

What does the next term of government have in store for social research?

Chris Goulden conducts a straw poll of key players

The Labour government under Tony Blair has demonstrated unprecedented degrees of commitment, at least at the rhetorical level, to the idea that 'what matters is what works'. This has implied a reliance on the contested idea of 'evidence-based policy', largely derived from social and economic research and evaluation, in most major departmental areas such as crime, education and welfare. This has also reflected an attempt to move away from what some saw as the more ideologically-

rooted policy-making of earlier governments. The New Labour commitment has been reflected in the growth of funding for the government's own social research programmes and staffing, for example. However, it also reflects a growing global phenomenon of the 'managerialisation' of politics and policy.

But was their commitment predicated on a naïve assumption about what social research could deliver, either methodologically or within relatively short 'political' timescales? What lessons can be learnt from the last eight years, if any, in order to improve the situation for the next five? How would the social research community react to a different party being in power?

At the time of writing, it seems likely that Labour will have been returned to power after May 5th, and a crucial question for social research will be whether the shift from 'what works' to 'delivery, delivery, delivery' continues apace or if the political landscape shifts more dramatically. The underlying assumption behind moving on to

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delivery seems to imply that ‘we have all the evidence now, thanks’ but in reality it is an ongoing process. There is no point delivering things that do not work! But does this kind of shift undermine the role of social research within government? During March, I asked for the views of a broad range of key players from academic, private and survey research. What did they want to see from the next term of government for social research and for the use of research within policy making? Several interesting themes emerged.

A key requirement identified was for greater efforts to be made to carry out research collaboratively by government departments. The opinion of Norman Glass, Chief Executive of NatCen, is that “joining-up is going out of fashion but, in research terms, it hardly happened”. His view is that it is “clear that government departments need professional researchers to help them design and interpret research”. Without such assistance there is a “tendency for policy-makers to leap to premature conclusions on the basis of preliminary results of research projects whose design difficulties should lead to caution at the very least. Plumping for conclusions from research can be just as questionable as ignoring research – policy-making ought to depend on the steady accumulation of evidence rather than reliance on one or two studies.” This view is echoed by Mike Hough, Professor of Criminal Policy and Director of the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at King’s College London, who says that the commitment to evidence-led policy has “worn thin” and that the rather

dogmatic approach to ‘evidence’ that is being adopted in some government departments, based on Campbell/Cochrane principles, tends to exclude valuable qualitative and theory-testing studies. He adds that the “government commitment to value for money in research, with elaborate procurement rules, is actually destroying the trust and goodwill that used to exist between government research managers and academic researchers”. Professor Hough maintains that it is still possible to get people to compete for grants and contracts with a style that fosters trust and collaboration, and that this may in turn help to tackle the problems associated with capacity building and turnover in government research departments.

It remained a moot point how far the government’s commitment to ‘evidence’ went beyond the rhetorical but respondents thought that the policy-making culture was something that would not change overnight. Professor Roger Jowell, now at the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys at City University, stressed the need for space to be

made to try things out. However, he also highlighted the problems of parliamentary timetables that militate against being able to build policies from the accumulated evidence and pilots conducted over a number of years, when politicians and the media want and need quick pay-offs. His wish for the next term of government is for the party in power to “reject the timetables of mass media in favour of the imperatives of good governance”, thinking that this is possible to a degree but that the two will inevitably be in conflict.

But what if Labour did not win? The prospect of a different party in power did not seem to faze people. There was a feeling that funding for social research was “small beer” and that “governments looking to slow down the growth of public expenditure are likely to want to be just as well informed about what the money is achieving as governments that want to spend more money”. It seems that with modern structures of governance, the reliance on social research and evaluation is here to stay.

All change at the SRA office

April saw major change in our new office as Suzanne Cohen has decided to move on and go back to being a qualitative researcher. We are deeply grateful to Suzanne for her sterling work. Without her dedication to the SRA much of the tremendous growth of the last three years would not have been possible, and she hands over to our new staff a well-organised administration. We wish her well in her new professional role. Jean Harrison joined us as our Senior Administrator and will be working three days a week. She comes from a successful career in insurance administration and is keen to learn



Suzanne [left] shows Jean the ropes

about the world of social research. Gemma Pikett will be working with Jean, and helping to make membership issues and all our growing number of training courses and seminars run smoothly. **Their contact point remains admin@the-sra.org.uk**

Editorial

SRA Chair, Ceridwen Roberts, gives her quarterly report.

As usual the SRA office, Executive committee and working groups have been very busy so far this year. We have been settling into 175 Gray's Inn Rd, recruiting new staff and reviewing all our membership services. Sadly, at the end of April, we said "goodbye" to Suzanne Cohen whom many of you have met at various SRA events over the last three years. I hope you will soon get to know Jean Harrison and Gemma Pikett who have joined us.



Membership

Tina Haux and Rachel Ormston, supported by John Wicks, are planning a membership survey during the summer. It's several years since we asked your views about SRA services, and we urgently need to update what we know about members so we hope you will respond in droves! After all, a lot of us spend our lives asking others to respond to questionnaires. This is part of the membership review which is also looking at what new services we can introduce and what sort of changes to make to our fee structure. We have just been awarded a grant by The Nuffield Foundation to help us improve our work for members for which we are deeply grateful.

Training

The Training Review working group reports in May, and we will then consult with members about their ideas. Meanwhile, the programme of training continues. The ethical training workshop went well and will be repeated and, yet again, data protection courses fill up very quickly. We have also just put a proposal to the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative for funding support to develop a coherent programme of mid-career and ongoing development courses in collaboration with partners as this is where we need to expand. So watch this space.

Public affairs

Both the working groups are very active. The Dissemination group held a seminar on Promoting Effective Dissemination at the end of April, which aimed to consider the key elements of a guide

to good practice. Policy and practice here varies enormously. But interest in improving dissemination and utilisation of research by policy makers and practitioners is hampered by lack of resources, skills and training as well as positive disincentives for academics and some commissioners to spend time publicising results. A report will be placed on the website by the end of May.

