

Research in Practice

Celia Atherton, Director, describes the work of Research in Practice



Not being heard, or having methodically sound research findings ignored by generations of traditionalist policy makers and practitioners, has long been a lament of researchers. Thankfully, times are changing. There is now more interest in the research evidence base than there has ever been, not just in social care, but also

in education, health, policing, probation and other public services. Ministers and their departments are queuing up to declare that today's policy is all about what works.

Such commitments are not easily met, however. Understanding the research evidence is hard enough, but working effectively in a way that is informed by that evidence is harder still. The barriers are formidable: the evidence may be complex or uneven, interventions and outcomes can be fiendishly hard to measure and evaluate, and inappropriate ways of working may be entrenched. As Alan Bowman, the new chair of the Social Care Institute for Excellence, said recently: "We have a long way to go before evidence-informed practice becomes the norm rather than the exception".

So, if research is to make a real difference to people's lives, researchers need to be more than heard; merely disseminating findings is not enough. Good research needs to be implemented – but to be implemented thoughtfully, creatively and imaginatively at the coalface, where its impact matters

most and where the challenges to using it wisely are greatest. While this article describes our work with service agencies we should not forget the formidable challenges facing researchers and funders in making their work more 'user-minded' and so more obviously relevant to practice.

At Research in Practice, this is an imperative we have always understood. Later this year, we celebrate our tenth birthday. From the beginning, we have understood that it is only when practitioners and their organisations weave research-mindedness into the very fabric of their day-to-day culture that research will make a lasting difference to the lives of children and their families.

Not so long ago, it may have seemed fanciful to imagine that such a dramatic change could be within reach. But for everyone involved with children's services, there is now the realistic prospect of an enduring paradigm shift in how those services operate. Ever since publication three years ago of the Government's Green Paper, Every Child Matters, and the launch of its Change for Children agenda the following year, children's services have been changing. The vision now is for more integrated, accessible and personalised services built around the identified needs of children and their families (rather than professional or service boundaries), with specialist support embedded in universal services and settings.

But what exactly is Research in Practice? And how does it fit into this changing landscape? In essence, Research in Practice is an active collaborative network of more than 100 partner agencies across England and Wales, all committed to working and learning together to improve outcomes for children and their families through the use of research evidence. Our particular focus is on children with additional needs – that is, children who need extra support to fulfil their potential.

Ten years ago, our partner agencies were exclusively local authority social services departments. Today, the network reflects the changing face of children's services, embracing not only local authorities but also local consortia that include health, education and social services, as well as national organisations such as the Children's Society, MENCAP and NSPCC. The network has grown to become the largest children and families research implementation project in England and Wales.

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Research in Practice

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Three aspects of what we do make Research in Practice unique. First, the network is driven by its partner agencies; participating agencies genuinely feel that they own the network, determine its direction and help set its priorities. Second, being part of the network means partner agencies can and do contribute directly to the design of interventions so that they have practical application in their own localities and for their own client groups. And third, we work at all levels of an organisation; frontline practitioners can only work in an evidence-informed way if the importance of that approach is understood throughout their organisation.

Our programme of Change Projects best illustrates our collaborative approach to developing ever more effective ways of embedding research in practice. There is no set formula for a project, but each involves partner agencies from within the network and a team of expert facilitators coming together to design, over time, a set of practical tools that can be used to translate the research evidence into effective practice.

Projects tackle a diverse range of those thorny issues that practitioners, managers and agencies must confront if they are to improve outcomes for children and their families. Eighteen months ago we launched a three-year project to improve social workers' use of research evidence when presenting cases in the family court. This year sees the start of our first health-oriented project, looking at young people, alcohol abuse and offending; and also our first education-focused project, looking at how to engage and re-engage young people in learning.

Other projects, there are usually half a dozen running at any one time, may focus on more strategic issues, such as establishing effective leadership for evidence-informed practice. And this year, we are re-running a project first run four years ago, in which we provide tuition, consultancy, mentoring and networking support to a group of non-research staff from partner agencies wanting to develop their skills in single-service evaluations.

The materials developed by project teams are reviewed, piloted and evaluated before being published for wider use across the network and beyond. This commitment to quality inevitably means the process is not quick, but it also ensures that the final products, such as our new handbook, *Firm Foundations: A practical guide to organisational support for the use of research evidence*, have been thoroughly tried and tested. We publish resources in a range of media, print, audio, video or web, and often a mix of all.

If Change Projects offer the perfect illustration of our collaborative approach to learning from research, they are by no means all we do. Each year, we run a programme of learning events to help partner agencies strengthen evidence-informed practice at all levels of their organisation. These include research-focused conferences, as well as one-day workshops; workshops may concentrate on current research and how to apply it to practice (research messages), provide skills development opportunities for improving evidence-informed practice (research support), or enable small groups of practitioners to discuss real cases with an experienced research-based facilitator (case study).

All learning events build in opportunities to reflect and plan for action back at work, and use methods that enable new knowledge

to be cascaded through the workplace. And all are certified and contribute towards post-qualification training and learning portfolios.

Our website www.rip.org.uk is an important learning platform in its own right. It links our partners to each other, connects them to a wider community of researchers and policy makers, provides a gateway to evaluated information about research and practice, and makes all our tools and resources available to people wherever they are.

