) and others recommend.

See what SOSIG can offer you at: www.sosig.ac.uk

Research In Practice

Produces a quarterly briefing with an update on developments in the **research in practice** network. This is a creative partnership between the Association of Directors of Social Services, The Dartington Hall Trust, The University of Sheffield and over 60 local authorities and child care organisations.

For more information contact: Celia Atherton on 01803 867692 or celia@rip.org.uk

Cathie Marsh Centre for Census Survey

The Cathie Marsh Centre for Census Survey and Research (CCSR) based at the University of Manchester has just prepared a new Short Course Programme for 2002/3 with a range of courses in research design and analysis.

For further information phone Nasira on 0161 275 4736 or email Nasira.Asghar@man.ac.uk or visit: www.ccsr.ac.uk/courses.htm

Equal Opportunities Statistics: Gender User Consultation

The Office for National Statistics is conducting a review of equal opportunities statistics and as part of the gender project we are launching a user consultation. We would like to find out your views of statistics broken down by gender and what could be changed.

Please take some time to look at the consultation documents. You can find them at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/genderstatistics>

If you would like to be a part of this consultation please fill in the questionnaire on the website and return it to us no later than Friday 21st June 2002.

Please alert as many people as you can to the user consultation since the more people that respond to the questionnaire means the more we will be able to understand users' needs as a result. If you know someone who would like to be a part of this user consultation but does not have access to the Internet please contact either myself or Paul Bailey and we will arrange for a postal questionnaire to be distributed.

If you have any queries or comments please do not hesitate to contact either myself or Paul Bailey, all contact details are available on the website.

Elizabeth Cowen

CITY City University London School of Social & Human Sciences

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Department of Sociology

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E-mail: socscipg@city.ac.uk. Please quote reference **SRM3**. www.city.ac.uk/human/asrm

The University for business and the professions

RESPECT!

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- socio-economic researchers work across Europe.
- Data protection — again existing legislation will be explored and synthesised, aiming to simplify the complexity and identify areas of harmonisation and where differences will remain.
- Professional qualifications — research occupations across the EU and major Accession States will be profiled, taking into account different national professional qualification and training frameworks, to make recommendations for the harmonisation or benchmarking of qualifications.
- Professional bodies and codes — a directory of existing professional bodies and their codes will be compiled, and information on the legal status and enforcement of these codes collected. These will be reviewed and synthesised, again taking national cultural, political and other differences into account.

The first task is to establish a set of codes of practice.

These will be consulted on and disseminated through a range of means including a web site, a project conference (around June 2003), presentations at other conferences, articles in journals and newsletters. It is not anticipated that this will be easy or that there will

necessarily be one final 'answer'. In some cases a spectrum of what is acceptable or 'good practice' may be needed to account for different political, cultural, legal and socio-economic contexts and traditions. The challenge will be to gain wider acceptance of the codes once the project ends.

For further information contact Sally Dench or Ron Iphofen (see SRA contact list on page 2). You can also check out the RESPECT website at www.respectproject.org

Are you running a course, seminar or conference?

If you are involved in (or know of) a training course, seminar or conference that other SRA members could attend, please contact: The SRA admin office.

Ethical Guidelines and Professional Regulations

By Ron Iphofen

The SRA's Ethical Guidelines are now complete. Ron Iphofen, SRA Vice Chair 1999-2001, discusses these below. This is a version of a paper delivered at the recent Academy of the Learned Societies for the Social Sciences one day Seminar on Ethics and Research Guidelines. The paper can also be found on the Academy website at www.the-academy.org.uk

The updating of the SRA's Ethical Guidelines has finally been completed and can be found on the website. Ongoing comment on our guidelines is invited and annual review by the Executive seems essential in the current climate.

As members will know, the update was done by a cross-sectoral working party of key members known to have an interest and expertise in ethical issues. Although the Executive Committee's concern began with the realisation that the guidelines had not been looked at since they were first established in the early 1980s, the working party's brief was to ensure the guidelines took account of more recent human rights and data protection legislation. There had been growing concerns within the membership, and requests for information and for advice about the implications for social research of new rights legislation. There was also a growing pressure to address the issue of research governance. Following a tightening of the regulatory process in the NHS, for example, new formal procedures for transparent accountability in research were introduced by the Department of Health last year. Indeed as our work gathered pace we sought and received some worrying anecdotes about ethical concerns from research workers in a range of fields - more particularly in the areas of health and social care.

We also became aware of a growing concern over the power and function ethical review committees. There had been a particularly lively debate on Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the USA. An article by Frank Furedi in the Times Higher, critical of research ethics committees, raised some of the dilemmas involved in ensuring that the quality and independence essential for good research were being balanced against the rights of, and obligations to, those being studied. He expressed concern that the growth and growing power of ethics committees is a consequence of an institutionalised fear of litigation and posed a threat to academic freedom.