SRA legal status – a special general meeting

The Executive thinks it is now necessary to change our legal status, and so we are holding a special general meeting to discuss this in conjunction with the summer event on Tuesday 5th July. You will get full information about this shortly. The meeting will explain why change is needed and the sort of changes proposed. We hope you will agree that we should become a charity and company limited by guarantee. This affords the Executive more legal protection as well as possibly allowing us access to more sources of funding.

Summer event 5th July and annual conference 7th December

Plans for both these events are well underway. Do put the dates in your diary as we have a very good line up of speakers and presentations and important discussions about the SRA's future are planned. As usual, there will be important exhibitions and plenty of people to meet up with.

Hope to see you in July.

Can we properly measure changing attitudes?

Oliver Hayllar, Researcher at NatCen reports from a recent SRA seminar

Professor Roger Jowell, Director of the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University, London spoke to an enthusiastic audience about undertaking attitudinal research.

Drawing on his role as principal investigator for the European Social Survey (ESS) and the development and progress of this ongoing survey, he highlighted various problems faced by the central and national research teams when developing this multinational comparative study.

26 countries are involved in the ESS. The Centre for Comparative Social Surveys is the central organisation and each national country has a main research institute co-ordinating activities.

General problems in undertaking attitudinal research include the difficulty in sourcing deep-rooted attitudes, rather than short-term opinion ("weather vs climate"). For cross-national research the general problems are magnified, for example through language difficulties and cultural differences but also in fundamental differences in how social research is normally carried out.

To counteract some of the difficulties, rigid specifications for carrying out the research were introduced including standardised sampling methods and fieldwork procedures. Core question topics are asked for each wave with specific question modules for each round of interviewing. The core question modules include: socio-political values, political engagement, moral and social values and education and occupation. The specific question modules for round 1 include: immigration and citizen engagement and democracy, and for round 2: family, work and well-being.

Roger concluded by outlining the call for proposals for new questionnaire modules for round 3 of the survey.

To find out more about the European Social Survey see: www.europeansocialsurvey.org

SRA Dissemination Working Group

Mary Hickman, Chair, SRA Dissemination Working Group describes progress to date

The SRA has become increasingly aware of the growing interest and concern about good dissemination of social research. In response to this concern, we set up a working group in 2004 to look at current policy and practice. The working group represents a broad spread of research interests, and contains providers and commissioners of research, from both the public and the private sectors. All members have a keen interest in good dissemination practices. The remit of the group is to support the SRA to look at the various dissemination methods in use; identify good practice; and produce a guide to disseminating social research which both commissioners and providers of social research will find useful.

As a first stage, the group wrote out to a large number of research commissioners and providers, asking for examples of dissemination guidelines. This trawl resulted in much interest for the proposed guidelines but highlighted the lack of guidance available.

The next stage is to hold an expert workshop of invited speakers and guests, to look in more detail at current dissemination policies and practice, and discuss some of the resource and training issues these raise. We hope the day will contribute to the thinking, policy and practice on this key element of the research process at a time when the Freedom of Information Act has been introduced and public bodies are reviewing their dissemination

and publication policies.

The workshop will be a mixture of presentations from speakers representing a broad range of expertise in dissemination and discussion groups involving all attendees. These groups will look to address such issues as defining the audience or audiences, choosing the most appropriate medium or media, funding and training and strengthening researcher/user relationships.

All the information from the workshop will feed into the production of dissemination guidelines. We also hope the SRA will be able to develop a programme of training, a need we identified in the first stage of the work.

SRA SUMMER EVENT:**Equality and Inclusion****Make a note of**

- **the date** – Tuesday 5th July
- **the time** – 1.30 registration – 6.30 close of drinks reception
- **the place** – Local Government Association

The speakers include Fiona Neathey on the DTI's survey of vulnerable workers and John Hills on his study of inequality since 1997.

There will also be a short Special General Meeting of the SRA to discuss changes to our legal status.

SRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE:**Nuisance or necessity?
*The role of non-researchers in research***

Wednesday 7th December,
Brunei Gallery, School of
Oriental and African Studies,
Thornhaugh Street,
Russell Square,
London, WC1H 0XG

The SRA Annual Conference 2005 provides a timely opportunity for social researchers to think about the roles of non-researchers in the research process – from user involvement in design to public perceptions of research and intellectual property.

See www.the-sra.org.uk for programme and booking details or contact the SRA admin office.

Mark Abrams Prize: call for entries

Entries and nominations are open to social scientists of any age and nationality working in the UK. Entries, which should be original work, should be in English and not more than 6,000 words. It is possible to submit recently published or forthcoming work. In the case of the former, this should not have been published earlier than 2005. No particular theme is set, but preference will be given to theoretically-informed, empirical work concerned with the UK. Secondary analysis of survey data would be especially welcome. The panel of judges will take due account of the age, experience and circumstances of authors, and reserves the right not to award a prize.

The prize, if awarded, is worth £250 and will be presented at the annual conference of the SRA in December. Winning entries may also, by agreement, be placed on the SRA website. **Send entries and nominations, together with brief biographical details of the author(s), to the administrator, SRA office, admin@the-sra.org.uk by 30 September. Further information at www.the-sra.org.uk**

SRA News**NEW ROLE FOR CHRIS**

Chris Goulden was elected onto the Executive last year and is the new commissioning editor for SRA News. In his day job, he manages the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty research programme, having recently escaped the clutches of London and civil service research. He is looking to set up a 'virtual' sub-committee for SRA News to help generate ideas for features and formats, and any interested volunteers should contact him directly (email below).

HELP NEEDED URGENTLY!

We are looking for a couple of enthusiastic volunteers to help with the SRA News. This will give you the chance to try out your writing skills, develop your journalistic abilities and make the SRA News required reading for all social researchers.

Book review editor – this will involve keeping a look out for forthcoming titles which you think will be of interest to readers, getting review copies from publishers and commissioning reviews.

Assistant/features editor

– this will involve helping to write features and articles for the newsletter (we have lots of ideas but no time to write them up!).