The website also hosts e-learning material: open access web pages designed to reinforce learning from selected workshops, but which can also be used as stand-alone resources. Other unique features include a ResourceBank of products that partner agencies have developed to spread evidence-informed practice in their own organisation, and a register of researchers to guide people to specialists in the field.

One final word: last autumn saw the launch of our sister organisation, Research in Practice for Adults (RiPFA). Based on the success of the Research in Practice model, RiPFA offers its partner agencies a similar mix of network opportunities to promote the use of research in social care with adults. Children don't live in isolation, and we will be working with RiPFA to develop a stream of joint activity (later this year, for example, we will host a joint conference for trustees and elected councillors on transitions). It's a testament to the success of our collaborative approach to improving outcomes through more effective use of research that so many agencies want to join this new venture. And it gives a reason to hope that, ten years from now, researchers will no longer be complaining that their findings do not influence practice or policy.

Taking the SRA Forward

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

In my first three months as chair I have experienced an exponential learning curve; it has been steep, at times quite intense, and hopefully the plateau is nearer than it was!



Probably my most pleasurable task was to give the vote of thanks to Roger Jowell, who delivered an outstanding speech on 16 March, entitled "How Different Nations View the World and Themselves – the hazardous pursuit of evidence in place of stereotypes" (see report on page 4).

I am struck by how much the SRA executive is trying to achieve, and sometimes it seems as if we are trying to do everything at once. There is a wide span and considerable number of operational activities underway; and we are also trying to identify, at a strategic level, the best way of taking the SRA forward to best serve members. You can read elsewhere in this newsletter from Janet Lewis about progress on the initiative to promote good practice on commissioning social research. Just a few of our other strands of work are:

- Training Review. Cathy Sullivan, Robin Legard and Tracy Budd briefed Ceridwen Roberts and me about the emerging issues from the review. We had a very helpful discussion and teased out topics for discussion by the executive at forthcoming meetings, including the need for a strategic plan to set the framework for matters such as paying trainers, fees and bursaries for courses, and what training/development opportunities are most helpful mid-career. Our aim is to make the training available as professional

and relevant as possible to SRA members and to play our part in increasing the professionalism of social researchers in whatever sector they work.

- Also on the training front, the SRA is applying to the ESRC under its Researcher Development Initiative (Round II) for funding to deliver an expanded suite of courses designed to meet a range of requirements. This would include the appointment of a training director. Courses could then be replicated in different venues, and developed to take account of lessons learned from researchers attending. Cathy Sullivan and Jane Ritchie are leading on this important application, as well as supporting the SRA's regular courses.
- The events committee covers a range of activities, including the summer event and the annual conference, and the range of SRA seminars and collaborative ventures with other organisations such as the Royal Statistical Society. There is a call out at present to members for volunteers to help and I would urge members, wherever you live, to consider whether you can give a little time to help the committee and the executive to deliver core events, to support the development of the SRA's membership services and to engage with the social science community.
- As an essential prelude to the executive launching a membership drive later in 2006, Simon Maxwell has been working with

Jean Harrison and Gemma Pikett in the office, to resolve various technical problems to improve the reliability and efficiency of our computer systems. John Wicks has developed a questionnaire for members about SRA providing enhanced services and this will be issued shortly.

There is a great deal going on within the SRA to develop our capacity to benefit members, and we are also trying to "seize the moment" of great interest and advances in the social sciences to ensure that SRA's voice is heard. To achieve progress on both, the executives hope to appoint a director (part-time) for the office to build on achievements so far. I am working with the other officers on a job description and skills specification, and we hope, initially, to use our SRA networks to promote the vacancy. I will report on progress on this in the next issue.

Taking Data Further: *innovative approaches*

SRA Summer Event 4 July 2006

Venue:

Local Government Association,
Local Government House,
Smith Square, London
SW1P 3HZ

Now taking bookings:

admin@the-sra.org.uk

Advance notice: SRA events

Put the dates into your diary now for the **summer event on 4 July** and the **annual conference on 6 December**.

The summer event, Taking Data Further, will include presentations on innovative approaches such as linking administrative and survey data, following up the most and least satisfied segments of survey respondents and merging large surveys. The event will be held at the Local Government Association with a drinks reception afterwards on the roof terrace of Transport House.

Following the success of last year, the 2006 annual conference is again based at the Brunei Gallery at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London. The theme will be Challenging Myths – Researching Reality: The Role of Social Research. Check the website for the call for papers.

Our regular seminar programme continues on 31 May with Scanning Horizons, a new technique developed at MORI. On 14 June we look at the evaluation of Incapacity Benefit reforms with speakers from DWP and the National Centre. Other seminars will focus on the Wealth and Assets survey, the first dedicated survey on this subject in this country and the second wave of the Access to Justice and the Workplace Employment Relations surveys.