Since they err on the side of caution, any innovative or sensitive research is unlikely to be sanctioned. Indeed some traditional approaches - such as covert observation are viewed with such suspicion that social researchers will be disprivileged in comparison with journalists who have no such qualms when there is a chance of a 'good story'. Even Howard Becker is now calling himself a 'conceptual artist' so that his work cannot fall subject to

ethical review. Experience of the IRBs does suggest a cause for concern in their gate keeping of all human subjects research, and the difficulties and delays involved in gaining permission to engage in legitimate forms of enquiry. Of course, minor delays do have to be balanced against a concern for the rights of research participants and much depends upon how well the committees do their job.

Ethical judgements

There is little dispute that ethical review requires making judgements. In many cases it requires balancing the costs and benefits to the research participants of their engagement in the research process. Frequently, such judgements are made 'on behalf' of the putative participants before they are approached for their participation, and those judgements should relate to the fundamental principles of moral philosophy. The conventional approach is to refer to goal-based, duty-based and rights-based deontological principles. In part these draw upon a developed philosophy of utilitarianism which argues that the ethical justification for all research is dependent upon: who does it (the profession); what they do it for (aims and intent); and how they go about doing it (methods/practice).

Practice

Concern for the rights and well being of research subjects/participants lies at the root of ethical review. Twenty years ago researchers seemed less concerned about the vulnerability of research participants. Today, vulnerability is a prime concern and we reviewed the SRA guidelines with this in mind. The very young and the very old, together with those with learning disability occupied our attention. Vulnerability is linked to the problem of routinely socially excluded participants and we had to ask whether or not the potential for social exclusion in research was an ethical or methodological concern (or both)? These issues have come to the fore in recent years but they were not fully considered in the earlier guidelines.

When methods are compared, there does seem to be a view amongst some observers that there are inherently 'unethical' procedures. Covert observation is seen as particularly problematic although I personally retain doubts about conventional 'randomised controlled trials' which is the gold standard as far as some medical researchers are concerned. In many cases, such trials depend upon the subtle coercion of 'captive' subjects - i.e. patients. It is difficult to ensure that patients do not feel pressured into participation.

We spent some time considering what advances in information technology meant for research ethics. Enhanced data archiving makes possible the recording, retaining and re-analysing of data, which has, in turn, encouraged the seeking of data retention longer than was previously thought necessary - thereby enhancing the dangers of leaking confidentiality and anonymity. Similarly enhanced data management - 'fusion',

matching and transfer - captures the popular imagination more than all the other concerns: 'What do they know about me? Who might they tell?'

We were also privileged to be asked to consider issues of safety and risk for field researchers. We did spend some time addressing whether the maintenance of the safety of field researchers was an ethical or a more practical managerial concern to do with danger on the job. The SRA was approached by Prof. Gary Craig's group who were taking a lead on safety concerns for researchers - again something that had rarely been considered in any detail before. Not that research had become more dangerous - but there was increased awareness that consideration for subjects should be matched by consideration for those doing the 'subjecting'. We included comment upon that in our updated guidelines and, as an association, endorsed and commended Gary Craig's group's guidelines. These again can be found on the SRA website.

Aims

Given the origins of independent ethical review in the post-world war Nuremburg trials of Nazi crimes it can never be enough to suggest that the 'ends of research justify the means'. Thus, merely wanting to understand more about how the world works is unlikely to be a sustainable justification for research activity. I suppose most social researchers must have a fundamental scientific curiosity about people and society - although the idea of substantive blue skies research remains a long sought-after ideal in the social sciences. (There is little chance of commanding the sorts of funds provided elsewhere, such as in sub-atomic physics.) So the ethical judgement involved here has to do with whether or not blue skies research - with no immediately evident added value - constitutes 'responsible' research activity in an era when research resources are being hotly competed for and the pressure for relevance is high.

Some form of human/communal/societal benefit does act as an overarching principle. Many will participate in research if it benefits their community and/or society. It might be impossible to estimate a value to society accurately assessed separately from the interests of the researcher - what researcher could not see some general benefit to the work they are doing? So the researcher is not best placed to make a judgement that balances the costs against the benefits to subjects.

More particularly with the last two Labour governments in the UK, social research has made significant policy contributions. Opportunities to contribute to policy from research look set to continue to grow. It is vital that the contributions made by social research are sensible, apt, valued and ethically unproblematic. Again, this raises issues of sustained responsibility if such an opportunity is not to be squandered. In the same way, since research knowledge and information does constitute a marketable product, outputs are subject to quality assessment, estimates of worth and value for money. Those SRA members in

independent research agencies will be acutely aware of how delays occasioned by ethical review or legal challenges prompted by ethical compromise can jeopardise the 'added-value' of research knowledge.

Whatever the researcher's sector of activity (public, private, academic) there is little doubt that the research product has become an assessed determinant of career progress. In academia the RAE attempts to quantify this. For the public and private sector it has more to do with how well 'accounts' are managed. When research success determines individual career enhancement ethical overview cannot solely lie in the hands of the researcher engaged in the project.