For more information contact Chris Goulden, SRA News commissioning editor at chris.goulden@jrf.org.uk

YOUR VIEWS MATTER

We welcome any comments or responses to articles in the SRA News. Send us letters or emails to let us know what you think and we'll include these in future issues.

SRA ONLINE

We urgently need someone to help update the website, particularly 'dates for your diary' until the new administrators are up and running. We can supply the software. If you are interested please contact us at the SRA admin office.

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

SRA SCOTLAND : Chris Nicol gives a round up of activities in Scotland

What's working

We held our first joint event with the Scottish Evaluation Network in February at Dynamic Earth, Edinburgh. The event 'What's Working: Improving the Contribution of Research and Evaluation to Organisational Learning' included sessions led by Sandra Nutley (University of St. Andrews), Anita Morrison and Paul Tyrer (Scottish Executive) and Steven Marwick (Evaluation Support Scotland) as well as workshops to allow the audience of 80 researchers and research users the opportunity to put their own experiences into context and draw key action points for their work.

Annual event

Six years on from devolution, how has the relationship between research, policy and practice, developed since the creation of the Scottish Parliament? This question will form the focus of SRA Scotland's half-day annual event on the afternoon of Thursday 19th May at the Apex International Hotel in Edinburgh. Confirmed speakers and panellists include:

- **John Curtice** (*Strathclyde University and the Scottish Centre for Social Research*)
- **Luke Cavanagh** (*Scottish Executive, Office of the Chief Researcher*)
- **Stephen Herbert** (*Scottish Parliament Information Centre*)
- **Charlie Jeffrey** (*Director of the ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change programme*)
- **David McCrone** (*Director of the Institute of Governance at Edinburgh University*)
- **Pamela Munn** (*University of Edinburgh*)
- **Greg Philpotts** (*Head of Regional and Local Statistics, ONS*)

The event includes a wine reception and has a nominal charge of £10 for students, £25 for members and £40 for non-members. Further details from scotland@the-sra.org.uk

Evening seminars

Professor John Curtice kicked off our 2005 evening seminar series with an entertaining and informative talk comparing the methods and accuracy of various political polls, especially internet polls, in the run-up to the 2005 general election.

At a joint seminar with the Royal Statistical Society Edinburgh in March, Valerie Strachan from Tribal HCH and Andy Robinson from Communities Scotland used the Scottish House Condition Survey to review the extent to which national and local house condition surveys in Scotland meet the information needs of social landlords.

Training

One-day training courses include:

- **Basic research design** – 26th May
- **Questionnaire design** – 16th June

For details or to book contact scotland@the-sra.org.uk.

Contact

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

SRA IRELAND: Peter Humphreys looks ahead

Membership

Membership continues to grow (nearly 20) and will increase further when we get events off the ground. Progress is slower than it should be because of day jobs, but we are getting there! We have kept in touch with the SRA working groups on dissemination and commissioning and these will be helpful in planning events. We are also considering organizing an event on commissioning with the Irish Evaluation Network. More news in the next issue.

As well as independent researchers/consultants, we have members in the following:

- **Combat Poverty Agency**
- **Comhairle**
- **Equality Authority**
- **Goodbody Economic Consultants**
- **Insight Statistical Consulting**
- **Institute of Public Administration**
- **KW Research and Associates Ltd.**
- **MORI Ireland**
- **National Children's Office**
- **National Disability Authority**
- **National Economic and Social Forum**
- **Northern Ireland Policing Board**
- **Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency**
- **University of Ulster**

Contact us

Opportunities to network, organise training and raise the professional recognition and representation of social research in Ireland will grow as our membership grows. So, if you are interested in knowing more, and would like to help, do get in touch with me at phumphreys@ipa.ie.

Focus: Research at the Institute of Public Administration in Ireland

By *Peter Humphries*

At the IPA, we have a small, full-time research team of six professional staff and the only dedicated public management research resource nationally. We offer a comprehensive and tailored research service to help organisations perform to their maximum capability. We deliver applied research on a commission basis. We work closely with our clients identifying problems. Together, we develop approaches to tackling these issues. Through working together with our clients and feeding our findings back to them, we help them achieve informed solutions. Quality research contributes directly to quality management practices. The emphasis is on dialogue and action. Our research aims to make a difference. Our research is focused on building organisations' capabilities in the following critical areas:

- Implementing strategic management practices and procedures
- Measuring and evaluating performance
- Delivering quality public services
- Managing both human and financial resources effectively
- Devolving power and decentralising operations

Our main research interests are:

- Strategic management and planning
- Service and business planning
- Programme and policy evaluation

- Performance measurement
- Improving service delivery
- Human resource management
- Equality of opportunity/diversity
- Social partnership
- Management of cross-cutting issues
- Governance and accountability

Last year, the Research Division, through its work with the Committee for Public Management Research (CPMR), further developed its approach to the generation and dissemination of quality research relevant to the support of the public service modernisation programme. We completed three studies:

- Developing a Strategic Approach to HR in the Irish Civil Service
- The Role of the Centre in Civil Service Modernisation
- E-government and Organisation Development

Downloadable from the committee's website (www.cpmr.gov.ie/), hard copies of research reports and discussion papers are distributed to senior officials across the wider public service, as well as to personnel, training and others with interests in specific areas.