Finally, we are holding a joint event with the Royal Statistical Society on Randomised Control Trials in November to continue to learn about and discuss an approach that promises ‘hard facts’. *Tina Haux*

Mark Abrams Prize: call for entries

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

Evidence in place of stereotypes

Over 60 people crowded into City University in March, as part of Social Science week, to consider the way in which different countries view themselves and the world. Roger Jowell had been invited to lecture to mark his unique achievement as the first ever social scientist to be awarded the EU Descartes Prize for Science, and the lecture was jointly sponsored by SRA, the Academy of the Social Sciences and City. Roger based his talk on his extensive comparative research experience, particularly the European Social Survey, which he set up with colleagues. He leads the coordinating team based at City.

No one should be under the illusion that these types of research studies are anything but demanding. Roger told us about some of the technical, conceptual and managerial challenges cross-national surveys can present but also was clearly enthusiastic about the ways in which the data, finally captured and analysed, can be used by researchers, politicians and journalists alike. Many of us left the room feeling the effort was well worthwhile and more comparative research needed to be fostered and funded, discussing how to do it over wine and canapés. *Ceridwen Roberts*

New Chief Researchers

The Scottish Executive has appointed Diana Wilkinson as chief researcher. Diana has had a long career in social research at the Scottish Executive, most recently as Head of Analytical Services Unit in Children, Young People and Social Care within the Education Department.

Angela Evans has been appointed as the Welsh Assembly Government’s first ever chief social research officer. She will lead the Office of the Chief Social Research Officer and act as Head of Profession for research and evaluation staff across the Assembly Government.

SRA Initiative on Research Commissioning and Funding

Janet Lewis gives a progress report.

Background

This SRA initiative, which started in May 2004, is progressing steadily. Previous editions of SRA News included short updates on progress and this note provides an overview of work to date and future plans.

Our focus

Building on the SRA's good practice guide on Commissioning Social Research, the aim is to promote the core principles of good commissioning. These include the fundamental messages of:

- The need for clarity about what is being sought from the research – the concerns and question(s) to be addressed
- The importance of developing a constructive dialogue between commissioner and commissioned
- The need to allow adequate time for the commissioning process and the research.

Many other matters, including the context for research and practical details, have also been identified as important to good commissioning.

The initiative also aims to cover a broad spectrum: from government to small organisations commissioning one-off pieces of work, and from statutory bodies to grant-makers. It wants to encompass a wide range of different levels of experience of commissioning as well, from the person who has little or no experience of doing research or managing it, through to experienced research commissioners responsible for large research budgets.

Our approach

The main thrust of the initiative is to help to educate people to work in ways that result in high quality and useful research, to fill gaps and to identify good practice.

The basis of the initiative is an ever-evolving email list of interested people who are invited to meetings every six months, at which a wide range of topics have been discussed. Two major gaps have been identified: a lack of provision of training for research commissioning

and a lack of an authoritative source of information about best practice.

Achievements

There have been a number of successes so far:

- A mailing list of active, interested people
- The Office for Government Commerce (OGC) and Government Social Research (GSR) have worked together to produce some joint guidelines on Procuring Social Research in Government. These are now at www.gsr.gov.uk/professional-guidance/procurement-guidance
- A grant of £17,500 received from the ESRC for a project to develop curriculum guidelines for training in research commissioning
- A consultancy team – Janie Percy-Smith and Alison Darlow – appointed to do this work from 1 April 2006
- A list of people, either providing training currently or interested in doing so, compiled and a meeting held in early April
- Purchase of domain name for a new website: www.better-social-research.org.uk
- Proposal for developing the website written and some resources and funds obtained to allow work to start. Further details of the possible content now being elaborated to form the basis of another round of fundraising.

Current priorities

The main priority now is developing the website.

Provided funds can be obtained, there is a considerable amount of material already available that can go on the website or that can be pulled together relatively easily. The issue that is most problematic is how best to cover areas where what constitutes 'good practice' is debated, disputed or unclear. For example:

- Post-tender negotiations
- Ownership of data and, to a lesser extent, copyright of publications
- Costing specifications and proposals – including whether a budget should be included in the brief.

It will not be possible for anyone to sit down and write the definitive statement on these latter issues.

Some way will therefore need to be found to identify what is generally considered to be 'good practice', or the pros and cons of alternative actions. We will be experimenting with different methods of doing this, from a discussion paper assessing different practices, to facilitated meetings with researchers and commissioners to identify what experienced people consider 'good practice'. We hope SRA members will be involved in this.

Anyone interested should contact Janet Lewis on janet@jdlewis.freemove.co.uk

SRA SCOTLAND:

Chris Nicol reports

Since the turn of the year, we have focused on running our popular qualitative training courses. As usual, demand has exceeded supply, so we are repeating parts of the course on 11 and 12 May. Refer to our training diary on this page. For more details contact Lindsay Adams scotland@the-sra.org.uk.

At our February seminar, On Track: Class of 2004, Justine Menzies of Ipsos MORI described this five-year tracking exercise which aims to address the lack of evidence on how learners progress after completing their studies. Justine's study looked at the methodology and highlighted problem areas, such as attrition and keeping in touch with a mobile population.

We are looking for speakers for seminars for summer and autumn, so if you are working on a study you think might be of interest to an audience of social researchers please get in touch. SRA Scotland seminars are usually very informal and are a good place to try out your findings, theories and ideas or share methodological problems with a sympathetic audience.

Seminars are often organised quickly to fit in with speaker availability. This often means that we are unable to publicise the event in SRA news. If you wish to be kept informed of SRA Scotland seminars and training events please join our email list (scotland@the-sra.org.uk).