Profession

Given the preceding argument, it seems essential that the profession of social science research controls itself adequately. Scandals in social research are unlikely ever to be as traumatic as those involving child organ retention. But such scandals do illustrate the taint on all research activity that is a consequence of such behaviour. Field contaminants are many and varied and they include market researchers 'posing' as social researchers, salespeople posing as both (!), the over-evaluation of routine human interactions - all can lead to contamination of the field which diminishes trust in the act of research.

One professional device for enhancing ethical awareness is expert mentorship - the sharing of experiences and solutions to problems. We have suggested that expert researchers could aid novices in their ethical decision-making by offering mentorship and advice in response to specific issues. We hope to list such contacts on the website (when they make themselves available!). We have even sought anecdotes about ethical problems that we could publish anonymously. Although I did receive several examples, all seem reluctant to allow publication in case of identification.

A more systematic maintenance of ethical standards would recommend that researchers should be required to attend training courses in ethical decision-making. At the very least this could offer a way of ensuring that they have read the professional guidelines. In his Times Higher article Frank Furedi appears critical of 3rd year undergraduates having to have their research proposals subjected to ethical review. Yet, if that is to be a feature of the career they are entering, the sooner they confront the process the better.

A recurring concern with professional associations has been the status of ethical guidelines as professional codes. The questions include: How sanctionable can (or should) they be? What powers of exclusion, reprimand or proscription can be applied by the professional association? Might ethical guidelines function better as 'educative' prescriptions - leaving the individual

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researcher to make their own ethical choices? In this regard, it appears vital to address the issue of whether or not there can be mono-professional ethical guidelines or whether multi-professional standards are possible. Are there some evidently shared principles across disciplines or are there hierarchies of standards by substantive 'topic'? Thus, some have claimed that since the biomedical sciences deal with 'life and death' issues, they must adopt the highest standards. I would want to question that - not only since the concerns about ethical review grew out of the behaviour of Nazi biomedical scientists in WWII but, perhaps ironically, people often feel more concerned about what we do to their minds and their culture than what is done to their physical bodies.

In the same way, it seems an unwarranted narrowing of focus if we assume general ethical principles to have merely local relevance. Ethical guidelines should surely apply internationally; the broadening of ethical concerns suggests we cannot consider ourselves to be operating in splendid isolation. To take a recent topical example, questions have been asked about the appropriateness of conducting trials for AIDS drugs in the developing world - with individuals and in societies that could never afford to purchase the developed drugs when their efficacy is proven. Ethical standards in social science research must be so generalisable that work of a similar nature would be inconceivable.

Finally, there remains the problem of the conduct of independent review. I remain unconvinced that health ethics committees and IRBs, for example, are truly independent. The former represent diverse interests while being dominated by biomedical disciplines and both increasingly prioritise risk management over research ends. Risk management tends to estimate the institutional costs of research error and leads to a consideration of legal concerns. One might ask how far it is possible for ethical matters to be distinguished from

the requirements of, say, human rights and data protection legislation? Once again, is there a generic professional responsibility to ensure that one's colleagues do not balance THEIR ethics against 'the law' to the detriment of the research profession? For example, how far is it possible for data management to be dealt with by adherence to the letter of the law, thereby removing it from the remit of ethical review per se? Some argue that the law and ethics cannot be separated in such ways and, in any case, the law on human rights and social research has yet to be 'tested'. And a distinction does have to be drawn between the financial sponsorship of research activity and the process of ethical review. The former is primarily a concern of product quality, i.e. the fulfilment of a promised research goal - thus it is an institutional responsibility - while the latter is an expressed concern with the moral order and the researcher's sensed obligation to it.

Conclusion

Maybe some form of truly independent scrutiny is the only way to maintain the integrity of the social research profession in an era of enhanced data protection and expanding human rights legislation. There is no inherent reason to seek special exemptions from such scrutiny for social research. Perhaps the answer is to establish such competent mechanisms within the social science professions themselves that both potential participants and potential commissioners have increased confidence in the process of ethical review that they will not seek reassurance from external bodies. Frank Furedi's complaint was primarily about restrictions upon academic freedom. But freedom is not academic! The 'freedom' to study whatever we want will always be at a cost - to someone else's freedom NOT to be studied. Our integrity as researchers demands that we recognise that the rights of our research participants are to be valued above our cherished research goals and seek to embody such principles in the research process from the outset.

Stop press

The Department of Work and Pensions has issued a consultation

document at:

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/consultations/consult/2002/childpov/index.htm>

Deadline for comments is 11 July 2002.

books/reports for review

If you would like a copy of any of the books/reports listed below all you have to do is write a short review of no more than 300 words. In return you get to keep the reviewed item.

UKCH Religious Trends No. 3 2002/2003

Edited by Dr. Peter Brierley, foreword by Professor Jowell, CBE.