Seven new CPMR studies were started last year:

- Corporate Governance of Agencies
- Developing a Knowledge Management Agenda for the Irish Civil Service
- Performance Indicators
- Public Service Decentralisation – Governance Opportunities and Challenges
- Pilot Cross-Department Expenditure Reviews
- Regulatory Impact Analysis
- Developing Public Management Research in Ireland

Some of these incorporate innovative features. For example, the Corporate Governance of Agencies project is being undertaken in partnership with the Public Management Institute

(Catholic University of Leuven) and the University of Bergen. This has already yielded a number of significant advantages. For example, it means that the study will generate results from Irish experience that can be benchmarked against those in other European countries. The first survey as part of this study focused upon Irish national-level, non-commercial bodies and employed a web-based questionnaire that was hosted by the University of Leuven. A key member of the Leuven team came on secondment at the IPA to support the cross-national dimension to this study. In December 2004, the CPMR hosted a high-level research seminar of researchers working in 'agencification' and changing public service organisational development. As well as providing the opportunity to discuss the Irish, Norwegian and Belgian results in a cross-national setting, it means that the CPMR work is informed by the very latest international thinking. As well as Ireland, Belgium and Norway, other countries contributing to this seminar included Australia, New Zealand, the UK, USA, Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

As well as its work for the CPMR, the Research Division undertook other work for public sector clients including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Homeless Agency and the Dublin Docklands Development Authority. Members of the division spoke on their work at events organised nationally by various government departments and internationally by the OECD and World Bank, as well as to the Social Development Commission of the United Nations. The division also made a substantive submission to the Forum on the Workplace of the Future organised by the National Centre for Partnership and Performance.



MSc in Social Research Methods

The Department of Sociology at UniS is internationally renowned for its excellence in research methodology, and is one of the top six leading sociology departments in the country, as reflected in its 5* rating in the recent RAE. The Department has long been a market leader in academic and social research training and has been running MSc degrees in research methods for nearly 30 years.

One year full-time

The full-time MSc in Social Research Methods is mainly taken by students who have graduated in the social sciences over the previous five years and who wish to obtain the necessary breadth of skills to enter a career in social research or academia. Graduates of the degree are in demand for positions in the public and voluntary sector, government research departments, market research, university research posts and to teach research methods in higher education.

Two years part-time

Many students studying part-time are already well established in their career, or actively involved in social research, whilst others are returning to further education following a career break. The part-time degree attracts students from a wide range of employment backgrounds including market research, higher education, government departments and local authorities.

Both full- and part-time degrees cover both quantitative and qualitative methods to an advanced level.

Students take courses in:

- Principles of quantitative data analysis
- Advanced statistical modelling
- Surveys and research design methods
- Qualitative interviewing, ethnographic and observational methods
- Software for quantitative and qualitative analysis
- Documentary and online research techniques
- Optional courses in substantive areas, e.g. criminal justice, social policy, health, new technology
- Dissertation

The broad aim of these degrees is not just in the application of specific research techniques but to illuminate the connections between sociological theory and empirical research and to relate research to the development of public policy and the analysis of substantive social issues. Wider issues of the social research process are also covered.

These include:

- philosophy of science, social theory
- research ethics
- the planning and management of research projects
- presentation and dissemination of research findings

Both full and part-time degree programmes are fully recognised by the ESRC for their 1+3 MSc/ PhD Scholarship Awards.

For an informal discussion, please contact Postgraduate Admissions Tutor, Dr Katharine Tyler (k.tyler@surrey.ac.uk Tel: 01483 686964). For an application pack, please contact Postgraduate Administrator, Ms Sue Slade (s.slade@surrey.ac.uk Tel: 01483 689543).

Department of Sociology,

University of Surrey, Guildford GU2 7XH

Visit the department's website at: www.soc.surrey.ac.uk

UniS

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RESEARCH BRIEFING : *If there is anything you would like to publicise on these pages please send details to the SRA admin office. You can also receive more frequent briefings by subscribing to the SRA e-bulletin. See www.the-sra.org.uk for details.*

DfT changes gear to meet demand for more high quality research

A recently published review of social research at the Department for Transport (DfT) highlights unmet demand for high quality social research at the department and the need for more social researchers to take on work in the transport field.

DfT commissioned NatCen to assess the quality, capacity and organisation of its social research. The study was based on 26 in-depth interviews with DfT and other Whitehall staff and a review of 17 of DfT's research projects. The main findings include:

- The social dimension is seen as an important part of transport policy by officials, but there is a sense that the department does not know enough about it
- Some of DfT's existing qualitative and quantitative research is not of sufficient quality to constitute robust evidence for sound policy decisions
- DfT needs to manage and utilise its existing stock of knowledge more effectively and manage its social research in a more professional way.

DfT published the report on its website in January 2005, along with an action plan showing

progress since NatCen completed the review. The department has already reorganised the central social research function by setting up a separate Social Research and Evaluation Division to work with the decentralised structures of DfT to improve the management and use of social research evidence. A chief scientific advisor – Professor Frank Kelly – has been appointed, while DfT's latest Evidence and Research Strategy highlights the need for more evidence on the social aspects of transport policy and is being used to inform the direction of the department's separate research programmes.

Social research in the field of transport looks set to grow. In her foreword for the report, Gillian Smith, head of the new Social Research and Evaluation Division, mentions that ESRC are considering funding a major programme of social science research on transport and mobility. She is also keen to ensure that DfT works with a wider range of social research contractors and providers and would like to hear from anyone who would be interested.

The NatCen report identifies a long list of areas in which social research

was thought to be needed, including:

- Greater understanding of social exclusion related to transport policy and delivery
- Understanding of the social environment within which railways operate
- Transport behaviours and decisions within different population sub-groups, and barriers to using different forms of transport
- Public attitudes to different forms of road pricing and taxation for more sustainable methods of vehicle use.

If you are interested in finding out more about DfT social research opportunities, contact Gillian Smith, Head of SRE, Zone 4/16a, Great Minster House, 76 Marsham St, London SW1 4DR (gillian.smith@dft.gsi.gov.uk).

The full report of NatCen's review, *Review of Social Research in the Department for Transport*, by Norman Glass, Jane Ritchie, Roger Thomas, Christopher Farrell and Lisa Calderwood, is available online at www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_science/documents/page/dft_science_034037.hcsp

Half a million NI people below poverty line

A new report has claimed that over 500,000 people in Northern Ireland are living below the poverty line. According to the report *Bare Necessities – Poverty And Social Exclusion In Northern Ireland* a higher proportion of families are living in poverty in Northern Ireland than in either Britain or the Republic of Ireland. The report found that 185,000 households containing over 500,000 people were living below the poverty line. For more details see www.4ni.co.uk/industrynews.asp?id=37367

DARE database suspended

The social and human sciences DARE database is ceasing activity whilst a new, compact version is under study. The current version can be viewed until the end of 2006 at <http://databases.unesco.org/dare/dareintro.shtml>

How effective is local government research?