We are now planning SRA Scotland's annual event. Following the success of last year's London event, the theme will be involving non-researchers in the design, conduct and dissemination of research, with a focus on research in Scotland.

Contact

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

SRA IRELAND:

Peter Humphreys reports

Over 80 delegates from the policy and the applied research/consultancy communities attended our inaugural seminar in January on Good Practice in Commissioning Research and Evaluation. Encouraged by the response, we have been doing some planning to help keep the momentum going. At the time of writing, we are planning a meeting in early May of all members, hosted by the Equality Authority, here in Dublin to plan next steps, including establishing a branch committee (to share out the jobs and spread the load!), future training and events activities and a membership drive.

The feedback after the seminar was extremely encouraging and we are building upon the strong level of enthusiasm generated by the day. Already we have members in a wide and growing range of bodies across the island of Ireland.

Contact

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

Diary

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

Edinburgh

Training:

Research Design in the Real World 19 MAY

Understanding Sampling 12 JUNE

Better Questionnaire Design 19 JUNE

Events:

Scottish Summer Event JUNE

London

Training:

Longitudinal Research 17 MAY

Events:

Evening seminars:

Scanning the Horizons: Mori Qualitative Research (4.30–6pm) 31 MAY

Wealth and Assets Survey 14 JUNE

Summer event:

Taking Data Further: innovative approaches 4 JULY

Annual conference:

Challenging Myths – Researching Reality: The Role of Social Research 6 DECEMBER

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

Queering Statistics

By *Steven Taylor*, SRA Events Committee

A packed lecture hall greeted the panel of speakers at a recent Royal Statistical Society Social Statistics Section and SRA joint seminar on 'Queering Statistics'. The focus of the evening was to discuss the apparent lack of statistics on the extent and nature of the lesbian, gay and bisexual population within the UK, and explore the case for, and obstacles to achieving better official statistics. Jil Matheson from the Office for National Statistics chaired.

There have been huge advances in equality for lesbian gay and bisexual people. Being discriminated against at work due to sexual orientation was made unlawful in 2003, and the introduction of civil partnerships at the end of 2005 marked an important milestone. Despite these advances, prejudice and intolerance remain. Katherine Cowan of Stonewall, drew on research by MORI which suggests that lesbian and gay people are one of the most discriminated against groups in society. Katherine said that collecting data is essential to enable policy makers and others find ways to tackle problems. She argued that the continued absence of lesbian, gay and bisexual people from official statistics perpetuates the notion of sexual orientation as inferior to other strands of anti-discrimination, about which considerable data are collected. Despite legal advances, statistical and research establishments are playing 'catch up'.

But what data should be collected? Ford Hickson of Sigma Research and Jeffrey Weeks of South Bank University both raised the importance of articulating what we want to measure, before attempting to measure it. Human sexuality is complex and constantly changing and reducing it to a few categories can be problematic. Ford distinguished three important aspects of sexuality: desire or 'orientation', behaviour and identity. They interact in many ways: married men who identify as 'straight' sometimes have sex with other men. And anyone who knows Daffyd of Little Britain will know someone may identify as 'gay' but never actually have sex with other men! Ford concluded that for most government social surveys, the appropriate focus will be on individuals' identity. However, Jeffrey argued that the prevalence of 'homosexuality' is irrelevant, and what is of interest is how homosexuality manifests itself in the social world, such as through civil partnerships.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has begun to address this. Heidi Grainger, a statistician at the DTI, spoke about questions asked on DTI surveys which aim to

collect data on both the experience of discrimination due to sexual orientation and also on individual respondents' sexual orientation. Methodological problems remain, such as sampling issues associated with measuring a small population of individuals, who may not occur at random throughout the population, and respondents' truthfulness in answering. But there are techniques to tackle these. The DTI surveys used a show card where the respondent is simply asked to pick out the letter attached to the category which best describes them. This reduces the difficulty some respondents have in answering, and keeps the answer confidential (particularly critical if the respondent's mother is in the room).

The seminar concluded with a general consensus that it is time for data on the lesbian gay and bisexual population to be collected, to allow for development of informed policy, targeted services and interventions, and to end the 'statistical invisibility' of this much discriminated-against group.



ESRC Research Methods Festival

St Catherine's College, Oxford

17–20 July 2006

Sixty different sessions presented by experts, with time for discussion, debate and networking

Topics include survey non-response, research projects, ethical issues, doing partnership research, software for qualitative data, urban change, analysing spatial change, longitudinal analysis and a continuous stream of sessions to highlight resources for researchers.

More information and online booking at:

www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/festival

Organised by the Research Methods Programme

The NHS Research Strategy: What Role for Social Science?

Professor Sally Davies, the Department of Health Director of R&D, explains:



“Our new research and development strategy recognises the diverse combination of factors affecting health and well-being in our modern society. It shifts the focus of research from a biomedical to a patient-centred approach and will provide new opportunities for high quality science across the widest possible disciplinary base.”

The goals of the new strategy

When we published our new national health research strategy, *Best Research for Best Health*¹, we made a commitment to position UK clinical research at the heart of the global research environment. After all, health research not only provides us with the means to tackle disease and ill health, it contributes to international competitiveness through its highly important role in the universal knowledge economy.