Christian Research

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See pages 14 & 15
for latest reviews

TRAINING DAYS

- **22nd May: Quantitative Data Analysis**
- **11th September: Focus Groups**
- **6th November: Report Writing and Presentation Skills**

All training days will be held at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7 6PA.

Any queries relating to the content of these days or about future SRA training events should be addressed to Joanne Maher, on 020 7533 5372, email: joanne.maher@ons.gov.uk.

Fees: Members £65, non-members (includes membership of SRA for one year) £110, student/unwaged £16. To make a booking, either print out the specific booking form or print out and complete our standard booking form (at www.the-sra.org.uk) and send it with payment to the SRA or contact the SRA administrative office.

To make a booking for a training day or for the evening seminar contact the SRA administrative office.

EVENTS

- **3 July: Summer Event**

at the Local Government Association in Westminster. Starting at 2:00pm on using technology to enhance social research. Followed by drinks, nibbles and networking.

- **4 December: AGM and annual conference**

at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7

Further details: SRA Admin Office: tel: 020 8670 5460, fax: 020 7635 6014, email: admin@the-sra.org.uk, www.the-sra.org.uk

Association for Survey Computing

- **19 September: Open Standards** at Imperial College

Conference will include discussion of Triple-S and other interchange standards based on XML.

Details: ASC Administrator: Diana Elder
Tel and Fax: 0494 793033,
Email: Admin@asc.org.uk
www.asc.org.uk

The British Society for Population Studies, BSPS and RSS Official Statistics Section

- **21 May: Modernising Civil Registration In England & Wales: Implications and Opportunities for Improving Statistical Information on Vital Events**

10:45am at the Royal Statistical Society, Errol St, London EC1Y 8LX
Convenor: John Haskey (BSPS)

A Government White Paper on 'Civil Registration: Vital change - birth, marriage and death registration in the 21st Century' proposes more and better registration services, making use of modern technology. The conference will explore the opportunities afforded by these changes to improve the statistical information on vital events and play a role in the public consultation phase.

No charge. Jointly supported by the BSPS, RSS and ONS. Please confirm your attendance by emailing your name, email address and organisation to: <mailto:pic@lse.ac.uk>

National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)
Public Seminar Series:
Summer 2002

- **20 May: Research in a policy context - Things I wish I had done**

Policy-makers, researchers and research commissioners need to change their current practices if policy-relevant research is to be delivered effectively and efficiently. Norman Glass who has belonged to all three categories tries to distil the hard-learned lessons of his locust years.

- **17 June: Health inequalities: the contribution of national statistics from Black to Comprehensive Spending Review**

As a statistician working in Government, John Fox has been involved in the development of policy on health inequalities in the late 1970s leading to the Black Report and in the 1990s leading up to the current Comprehensive

Spending Review. He will describe the changed context, the key roles that information is now playing, and new statistical developments.

- **15 July: Ethnic minority psychiatric illness in the community**

James Nazroo (UCL) and Kerry Sproston (NatCen)

The Joint Health Surveys Unit of Department of Epidemiology, UCL, and NatCen, has recently conducted a large quantitative and qualitative study on ethnic differences in mental health on behalf of the Department of Health. This seminar will discuss findings from the study and methodological issues.

All seminars take place at 4.45 - 6pm at 35 Northampton Square, London EC1V 0AX.

To attend you must contact Carol Lawrence on 020 7549 9560 or c.lawrence@natcen.ac.uk to confirm a place.

University of Surrey Day
Courses in Social Research

- **15 May: Designing samples for surveys**
- **22 May: Attitudes and How to Measure Them**

Courses cost £110 each, inclusive of course materials and lunch. A reduced rate of £90 per course is available for those from educational institutions and registered charities. Standby places for full-time PhD students cost £20. Courses can also be run for a group, either at the University of Surrey or at your site. More details at: www.soc.surrey.ac.uk

Centre for Applied Statistics,
University of Lancaster

- **14-16 May 2002: Introduction to STATA**
This comprehensive statistical system is popular with economists, epidemiologists and other social and biomedical researchers.
Fees: £300 (£200 reduced fee)
- **28-30 May: Intermediate SPSS 10.0 for Windows**

Takes participants, who have attended an introductory course on

SPSS, a stage further in the statistical analysis of data.

Fees: £300 (£200 reduced fee)

• **11-13 June: Survival Analysis**

This course explains how to analyse survival data effectively, and how to interpret the results. Intended for those motivated by substantive rather than by statistical interests. A basic knowledge of statistical methods assumed.

Fees: £300 (£200 reduced fee)

• **14 June: Secondary Data Sources**

Fees: £150 Contact: Mary Peckham, Centre for Applied Statistics, Fylde College, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YF
Tel: 01524 593064

www.cas.lancs.ac.uk/short_courses/

CCSR, University of Manchester

• **11-12 June: Multiple Regression**

Covers the ways in which models may be fitted to predict an interval response variable from several binary and interval explanatory variables. The methods are applied to the teaching datasets from the 1991/2 General Household Survey to find predictors of weekly earnings.