Alison Darlow

New research commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Local Authorities Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) focuses on the issue of what characterises effective research in local government. The research, undertaken by Janie Percy Smith (Independent Consultant) and Alison Darlow (Policy Research Institute), aims to identify the characteristics of effective research within the local government context, and to assess the extent to which there is a relationship between an effective research capacity and local authority performance.

The first stage of the research involved, through extensive consultations with local and national informants, developing a set of reasonably robust indicators of effective research capacity. Indicators have been developed in four broad areas. These are:

- **Research capacity** – including financial resources, numbers of research staff, skills and professional development.

- **Research organisation and culture** – including the location of research within the organisation, co-ordination of research, research culture, research strategy.
- **Quality and type of research** – including linkages to organisational priorities, quality assurance.
- **Communication and impact** – including presentation of research, dissemination and research that informs or has an impact on policy or practice.

Local Authority Research Effectiveness: A Discussion Paper has been published by the LGA and is available on its website (www.lga.gov.uk). Two further outputs from the project are planned, including a research report detailing the findings from the project so far and a toolkit designed to provide local authorities with practical advice on how to enhance the effectiveness of their research on the basis of the evidence assembled through this project.

Further information about the project is available from Janie Percy Smith (JaniePS@aol.com) or Alison Darlow (A.Darlow@leedsmet.ac.uk).

ESRC appoints strategic advisor for data resources



The ESRC Research Resources Board has appointed Professor Peter Elias (pictured), University of

Warwick as Strategic Advisor (Data Resources). He will be responsible for developing a National Data Strategy to support social science research. This will involve planning for the development of new data sources and the maintenance of existing resources, working closely with government departments, other research councils and the research foundations to coordinate these developments and assisting with the task of identifying the scope for co-funding arrangements.

Government social research professional development courses

The Cabinet Office runs a number of government social research professional development courses in policy evaluation and analysis. As well as increasing their knowledge of various research methodologies, the courses also offer participants the opportunity to make contacts within various government departments. The Cabinet Office would like to encourage take-up. Further details are available at: www.policyhub.gov.uk/evalpolicy/training_on_evaluation_methods.asp

Source: ESRC

The 2005 English church census

The English Church Census is a comprehensive survey of almost 37,000 churches across all denominations. It will provide a snapshot of church life in 2005 and give church leaders information to help them plan ahead both locally and strategically. This is the fourth such study and will allow trends in churchgoing to be measured more accurately than ever.

The survey asks about Sunday church attendance broken down by age, gender, frequency and ethnic background, and includes questions on mid-week worship, youth and 'fringe' activities, mission activity and values, and community engagement. Churches can submit their replies online. A special website www.ecc05.org.uk has been set up, and readers of SRA News are welcome to browse that or the parent site www.christian-research.org.uk.

Further information from Dr Peter Brierley, Executive Director of Christian Research; admin@christian-research.org.uk; 020 8249 1989.

E-social science

Do the initials NceSS mean anything to you? Probably not yet but, if the team at the ESRC-funded National Centre for e-Social Science based at the University of Manchester has its way, more and more of us are soon going to know more about them and what e-social science is.

Manchester is the hub of this virtual centre and several nodes have been established around the country. NceSS aims include:

- acting as the central resource base for e-social science in the UK and raising awareness among social scientists
- providing a one-stop shop for expertise, training, technical infrastructure, data resources, computer facilities and user support for e-social science research and grid technologies

The centre is organising the first ever international conference on e-social science to be held in Manchester 22-24th June 2005.

See www.ncess.ac.uk to find out more about NceSS. The SRA is planning to hold a joint event with NceSS later this year so SRA members can find out how e-social science can be useful to them.

mruk makes significant impact in the south

mruk research, the UK's largest regionally based research company, has made a substantial impact with social research projects in the south east of England in the last few weeks.

The award of the £1.5 million two year contract from The Metropolitan Police Force follows recent success in being appointed on framework contracts with WRAP (Waste Resources Action Programme) and Central Office of Information, and work with Legal Services Commission.

This builds on the extensive regional work mruk conducts from bases in Manchester, Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Winchester and London – for clients such as Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive, North Tyneside Council,

The Housing Corporation, Scottish Executive, Scottish Water, Leeds City Council, Merseyside Police, North Wales Police, Scottish Enterprise, Basic Skills Agency and Opportunity Wales.

Jim Law, mruk's MD is delighted at what he sees as a breakthrough in the South East market. "We have been providing high quality social research for around 20 years, but until recently have been less well known in the South East. In the last 12 months we targeted our efforts in to addressing this, and we are delighted to have succeeded so spectacularly. We look forward to more projects in the South East market in the future, to compliment our strong activity in other regions."

More information: www.mruk.co.uk

New researcher database

A new database of researchers and their areas of expertise will be set up and shared between the ESRC Research Methods Programme, the National Centre for Research Methods, and the Cabinet Office and other government departments. It will be used as a resource for government departments seeking to procure research services.

Source: ESRC

Extra time online

ContinYou has launched a new Extra Time online resource with key information about Extra Time /Out of School Hours Learning (OSHL). Funded by DfES, this FREE resource is for anyone who wants to develop policies or wants to know more about evaluations and evidence in this field.

For more information contact ContinYou, 020 8709 9900 or info@continyou.org.uk www.continyou.org.uk

Courses database

NCRM have now taken over and re-developed the courses database. The database provides a way of searching for short courses using keywords or terms in the course title. The additional resources and long-term maintenance that NCRM can offer are of great value. **See:** www.ncrm.ac.uk/database/?action=training

Source: ESRC

UK's 'useless' quangos under fire

The UK has 529 quangos (such as the ESRC) financed with billions of pounds of taxpayers' cash – many of which are useless or duplicate each other's efforts, a report claims. The report is published by the Efficiency in Government Unit – a joint effort by right of centre think tanks the Economic Research Council and the Centre for Policy Studies, and attacks the number and cost of Britain's quangos. **For more information on the Essential Guide to British Quangos 2005 see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4255709.stm**

Sociology hits the (small) screen

Government Chief Social Researcher, Sue Duncan, is to appear in a British Sociological Association video so that schools and universities can encourage students into sociology as a discipline and career. Filming took place in January and Sue spoke about how her education in sociology has fuelled her career in government social research.