In developing the strategy, we set ourselves the goal of creating a health research system in the NHS in which outstanding researchers conducting leading-edge research are supported by world-class facilities. We also wanted to improve systems of research management and governance and ensure that public money is spent for public good.

More fundamentally, perhaps, recognising the complex nature of ‘health and illness’ in contemporary societies, the new strategy represents a shift from the more traditional biomedical focus to one that puts the patient and the public at the centre.

How will we achieve these goals?

Key to achieving our goals is creating a new National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). This virtual institute will encompass all existing DH-funded centres of research excellence and provide added coherence to a range of activities. There will be a multi-disciplinary Faculty of Senior Investigators, Investigators and Trainees. New units will be created on diagnostic testing and monitoring, and new centre grants awarded for biomedical, translational, service quality and safety research. We plan to establish a series of National Schools, beginning with one for primary care research and, if this pilot is successful, we will consider the opportunities to create one on research into the practice and delivery of social care. Current funding

programmes² will be expanded and/or rationalised and new funding streams set up for innovation and research for patient benefit.

We are developing a more coherent and extensive infrastructure to underpin research in the NHS. The existing system of topic-specific networks on mental health, stroke, diabetes, medicines for children, dementia and neuro-degenerative disease will see the addition of a Primary Care Research Network for England (PCRN-E) and a Comprehensive NHS Research Network to address all diseases and areas of need beyond those covered by the topic-specific networks. Our new National Network Coordinating Centre (UKCRNCC) will support all networks. There will be cutting edge facilities for experimental medicine and a series of ‘technology platforms’ for health research in NHS providers.

The new strategy represents a shift from the more traditional biomedical focus to one that puts the patient and the public at the centre

Most importantly, the ‘transparency, fairness and contestability’ of the funding systems will be improved. Funding will only be provided on an open, contestable where appropriate and competitive basis. These, with tight arrangements for planning, monitoring and reviewing research will deliver better accountability and value for money. Our new programme of ‘Research for Patient Benefit’ will reintroduce a responsive-mode stream, providing a new route for enquiry-driven research, and the Research for Innovation, Speculation and Creativity (RISC) programme will provide support for new and radical research ideas unlikely to fare well under traditional peer review systems.

We will continue with our plans to ‘bust the bureaucracy’ that surrounds the research process by simplifying procedures for research administration, monitoring and governance. These will ensure that researchers provide a ‘once-only’ input of information for use by all interested parties. Particularly for regulation and governance, procedures need to be proportionate to the risk involved. Centres of expertise will be established as part of the national research networks to coordinate

research management and governance resources across local health economies. A national advice service will help researchers navigate regulatory and legal processes.

Another objective is to develop the skills and careers of those working in health-related research. Work will continue with the UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) partners to develop the career pathways of medically and non-medically qualified researchers. Support provided through the existing Research Capacity Development programme – via career scientist, post-doctoral and researcher development awards – will continue to cover all professions and disciplines important to applied health and social care research.

These developments will ensure that the NHS is a world-class host for clinical and wider health research and will create greater opportunities for all good scientists working in the field – from whatever discipline.

But what role for social science?

The definition of ‘health-related’ research contained in the Best Research is intentionally broad and inclusive:

“...spanning prevention of ill-health, promotion of health, disease management, patient care, delivery of health care and its organisation, as well as in public health and social care...” (ibid:4).

We recognise that ‘health’ involves an increasingly diverse institutional ‘territory’, covering not only hospital and community-based NHS services but the many statutory and independent agencies comprising the wider ‘health economy’. Given this breadth of scope, providing the evidence to improve health and well-being must draw on a similarly broad disciplinary base.

These developments will ensure that the NHS is a world-class host for clinical and wider health research

The importance of disciplinary diversity is well illustrated by the example of ageing-related research. Arguably, one of the most pressing issues for modern health care systems is the ‘greying’ of society – the growing proportion of the population that is old or very old. Currently this is one of the five ‘Grand Challenges’ all government departments are being asked to face.

To rise to this challenge, we need more basic research on the underlying mechanisms of the ageing process and on the aetiology of specific conditions associated with ageing such as dementia, stroke and skeleto-muscular degeneration – a role for our partners. But we also need to assess the influence of non-biophysical factors on the ageing process and the interplay between the ageing body and its social, physical and technological environment. Fully understanding human ageing thus requires the insights of a wide range of disciplines from

neurologists and geneticists, through psychologists and gerontologists to sociologists, demographers and social geographers amongst others. Best Research for Best Health has a role to play here.

In addition to the role of the NHS, we also need to examine the contribution made by social care in older people’s health and well-being. A recent report by Sir Derek Wanless estimates that by 2026 just under another half a million people will need some form of social care service³. Preparing for this will require better understanding of ways of organising and delivering care services, of supporting self-managed care and preventing dependence, as well of the wider political and economics issues. This understanding will be informed by the work of organisational theorists, welfare economists, policy analysts and many other social scientists.

In an area of central public importance such as healthy ageing, therefore, clearly a wide range of social science disciplines should contribute. But securing a patient-focused or ‘whole person’ approach to health requires more than recognising that many different disciplines have an independent role to play. Multi-disciplinarity may not go far enough.