Fees: (Two day course) £200 (£150 for those from academic institutions)

Further information: Kate Thomas CCSR, FSSL, University of Manchester. Tel: 0161 275 4736, fax 0161 275 4722, Email

kate.thomas@man.ac.uk

<http://les1.man.ac.uk/ccsr/courses/shorthome.htm>

CASS Courses

• **27-28 May: Design and Administration of Postal and Self-Completion Surveys**

Elaine McColl (University of Newcastle) and Roger Thomas (National Centre for Survey Research)

University of Manchester.

Aimed at researchers who need to

design and administer self-completion surveys, especially those in the social, economic, educational and medical sciences.

Fees: £270 or £65 with ESRC bursary.

To register for a CASS course and for further information please contact: Jane Schofield

Department of Social Statistics
University of Southampton
Southampton SO17 1BJ

Tel: 02380 593048

Fax: 02380 593846

Email: cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk

www.socstats.soton.ac.uk/cass

University of Southampton,
Statistical Methodology
Workshop Series

• **14 June: Two-Stage Informative Cluster Sampling - Estimation and Prediction**

Abdulhakeem Eideh

All talks start at 12.45, in Social Stats Seminar Room (room 2097, Murray Building, Building 58), unless otherwise stated. University of Southampton, Department of Social Statistics

www.socstats.soton.ac.uk

College of Health

• **22 May: Qualitative Interviewing Techniques**

Qualitative interviewing techniques (including depth/semi-structured interviews), covering sampling, creating interview schedules, interviewing skills and practical exercises.

• **4 July: Analysis of Qualitative Data**

Understand some of the methods used in analysing qualitative data and how to report findings.

• **12 June: Research Methods Overview - obtaining feedback from patients and the public**

Develop an understanding of research methods to obtain feedback from patients and the public. For further information contact Francesca Avbara, College of Health, St Margaret's House, 21 Old

Ford Road, London, tel: 020 8983 1225, fax 020 8983 1553, email f.avbara@collegeofhealth.org.uk

Fees: for each course: £165.00 + VAT

The University of Reading
Statistical Services Centre

The SSC offers a variety of courses for a range of audiences – to provide the skills necessary for dealing with particular problems, with the emphasis on the practical application of statistics.

For further information: Statistical Services Centre, The University of Reading, Harry Pitt Building, Whiteknights Road, Reading, RG6 6FN, UK. Tel: 0118 931 8025, 0118 975 3169, email statistics@reading.ac.uk
www.rdg.ac.uk/ssc/

University of Essex

• **6 July to 16 August: Essex Summer School in Social Sciences & Analysis and Collection**

The School consists of three two-week sessions. Courses deal with techniques of data collection, analysis, and model building and non-statistical but innovative approaches to social science.

Essex Summer School, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester CO4 3SQ, telephone 01206 872502
www.essex.ac.uk/methods/

See page 13 for details of training from SRA in Scotland.

10th May
Better
Questionnaire
Design

The fascinating world of public sector research

By Sue Brooker, Head of Social Research, BMRB International

Public sector research is a particularly challenging area of social research and covers several research types, such as media, advertising and business-to-business research. This article looks at what makes public sector research both different and exciting.

Public sector research – or social research – covers any research that can be said to be in the public interest. It therefore involves working on issues that really affect people's lives. Media issues in the public interest include standards of taste and decency and issues surrounding the television licence fee. Turning to advertising research in the public interest, last year the government spent over £100 million on publicity, making it the fourth biggest spender and in March this year it obtained the number one position. In addition, of course, social research can involve the full range of research methodologies with data collection being face to face, or by telephone, postal or electronic methods. It is certainly not a narrow field in which to work.

Indeed, I would say that social research is the most dynamic and exciting environment in which to be involved. It often requires researchers to tread new ground and be creative and innovative. From an agency perspective, you need to be a sound researcher with knowledge of scientific research methodology – but you also need to understand the world of current affairs and government policy. The projects you are involved with both reflect and make the news – so it is important that any survey findings are accurate and portray 'reality'!

Some social researchers are routinely involved in research of a 'classic' nature – probability sample designs with rigorous sampling methods and with measurable response rates and statistical accuracy. Many of the most well known and respected Government surveys are of this nature – for example, the Labour Force Survey, General Household Survey, and British Crime Survey. These highly respected surveys are relied upon for their accuracy by the government and throughout the research world.

However, many of these surveys have achieved and maintained their high status through innovative development and creativity. For instance, to prepare the questionnaire for the British Crime Survey 2001, researchers from BMRB, the Home Office and the world of academia, visited a number of women's refuges and support centres, to develop a module on experience of domestic and sexual violence by both women and men.