For more information see www.gsr.gov.uk

Harmony online

The Harmonisation website has been updated in view of changes to social data sources on tenure, mobile phone users, benefits and tax credits, social capital and internet access. See www.statistics.gov.uk

Social trends

The ONS annual Social Trends report has just been published with the usual array of fascinating facts and figures. For example, the most common reason given for economic inactivity by men was long-term sickness or disability while for women it was childcare. Household expenditure on communications has trebled in volume between 1991 and 2003, and seven in ten people convicted for theft were reconvicted within two years of discharge. Since it is 35 years since the publication started, this year's report has a special section on changes over that period by Len Cook and Jean Martin. The report is available free on www.statistics.gov.uk/socialtrends35

NEW FINDINGS

New report on links between employee participation, job satisfaction and company performance

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published a review of the links between employee participation, job satisfaction and company performance. *Employee participation and company performance* by Juliette Summers, Lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of Stirling, and Jeff Hyman, Professor of Management at the University of Aberdeen Business School, is the first major appraisal of contemporary employee participation practices and their outcomes and is particularly important in the context of family-friendly employment practices and progression at work. Available as a free PDF download or as a paperback report, priced £15.95, from www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=677. A free summary is at www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy/0125.asp.

Have planning agreements increased the supply of affordable housing?

Just published on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website, this study considers whether increasing use of Section 106 planning agreements has been at the expense of other forms of affordable housing provision. Read it at: www.jrf.org.uk/redirect.asp?url=findings/housing/0155

More Britons are living alone

More Britons are living alone than ever before, with more on their own between 25 and 44. Once someone has gone solo, they are more likely to remain so according to new research funded by the ESRC. Using census statistics and data tracking more than 150,000 individuals in England and Wales since 1971, researchers led by Malcolm Williams of the University of Plymouth, predict that this trend will continue. For more information contact m.williams@plymouth.ac.uk or 01772 233217.

UK public is largely positive about science

A recent MORI report *Science in Society: Findings from Qualitative and Quantitative Research* for the Office of Science and Technology into public attitudes to science and scientists, found that over 80% of adults think science makes a good contribution to society and that science will make our lives easier. More than half (56%) of UK adults have taken part in a science-based activity in the last year, outside work. There has also been an increase in the level of trust in scientists in recent years.

Source: www.policyhub.gov.uk

Who pays for higher education?

A recent report *Higher education funding policy: who wins and who loses?* A comprehensive guide to the current debate, published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), compares the university funding policies of Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats. The report finds that all three parties promise to increase university funding, raising per student funds by up to 30% in real terms for new students from 2006-07.

Source: www.policyhub.gov.uk

DWP publishes report on staff safety

A new report into staff safety in Jobcentre Plus offices finds that staff generally feel safe in new open plan offices. However, some staff are concerned about working in unscreened environments. *Staff Safety in Jobcentre Plus Offices* by Pat Irving and Ashfa Slater of ECOTEC Research and Consulting Limited can be downloaded free from www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

A question of balance

The DWP has just published research into lone parents and work conducted by NatCen and the Social Policy Research Unit at the University of York. It will be useful for informing thinking about appropriate policy interventions for different kinds of lone parent families. *A Question of Balance – lone parents, childcare and work* can be downloaded from www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/

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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.

SRA NEWS PUBLICATION

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Social Europe: Living Standards and Welfare States

Richard Berthoud and Maria Iacovou (editors)
2004, Edward Elgar: Cheltenham
£59.95

Reviewed by: Nick Axford, Dartington Social Research Unit

Social Europe analyses how people's lives evolve over time, documenting and explaining similarities and differences between European countries. It is based on a three-year EU-funded research programme involving six institutions. Chapters relate primarily to families, employment or income and are based on data on 153,000 individuals from the first three waves of the European Community Household Panel Survey (ECHP), starting in 1994.

The main finding is variety. With family dynamics, for example, young men first leave home in Nordic countries on average five years earlier than in southern/Catholic countries, a difference explained by cultural and economic factors. With employment, social democratic countries such as Sweden have the lowest 'downward mobility' into full labour market exclusion. Income differentials and persistent poverty are greatest in liberal welfare regimes, notably the UK.

Collectively, the chapters offer valuable insights on conducting cross-national comparative research, especially the strengths and weaknesses of the welfare regime approach. They also provide useful case studies that complement the methodological literature on longitudinal analysis. The benefits for policy of a dynamic perspective are highlighted – for example, the different responses required to tackle 'persistent' as opposed to 'occasional' poverty. The book also shows why similarity in trends across Europe does not necessarily indicate convergence between countries: the proportion of births outside marriage, for instance, has risen in all countries but faster where it was already high (e.g. Denmark) than where it was low (e.g. Spain).

As the editors note, 'we are still in the first stages of cross-national comparative longitudinal research' (p.265). The ECHP survey was discontinued in 2001 after eight waves, so the period in question may be remembered as the 'golden age' for comparative research of this kind. The wealth of robust analysis here should certainly encourage others to exploit the data while it remains fairly up to date.

The Sociology of Ethnicity

Siniša Malešević
2004, Sage Publications
ISBN 0-7619-4042-1
£19.99

Reviewed by: Ayo Mansaray, Institute of Education, University of London

'Ethnicity' is a nebulous term and this book attempts to show what explanations sociology can offer for understanding ethnic relations. Malešević (p4) defines ethnicity as 'not a thing or a collective asset of a particular group; it is a social relation in which social actors perceive themselves and are perceived by others as being culturally distinct collectivities'.