What we increasingly need to understand the complex issues facing modern health systems is ‘interdisciplinarity’ – the development of approaches that bridge conventional disciplinary boundaries. Social scientists may have a particularly important role to play, given their well-established capacity for methodological diversity and innovation.

An opportunity to be grasped

The Government’s new research and development strategy for the NHS is an ambitious attempt to establish the conditions for world-class science in the health field. Its plans for improved transparency, reduced bureaucracy and better support will benefit all high quality researchers – both leaders and collaborators. In understanding fully the complex factors affecting health and well-being in modern societies, we need to draw on the full range of disciplinary expertise. We also need scientists to work across traditional disciplinary boundaries to develop innovative areas of interdisciplinary research. It is for scientists of all kinds to grasp this exciting opportunity and work with it effectively to improve the future health of the nation.

1 Best Research for Best Health: A new national health research strategy. Department of Health. January 2006 (<http://tinyurl.com/lmyks>)

2 The Service, Delivery and Organisation (SDO) and the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Programmes will be expanded and refocused; the New and Emerging Applications of Technology (NEAT) and the Health Technology Devices (HTD) will be combined into a new ‘Invention for Innovation’ Programme.

3 Kings Fund (2006) Securing Good Care for Older People: London. The Kings Fund.

Exploring the Potential: Windows on the World

John Southall, Senior Qualitative Data Support Services Officer of ESDS Qualidata, describes a recent workshop on opening access to library collections.

The University of Sussex library holds a number of key collections for academic research including the archives of Mass Observation, Rudyard Kipling and the Bloomsbury group. The traditional use of these resources relies on the ability of the researcher to visit in person to consult the original documents, under supervision in the special collection readings rooms. There is an increasing demand for remote access to all archival collections by the research community, and libraries and archives are seeking ways to meet this demand. This was the focus of a recent workshop, 'Exploring the Potential', held at the University of Sussex, jointly organised by the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) (University of Sussex) and ESDS Qualidata (University of Essex).

The MOA represents a traditional paper-based archival resource. It continues to collect material, which is sympathetic to the original MO idea – writing by ordinary people about everyday life in the UK. This material is available to visitors to the archive. ESDS Qualidata is part of the Economic and Social Data Service and supplies up-to-date advice on using qualitative research resources in the UK. Qualidata represents the growing use of digital resources available online. It is engaged in an ongoing project to archive a range of classic and contemporary qualitative research projects. These data collections are preserved and disseminated through the work of the UK Data Archive.

The workshop allowed delegates to learn more about each archive and to talk to other researchers who have made use of the material. Dorothy Sheridan, Director of the MOA, chaired the morning session, describing the development of the Mass Observation project and issues involved in making it accessible. The MO in the 1930s and 1940s is of great interest to many contemporary

researchers because it played a key role in the growth of British sociology and the documentary movement. Sheridan contrasted this with the equally fruitful, but perhaps less-known, revival of the research project in 1981. This later stage has been gathering data on social life in Britain for over 25 years, a period of enquiry that outlasts even the original phase of work, and still continues to accumulate data. All this is gathered, preserved and archived.

Sandra Koa Wing, development officer of the MOA, discussed in more detail current MO projects. The work involved in developing and cultivating a national panel of correspondents is central to the work of MO and she outlined the problems so doing. She described concerns that have been raised about the demographic composition of their panel of correspondents, which, if left to develop organically, attracts more women, people from the South East and older people. Whilst the project is not intended to be a representative demographic sample of the population, some researchers saw this bias as a constraint. Attempts to address this bias and subsequent problems were described and formed part of the discussion with delegates.

A presentation by John Southall, Senior Qualitative Data Support Services Officer of ESDS Qualidata, outlined the kinds of qualitative data available from the UK Data Archive. Most of this is contemporary research funded through the ESRC and, once archived, is available online, in most cases, to registered users. A great deal of raw data from notable research projects of the 1950s and 1960s is also preserved. Although all on paper, there is an ongoing project to digitise them and open them up to a wider research community. Southall outlined main stages in creating such a digitised resource and compared and contrasted the strengths of paper and digital archives and the differing needs of researchers.

There is an increasing demand for remote access to all archival collections by the research community

Discussion gave delegates the opportunity to ask more questions about the resources and to bring their own research needs into the debate. An exhibition of materials from the MOA allowed delegates to see original diaries, photographs and other materials accumulated.

John Southall chaired the afternoon session which presented a number of case studies in re-using data. Researchers who had accessed the two archives spoke about their experience. Dr Tanya Evans, Research Officer at the Institute of Historical Research (University of London), described working on the project 'Unmarried Motherhood in England and Wales 1918-80'. This uses

data behind the 1969 publication by Dennis Marsden, 'Mothers Alone'. Evans paper examined issues of understanding and context in using the material. She also discussed the great importance of background documentation in framing secondary usage.

Dr Nick Hubble, Research Fellow at the Centre for Suburban Studies, (Kingston University), drew on his experience of accessing the MOA. He spoke of the importance of being able to use primary material in order to explore the history and cultural politics of MO fully. In assessing the legacies of the MOA, he argued that it demonstrated how social research played a key role in the development of policy and mass democracy in Britain in the mid-twentieth century.