As researchers, this is not the only time that we have gained an insight into experiences that we might not normally obtain in our personal circumstances. We have:

- Measured the prevalence of child abuse. This paper was presented at the 2001 MRS conference and won an award for application of research. We not only interviewed many abused young people in the study, but developed the questionnaire specifically with abused young people to ensure that it was appropriate and valid.
- Measured the prevalence of use of illegal drugs amongst young people. We became experts in drugs vocabulary amongst young people!
- Interviewed psychopathic patients in a prison hospital. The purpose of the interview was to establish how the inmates were being treated by the hospital staff and warders. The staff were very reluctant to let us interview the patients unaccompanied but this was clearly necessary if we were to obtain their views of these very same staff. We therefore had to sign a 'disclaimer' concerning our own personal safety.
- Conducted a survey amongst people who had survived various national disasters such as Hillsborough, Zeebrugge or the Marchioness, or the relatives of those who had died in these. This survey was to investigate how they had been dealt with by the broadcast media and also covered relatives of murder victims and relatives of those who had experienced violent death, as well as those who had been raped or sexually abused.
- Conducted surveys amongst gay men in pubs and clubs, to establish details of their sexual behaviour and encounters, to determine knowledge and practice of safe sex. The interviewing environment was highly variable – from shouting above extremely noisy music and perched up against a grand piano as a table – to interviewing by the light of a fish tank.

Some of the surveys above were conducted using traditional pen and paper methods, and some using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). We are usually flexible in our approach according to the demands of the particular survey (it would not be practical to conduct interviews by the light of a fish tank on CAPI!) although increasingly these days we conduct these sorts of interviews using CAPI. CAPI has a number of major benefits for social research, not least of these being CASI (Computer Assisted Self-Completion Interviewing). We used CASI for the drugs and child abuse surveys referred to above, to obtain the most intimate and sensitive detail about people's experiences and behaviours. We also use it for the most sensitive questioning on the British Crime Survey and on current projects about teenage pregnancy, in which we ask teenagers as young as 13 about their experience of sex and relationships. There is much evidence that the use of CASI increases respondents' perception of confidentiality and therefore the honesty of their answers.

continued opposite

- We regularly conduct research amongst those in custody. A recent project amongst prisoners on remand in court custody suites led to us purchasing a number of adjustable bar stools – as the interview had to be conducted through the grill on the cell doors and these varied in height from court to court.
- In other work amongst prisoners we have used ‘life event calendars’ when asking people to recall details of their lives. These calendars include national events which may be of relevance to the respondents – such as big football matches or major news items - and the interviewer adds in key events personal to the respondent – such as birthdays or major changes in their life (a birth, marriage, change of address). This helps respondents to focus more accurately on a defined period – in one case in order to establish what crimes had been committed in a specified time before they went to prison. Life event calendars are now also used to aid memory in the British Crime Survey.
- We are often faced with devising a sampling frame and procedure for difficult to reach populations – such as witnesses to court cases, street beggars, asylum seekers.... Sometimes this involves complex and robust sampling procedures, such as providing court staff with sampling instructions. At other times a more pragmatic approach is needed – such as wandering the streets to look for beggars.

It’s certainly fascinating working in social research. No two days are ever the same and we never know what challenges are around the corner!

** This article is based on an original published as a Public Sector Special Report in Research Nov/Dec 2001. The article has been cut for reasons of space.*

The SRA in Scotland

By Rebekah Widdowfield and Kerstin Hinds

The SRA in Scotland began 2002 with two successful events.

- Jointly with the Scottish Local Government Information Unit (SLGIU), we held a very well attended, and received half-day event in Glasgow in February, '**Social Exclusion: separating fact from fiction**'. With the Scottish Executive promoting an evidence-based approach to social justice, researchers and practitioners working in the field face many problems generating and using social exclusion statistics. This seminar considered the challenges facing those implementing the evidence-based approach, exploring the problems of measuring social exclusion both at national and local levels and ways in which social justice statistics are used and misused in practice. Discussion groups highlighted practical examples of how these problems have been addressed. Speakers included Robina Goodlad of Glasgow University's Centre for Research on Social Justice, Rob Wishart, Chief Statistician at the Scottish Executive, Maggie Bochel of Highland Council, and

Gill Scott of the Scottish Poverty Information Unit. All gave excellent presentations helping to unpack the present situation and the way forward. Workshop sessions gave participants the chance to learn more about how other organisations were tackling the problems, and to share ideas around issues of data sharing, access and use. Many contacts were made and we hope to run future events with the SLGIU.

- The speaker for our first evening seminar in February, was Dr Alison Brown who gave a talk on a piece of research she had recently completed for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation examining the impact of devolution on the voluntary sector in Scotland. Alison discussed the opportunities and challenges devolution had presented the voluntary sector with, looking in particular at a number of key themes including: consultation, skills, partnership working and reserved matters before concluding with a series of methodological questions. This led to a lively debate on qualitative research methods which embraced an array of issues such as sampling techniques, reporting qualitative research findings and links with policy. The length of the ensuing discussion was testimony to the interest engendered by what had been a very engaging talk.