This is a text book, which means that it sets out to tell a coherent story about the development of theories of ethnicity, grounded in the writings of the canonical 'fathers' of sociology, Simmel, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. This is a somewhat audacious undertaking since with exception of Weber, none of these authors had an explicit theory of ethnicity as such; thus Malešević engages in an adroit re-construction of their arguments. Having established a case for thinking that early classical theorists were concerned with ethnicity even though they did not use the term, Malešević gives clear and concise summaries and criticism of familiar sociological theories, as applied to 'ethnicity', such as symbolic interactionism, rational choice theory, elite theory and so on.

I do have some reservations about his rather quick dismissal of 'race' as an analytical concept lacking explanatory force. There is an inherent reductionism in his argument that 'ethnicity is able to accommodate all of these specific labels such as 'race' (Malešević, p. 6) because it ignores the specific dynamics of discriminatory practices based on 'race'.

There is an interesting chapter where the author attempts to show how each theory would explain the Rwandan genocide, and suggests that explanations cannot always be made compatible in some grand synthesis and that there is no sociological master key to understanding ethnicity. This is a highly useful introduction to the sociology of ethnicity.

Social Research Issues, Methods and Process, 3rd Edition

Tim May

2001, OUP

ISBN 0335206123

£19.99

Reviewed by Dr Antony Billingham, Department for Work and Pensions, Sheffield

This is the third edition of May's successful Social Research text, in itself a testament to its enduring appeal to researchers and students.

May says that research is central to the social sciences. It is increasingly used as the yardstick by which academics and government are judged and, as such, robust research based upon sound methodology is a key skill.

The book does not focus totally on methods. May introduces the theoretical concepts and debates which underlie most research, and this gives readers an understanding of the 'aims and practice of social research'. This is an essential precursor to the wider discussion of methods because there is a 'constant interaction between ideas about the social world and the data collected in it'. We never collect data within a vacuum.

There follows a useful chapter looking at values and ethics. Achieving value-free research is often difficult, and a weakness we should recognise before and during data collection. Increasingly, as research widens collection of data into more sensitive areas and asks information from vulnerable groups, we must be aware of the ethics of our research and ensure that we behave according to professional guidelines.

May discusses various research methods, taking in official statistics as data sources, interviewing, participant observation, documentary research and, finally, comparative research. Each of these chapters contains the main debates surrounding the method, and is written in a clear and easily understandable way. The book's strengths are its accessibility to students and its usefulness to established researchers, providing timely reminders of current debates. Each chapter concludes with questions that allow readers to reflect upon the subjects already covered and to move beyond the debates in the book.

Overall, May successfully covers the difficult topic of methodology in a clear and concise manner, and his book is suitable for both a specialist and generalist audience.

Understanding Research for Social Policy and Practice: themes, methods and approaches

Becker S and Bryman A (eds)

2004, Bristol: The Policy Press

ISBN 1-86134-403-1

Reviewed by Ian Smith

This is a valuable book which covers some of the specific issues that differentiate researchers working in a social policy environment from general works concerned with social research.

The editors offer chapters on research design and methodology and quantitative and qualitative research, as one might expect in any text on researching social policy issues and impacts. The book's distinguishing feature is that it relates social research to the social policy process through understanding the policy-making process (and where research fits in), and discussing both research management and the dissemination of findings.

I would incorporate this book as a core source within research methods courses at undergraduate or postgraduate level. The editors have managed to develop a balanced anthology that includes packages of material backed up by short position papers relating to the main text written by 65 authors with challenging questions to consider and an indication of further reading. Despite the range of material, the editors have managed to keep the pace and style of the content interesting and coherent. However, the inevitable compromises in covering so much ground mean that readers will need to consult the 'further reading' in order to develop sufficient practical understanding in using any single method.

The chapter on research management is probably the weakest. It sets out to tackle some basic matters relating to 'the quality and effectiveness of the research management process'. Project management is certainly more important as we work in larger and often multi-agency teams, and the chapter is a useful checklist of the things one might need to consider: ethics, managing people, employing people, managing the expectations of clients. A commentary on the criteria by which research commissioners assess 'good' research would have been useful. This would have allowed some interesting reflections on the policy-making process raised in chapter 1. All these issues are better handled in the context of chapter 7 dealing with the dissemination.

This is a useful book primarily for students to get

a taste of how to do research within social policy. It raises the practical issues of doing this kind of research, and suggests where the newcomer might go to deepen their understanding. For existing practitioners, it might risk irritation on subjects you are familiar with because of the inevitable brevity of coverage but might offer initial insight into methods and approaches you are unfamiliar with. I found it interesting.

Qualitative Research Sociology

By *Amir B. Marvasti*
2004, London: Sage

*Reviewed by Samantha Holland,
Leeds Metropolitan University*

There are many books on methods, some more accessible than others. This book is specific to the social sciences and up to date. Marvasti writes in a clear, friendly tone. The chapter structure follows research design with sections on visual methods, ethnography, interviewing, analysis, and (crucially for the modern researcher) ethics. Each chapter ends with a summary, a list of suggested readings and a short exercise. Whilst I am not entirely convinced by the usefulness of all the exercises, they do offer some helpful tips in the later sections, particularly in ethics. (The exercise on p.61 confuses sex with gender – rather disappointing from a sociologist.) The final section is about writing, how to get going, how to keep going, the right tone for a formal piece of work, and so on. Too few books for students offer advice on this subject, so I was pleased to see it here.

Firstly though, she sets the scene for the novice social researcher by providing a basic guide to, and definition of, sociology ('the strange in the familiar', p.2). She then gives a brief introduction to positivism and constructionism, pointing out that both are empirically grounded. To illustrate the differences she uses the example of prostitution but notes that the 'distinctions [between the two] are equally applicable to less sensational topics' (p.6).

This is a clearly written and accessible book which covers all the elements of a research project. It would be invaluable for undergraduates (or anyone undertaking a research project for the first time) and I will be recommending it as a must-have text for all future dissertation students. If, like me, you are interested in methods for their own sake you will also find enjoy this book, even if you don't learn anything new.