Bill Bytheway, Senior Research Fellow at the Faculty of Health & Social Care (The Open University), discussed his use of the MOA as part of a project looking at ageing and the social significance of birthdays. Several archival resources were used and collated in the research process. A great strength of the MO material from his perspective was its use of the diary format. Its dated entries made it especially appropriate for the needs of his research.

The workshop provided a useful opportunity for archivists and researchers to meet and discuss what improvements could be made in the way material is accessed and made available. It became clear that there is a role to play for both paper and digital archives. Much new research is being created digitally but much also continues to be created on paper. Researchers should not favour one over the other either through explicit choice or as a result of their working practices. The discussions during the day also acted as a reminder to delegates of the range and diversity of material available to the social research community.

Some of the slides used during the day are at: www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/news/eventdetail.asp?ID=1474

Further information on the work of ESDS Qualidata and MO is at: www.esds.ac.uk/qualidata/ and www.massobs.org.uk/

OFFICERS

Chair

Barbara Doig, *Consultant*
barbara.doig@gmail.com

Vice-Chair

Ceridwen Roberts, *University of Oxford*
ceridwen.roberts@btopenworld.com

Secretary

Jenny Turtle, *BMRB*
jenny.turtle@bmr.co.uk

Treasurer

Richard Lewis, *Open University*
r.w.lewis@open.ac.uk

ELECTED MEMBERS

Kate Bloor, *West Sussex County Council*
kate.bloor@westsussex.gov.uk

Chris Goulden,
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
chris.goulden@jrf.org.uk

Tina Haux, *University of Bath*
sspth@bath.ac.uk

Fenella Hayes,
Scottish Centre for Social Research
scotland@the-sra.org.uk

Dr Peter Humphreys,
Institute of Public Administration
pumphreys@ipa.ie

Siân Llewellyn-Thomas, *TNS Social*
sian.llewellyn-thomas@tns-global.com

Jean Martin, *University of Oxford*
jean@fjmartin.co.uk

Dr Simon Maxwell,
The Department of Transport
simon.maxwell@dft.gsi.gov.uk

Cathy Sullivan,
London Metropolitan University
c.sullivan@londonmet.ac.uk

John Wicks, *MVA Ltd*
jwicks@mva.co.uk

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USEFUL CONTACTS

Commissioning and Funding working group
Janet Lewis
janet@jdlewis.freereserve.co.uk

Dissemination working group
Mary Hickman
mary.hickman@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk

Public affairs
Ceridwen Roberts

SRA Ireland
Peter Humphreys
Candy Murphy
cmurphy@onefamily.ie

SRA Scotland
Fenella Hayes

Events committee
Tina Haux

Training committee
Cathy Sullivan

SRA News
Editor: Chris Goulden
Book reviews: Sarah Edwards
sarah.edwards@health.org.uk

E-bulletin
Bill Solesbury
wsa@solesbury.demon.co.uk

Website
John Wicks

Administrative office
Jean Harrison (Senior Administrator)
Gemma Pikett (Administrator)
The Social Research Association (SRA)
175-185 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8UP
Tel: 020 7812 0634

Researching Britain

Alun Humphrey describes the new NatCen Omnibus.

There are various options open to researchers who wish to use survey research to find out about the characteristics, experiences or views of the general population, or particular groups within it. One option is to commission a stand-alone survey. However, this can be very expensive if carried out to a high standard, and is clearly uneconomic if the researcher is only interested in finding out about a few issues. Another option is to place some questions on an 'omnibus' survey. The problem then becomes finding an omnibus which subscribes to the same rigorous standards (for example, random probability sampling) associated with high quality social research. For this reason, NatCen (the National Centre for Social Research) is setting up the NatCen Omnibus, aimed specifically at those working in government, academia and the charitable sector.

The NatCen Omnibus

An omnibus is a survey carried out at regular intervals which allows a range of clients to 'buy' questionnaire space. Some may simply want to include a couple of questions; others might want to run 20 or more. Each client pays for the cost of including their questions, with the final cost depending on the number of questions involved and their format.

NatCen is setting up the NatCen Omnibus, aimed specifically at those working in government, academia and the charitable sector

The precise topics covered in any single survey depend on what issues are of interest to particular clients. NatCen researchers will work closely with clients to ensure that questions are clear and comprehensive, and suit their needs. NatCen has a long history of working closely with academic researchers in a range of different disciplines. Every omnibus survey will include a range of 'classification' questions covering key socio-economic and demographic characteristics (such as age and sex). These will be provided to each client, along with the results of their questions. Additional classification variables can also be incorporated should they be required.

Unlike most omnibus surveys, the NatCen Omnibus uses a stratified random probability sample design, the favoured approach for high quality government social surveys. Addresses are selected at random from the Post Office Address File (PAF), the most comprehensive list of addresses available. Interviewers can interview only at these selected addresses, helping avoid the biases that can result from interviewers being given more freedom about where and when they interview (as is the case with quota and quasi-random samples).