At the time of writing, we are planning more activities:

An April event jointly with the Edinburgh group of the Royal Statistical Society, '**Neighbourhood Statistics in Scotland**', inspired by last year's Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture held in London. Speakers at the Edinburgh event include Jon McGinty of the Office for National Statistics, Catriona McKay of the Scottish Executive, and Lynette Carey of the Glasgow Alliance.

On **May 10th**, we are running a Training Day on **Better Questionnaire Design** in Edinburgh.

This day is designed to give a rounded view of the process of questionnaire design. It will look at the early stages of translating research ideas into questions, and move on to consider best practice in questionnaire design. There will be room for participants to use their own research projects as examples should they wish, and advice on particular projects can be given over lunch time.

The training will be provided by experienced social researchers from NFO System Three and the National Centre for Social Research - Mandy Littlewood and Kerstin Hinds. Other researchers will also be available for practical sessions.

*For further information on this event, contact Mandy Littlewood mandy.littlewood@nfoeurope.com
Tel 0131 656 4038*

*For further information on the SRA in Scotland please contact Kerstin Hinds, K.Hinds@natcen.ac.uk
Tel. 0131 557 5494 or
Valerie Strachan, valerie.strachan@dtz.co.uk
Tel. 0131 527 8435*

Self-esteem: the costs and causes of low self-worth, Nicholas Emler, 2001, York Publishing Services, York

Reviewed by: William Solesbury
UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice,
Queen Mary, University of London

This report hit the headlines when published earlier this year. Its reported message – that raising self-esteem was not the ‘social vaccine’ that it is widely claimed to be – was newsworthy for its challenge to conventional wisdom. As Emler remarks in his opening paragraph, ‘few ideas in the human sciences have ever achieved the level of attention that has been lavished on the notion of self esteem.’ Interestingly, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term has been in currency for at least four centuries. But the modern take on it is the idea that self-esteem is a kind of resource or asset – and so has instrumental value, not just for the individual but for society at large.

This is one of those rare cases of the fruits of social research entering popular consciousness. Oprah Winfrey is quoted here as saying that ‘lack of self-esteem is what causes war because people who really love themselves don’t go out and try to fight other people’. Visit any bookshop and you will find a self esteem section in the popular literature on personal development. But its impact has been more than personal. The concept has provided the theoretical underpinning of much social policy. The notion is that high self-esteem inoculates people against vulnerability to a range of social ills. Raising self-esteem has therefore featured as an element in a range of social programmes, in the UK and overseas (especially in North America), concerned with, for example, educational performance, crime and delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy. As Emler remarks, there is a lot of public money riding on the back of this product of social research.

So a review such as this is timely – and money well spent by its funders, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The review explores what is known from research about three topics: the nature of self-esteem, its causes and its consequences. It is concerned mostly with the self-esteem of children and adolescents since that is the focus of its use in social programmes and indeed, Emler claims, the focus of most of the published research.

The report explores its three topics in a very readable way – no mean achievement with this kind of synthesis which can easily get repetitive and turgid. In its first section, he examines various attempts, largely within psychology and sociology, to define and measure self-esteem and to assess to what extent it can be changed. He concludes that it is both a state and a trait, that is, it can vary from day to day but it has an average level that is stable over time. In terms of its causes, Emler reports research findings that parental influence is of overwhelming importance, through both nature and nurture, though the evidence on the former – genetic inheritance – is slight. In later life, partners and peers can have an influence. In terms of the consequences of self-esteem, Emler summarised research findings in terms of three propositions: minimal influence on crime,

racial prejudice, teenage smoking or child maltreatment; possible (though not proven) influence on educational underachievement, alcohol and drug abuse; a clear influence on unprotected sex and teenage pregnancy, eating disorders, suicide attempts and low earnings and extended unemployment (for males). There is no mention of evidence for or against the Oprah Winfrey proposition about warmongering!

In reviewing the research on interventions – to address the currently popular ‘what works?’ question – Emler finds less evaluative evidence. Tentatively he suggests that interventions mostly have modest effects but are most successful when designed to raise self-esteem directly rather than indirectly through addressing what are believed to be its causes or consequences. It also works better as problem solving rather than preventive measures.

All this is of enormous interest and value, both politically and personally. It is admirable of Emler that he writes so clearly in taking the reader through the evidence and that he is ready to draw strong conclusions from his review of the research, with appropriate qualifications where necessary. Even so, he was the victim of some media misreporting. His broad conclusion (page 33 of the report) - that people with low self-esteem commonly treat themselves badly, and may be badly treated by others, but they themselves tend not to treat others badly - became the headline. But, in some media coverage, it was coupled with a more tentative, even throwaway, concluding remark (page 61) that high self-esteem – where associated with arrogance, narcissism and aggressiveness - might also be a problem in need of treatment.