ITEMS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books or reports, simply write a short review of about 300 words. You can then keep the item you review. Contact the SRA to reserve your copy. We also welcome unsolicited reviews of any other books/reports.

One Hundred Years of Poverty and Policy

Howard Glennerster, John Hills, David Piachaud and Jo Webb. Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Opportunities of a Lifetime: model lifetime analysis of current British social policy

Martin Evans and Jill Eyre. Policy Press

Active Ageing in Active Communities

Justin Davis Smith and Pat Gay. Policy Press and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Idea of Community, Social Policy and Self

Kevin Loughran. APJ Publications

Employment transitions of older workers; the role of flexible employment in maintaining labour market participation and promoting job quality

Stephen Lissenburgh and Deborah Smeaton. The Policy Press

Combining self-employment and family life

Alice Bell and Ivana La Valle. The Policy Press

Happy Families? Atypical work and its influence on family life

Ivana La Valle, Sue Arthur, Christine Millward, James Scott with Marion Clayden. The Policy Press

Socio-Economic Research in the Information Society: A User's Guide from the RESPECT Project

U Huws. Institute for Employment Studies

Surveying the public in NHS, public health, and social care research: briefing notes for researchers

Edited by Roger Steel. Involve Support Unit

KEEP UP TO DATE : For the latest diary dates, why not subscribe to the SRA's monthly e-bulletin at www.the-sra.org.uk

For details of all SRA training and events and booking forms see www.the-sra.org.uk

SRA Training

London

These will be held at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, N7 6PA

12/13 May:

Data Protection

(2 separate 1/2 day courses)

18 May:

Access and Sampling for Diverse Populations

tba:

Media Training for Social Researchers

Edinburgh

These will be held at the Edinburgh Training Centre, St Mary's Street.

26 May:

Research Design in the Real World

16 June:

Questionnaire Design

SRA Events

London

5 July

SRA Summer Event: Equality and Inclusion

1.30 registration – 6.30 close of drinks reception

Venue: Local Government Association

7 December:

Annual Conference: Nuisance or Necessity? The role of non-researchers in research

Venue: Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, Russell Square

Edinburgh

19 May:

Annual Event: Has research in Scotland Changed as a Result of Devolution?

Venue: Apex International, The Grassmarket

Time: 1.30-6.30pm including cheese and wine reception

Conferences and Workshops

19 May

Linking Survey and Administrative Data and Statistical Disclosure Control

Organised by the RSS Social Statistics Section

Venue: RSS, London

Details: meetings@rss.org.uk

25-27 May

Human Resource Development: Addressing the Value

Organised by NTP Ltd

Venue: Queens Hotel, Leeds

Details: www.leedsmet.ac.uk/lbs/events/2004/hrd_conference

26 May and 19 July

Participation and representation: implications for ethical research practice

Organised by ESRC Research Methods Programme (two half day seminars)

Venue: London and York

Details: www.ccsr.uk/methods/diary/

22-24 June

E-Social Science

Organised by the ESRC National Centre for e-Social Science (NceSS)

Venue: Manchester

Details: www.ncess.ac.uk

23 June

Millennium Cohort Study

Organised by Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Economic and Social Data Service.

Venue: Institute of Education, University of London

Details: www.esds.ac.uk

28-29 June

Conducting Research with Children and Young People

Organised by the Scottish Centre for Social Research and the Department of Applied Social Sciences at Stirling University

Venue: Stirling University

1 July

Health Survey's User Group Meeting

Organised by ESDS Government

Venue: RSS, London

Details: www.ccsr.ac.uk/esds/events/

15-16 September

Survey Research Methodology: Maximising Data Value

Organised by the Association for Survey Computing the conference aims to explore survey research methods in the area of data integration

Venue: Newland Park, Bucks
Details: Diana Elder

Tel and Fax: 0494 793033

Email: admin@asc.org.uk

www.asc.org.uk

Courses

CASS Courses

Details: Jane Schofield,
Division of Social Statistics,
University of Southampton
Tel: 023 8059 5376

cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk

www.socstats.soton.ac.uk/cass

Bursaries are available which reduce the fee – applicants must be full-time students, UK academic staff or ESRC-funded researchers.

22-24 June

Longitudinal Data Analysis

The Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research

Check online for details
of 2005/06 courses

Details: Margaret Martin

Tel: 0161 275 4589

ccsr@man.ac.uk

www.ccsr.ac.uk

Lancaster University Centre for Applied Statistics in conjunction with Information Systems Services

Statistics Short Courses

Details: 01524 593064

statistics@lancaster.ac.uk

www.cas.lancs.ac.uk/short_courses

2-3 June

SPSS for Windows II

9-10 June

Multi-level Models

Market Research Society

The MRS offers a range of courses in market research, graded from introductory to advanced thinking. For details see www.mrs.org.uk/training/trainindex.htm

NatCen

Details: l.pinkard@natcen.ac.uk
or 0207 549 9540

31 October – 4 November and 1-5 November

Design, conduct and analysis of qualitative research using in- depth interviews

29 and 30 November

Design, conduct and analysis of qualitative research using focus groups

University of Reading SSC

The Statistical Services Centre offers a wide variety of courses in applied statistics for a range of audiences. A selection is listed.

Details: Statistical Services Centre
The University of Reading

Tel: 0118 378 8689

Fax: 0118 975 3169

statistics@reading.ac.uk

www.rdg.ac.uk/ssc/

6-7 June

Multivariate Analysis

8-10 June

Repeated Measurements Analysis

16-7 June

Time-to-Event Analysis: A Practical Approach

11-13 July

Practical Bayesian Data Analysis

University of Surrey Department of Sociology

Offers a regular series of one-day courses on research methods in the social sciences for professional and postgraduate researchers.

The programme for 2005-2006 is not available at the time of going to press. See online at www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/daycourses/dcindex.html

Details: Tel: 01483 689458

Email: e.sutchbury@surrey.ac.uk

www.soc.surrey.ac.uk



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