This is a reminder of the seriousness of undertaking research reviews. Such reports are not just offering the results of one, inevitably limited, investigation’s contribution to understanding an issue. More ambitiously, they are appraising and summarising the whole, relevant present state of knowledge. Such reviews are increasingly being commissioned by research funders, like JRF in this case. That is a valuable contribution to more evidence based policy. And it is good research practice too for the findings of social research to be cumulated in this way so that the knowledge base is updated and made widely available, to serve as a starting point for new research.

But this does mean that reviews of research should be undertaken with at least the same rigour as primary research. In this review on self-esteem, the review methodology is not clearly stated. One is left wondering, for example, on what basis the 350-odd papers which are listed in the bibliography, and were presumably reviewed, were selected (only from peer-reviewed journals? only English language publications? how far back in time?); what role was played by the fellow researchers listed in the Acknowledgements? (Was this group work or individual endeavour?); what criteria were applied in appraising the validity of the findings in the research reviewed? (some are criticised in the text, others not). Transparency about method is just as important in secondary research, like this review, as in primary research.

Monitoring Poverty And Social Exclusion 2001, Rahman, Palmer & Kenway (2001)

Reviewed by: Malcolm J. Fisk
Insight Social Research Ltd, Centre for Business, 12
Devon Place, Newport NP20 4NN

The importance of this publication cannot easily be overstated given the currency of agendas concerned with poverty and, more particularly, social exclusion. The report may, however, fail to do justice to the expectations of its readers.

In the first instance a question arises regarding the nature of the relationship between poverty and social exclusion. Not that a large amount of time or effort should have been devoted to exploring such a question, but some discussion would have helped to clarify why the variables in question were chosen and would have enabled some consideration to have been given to their usefulness. This clarification is, it is considered, essential in view of their use to plot trends on the basis of which claims are then made for the successes or failures of government policies. As it is, however, doubts regarding both remain. Noteworthy in addition, is a concern that both environmental and rural issues go largely without mention.

An example of the apparent shortcomings in the choice of variables and in the interpretation of trends relating to them is concerned with the needs of older people. Here, a reduction in the 'proportion of those aged 75 or over who receive help from social services to live at home' is deemed to signal the worsening position of older people. An alternative interpretation, however, sees older people as increasingly fit, healthy, socially included and not needing such interventions.

Secondly, and inexcusably, the report is very unclear in the presentation of data for many of the selected variables as to when and whether they relate to England and Wales, Great Britain or the United Kingdom. Unflattering comparisons can be made here with another Joseph Rowntree publication, the Housing Finance Review. The latter, in offering data series relating to a wide range of housing measures for the four countries of the United Kingdom, does for housing what this publication should do for poverty and social exclusion.

If credit is to be given it is to the effect that the report does provide some relevant information for an interesting range of variables. The mainly graphical representations mean, however, that the raw data is, in most instances, not readily accessible. An easy means of assisting researchers who might wish to consider particular subsets of variables in relation to their research objectives is, therefore, not provided. In addition a useful overview is provided of government initiatives that relate to the selected variables.

All in all, the report promises more than it delivers. It is to be hoped, however, that the various shortcomings can be addressed, and perhaps, a wider range of variables introduced, as a potentially important data series is built upon.

Introduction to Qualitative Research

Roona Simpson, Research Student, Gender Institute, LSE reports on a recent SRA training day.

This SRA training day gave delegates the opportunity to hear various speakers on different aspects of qualitative interviewing, as well as having practical sessions during which they both conducted and observed interviews.

The opening and closing sessions provided useful introductions to qualitative interviewing, as well as information on specialist techniques. Helen Finch, an independent consultant, presented a clear overview of the basic principles involved, as well as the purpose and uses of qualitative interviewing, and practical issues surrounding the conduct of depth interviews. Andrew Thomas, Head of Qualitative Research at BMRB, finished the day with a presentation that looked at a range of additional projective and enabling techniques that could be employed during qualitative interviews and focus groups.

Raymond Lee, Royal Holloway, spoke on interviewing on sensitive topics; and Ginny Morrow, London School of Economics, spoke on the issues of conducting social research with children. A reading list covering these topics was included in the very good materials with which delegates were provided.

The practical sessions allowed us an opportunity to experience conducting and observing an interview in small groups, with a tutor advising each. We used topic guides taken from recent qualitative studies carried out at the National Centre for Social Research. All participants in my group found these extremely useful for practising asking questions and trying to cover the information in a specific time, as well as giving us the chance to ask about issues that came up during the interviewing. We all went from initial trepidation to a tenuous confidence by the end of the last practical session.

While some techniques seemed more appropriate for market research, the mix of sessions during the day appeared to have something for everyone, and the comprehensive materials provided also allowed us to pursue the areas in which we were interested further. This event proved to be very informative, with only the caveat that none of the sessions addressed data analysis; I felt far more confident knowing much more on how to go about doing qualitative interviewing, however I now need a day on how to analyse all the resulting material!



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