Each round of the NatCen Omnibus involves interviewing approximately 1,800 adults. If there is a need for a larger sample size, the necessary questions can be placed on consecutive rounds of the survey. Interviewing is carried out using Computer-Assisted Interviewing (CAI) in respondents' own homes. With CAI, all questionnaire routing is controlled by the computer, allowing interviewers to concentrate on asking the questions. Interviews are carried out by NatCen's panel of highly skilled interviewers located throughout Great Britain.

Unlike most omnibus surveys, the NatCen Omnibus uses a stratified random probability sample design

Each round of the Omnibus works on a 13-week cycle, from final agreement of question wording to the availability of data. This timetable includes five weeks for interviewer fieldwork. NatCen provides survey results in a number of different formats, to suit most clients' requirements. These include the provision of the full data set (for example via SPSS or STATA). Alternatively, we can provide a set of data tables, incorporating standard cross-analysis variables.

NatCen is happy to consider requirements that fall outside these standard provisions. Examples might include detailed pre-survey question testing, additional data tabulations or producing bespoke written reports.

For more information about the NatCen Omnibus, including prices and availability, please contact Alun Humphrey on 020 7549 9561 (a.humphrey@natcen.ac.uk).

Research 2006: Connections

Ruth Buchanan, Insight Manager, Group Centre of Excellence, Royal Mail Group, and MRS R-Net (young researchers' network) steering group member comments on the recent MRS conference.

'Connections' – the title of this year's MRS conference – gets to the very heart of what the event was all about. Running from 22-24 March in London, the annual market research conference attracted delegates from across and beyond the research industry. As I spoke to current and ex-colleagues, representatives from the private and public sector, from media, retail and business, I realised that the MRS conference has become something much more than an event about bringing together researchers – it is about connecting research with the wider world.

Research is a people business. Delegates attend conference to share ideas, glean new insights and interact to better their understanding. Gone are the days of sitting through lengthy, technical papers about how to research; we can all read conference papers back in the office, but the true benefit of Research: Connections came from taking part. Taking part was a key element of this year's conference. There were new interactive training workshops and debates, the Q&A sessions were fully taken advantage of and the 'meet the speaker' area was full throughout.

Research is a people business

The MRS conference is developing an increasingly commercial side, recognising that delegates cannot justify two days out of the office to attend unless they can take back a practical skill. For me, the 'New Developments in Quantitative Research' session did just this.

Ray Poynter's overview of conjoint analysis and choice modelling gave me useful tips on how I might use some techniques that have always baffled me a bit. Likewise, Nick Watkins and Dr Miriam Comber's paper on how consumers make complex decisions used a single analogy of buying a mortgage to illustrate how we need to take account of what stage in the decision-making journey our respondents are at – something I can definitely apply.

(Where else) could you go to hear a psychology professor speak about understanding your consumers?

'Connecting with the Next Generation' included several social research papers that addressed wide audiences – a key part of my work for Royal Mail and Post Office – whilst 'Connecting with Culture and Society' included one fascinating paper on how Promise Plc 'reconnected' Tony Blair with his voters, for the general election. These are all relevant, interesting and useful examples, and gave delegates both food for thought and practical ideas to apply.

The three conference keynote speakers were a fascinating combination: PR guru Lord Bell, Richard Reed, co-founder of Innocent Drinks, and Adrian Furnham, professor of psychology at University College London. They each approached the role of research from very different

viewpoints, providing insight into the breadth and depth of research applications – and how research connects to business in different ways. They are exactly the sort of keynotes we should be listening to; and where else but conference could you go to hear a psychology professor speak about understanding your consumers?

The opportunity to build and strengthen relationships provided by Research: Connections was probably the most valuable part of it all

No write-up of conference would be complete without a word on the social side. The party in The Brewery was great fun – and more importantly, put me in touch with people I rarely get to meet. As an R-Net steering group member there were plenty of young faces I recognise well – but the chance to meet more senior researchers, ex-colleagues and even potential suppliers was a valuable one. As Danny Wain said of agency-client relationships in the session 'Pitch, Performance and Profit', "The project may be ad hoc but the communication needs to be continuous". The opportunity to build and strengthen relationships provided by Research: Connections was probably the most valuable part of it all.

For further enquiries please contact Emily Luscombe, Camargue, on eluscombe@camarguepr.com or 020 7636 7366.

The National Strategy for Data Resources for the Social Sciences

By *Professor Peter Elias*, Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick.

The UK has world-class data resources, to support social research. These include national census and survey data, most of which are financed and developed by the major spending departments of government and collected in collaboration with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and its devolved counterparts. Among these, longitudinal survey data are particularly important, as they allow monitoring of processes of change and facilitate research into causal interpretations of these processes.

Other data resources with potential to inform social science research derive from administrative systems, recording transactions, registrations, etc. These are held by public and private sector organisations but are relatively underutilised.

Except for the decennial census of population, there has been little long-term planning to develop resources. The National Strategy for Data Resources for the Social Sciences, being developed by the ESRC and partners, aims to take a more systematic approach. This requires predicting the research issues likely to be important in the future and the directions in which research efforts are progressing. The following areas emerge as candidates for future activity:

- Population dynamics and ageing
- Migration
- Childhood education and development
- Globalisation and economic change

Many other topics will command significant efforts, and we need to ensure that we have the data resources required to address these issues across the many disciplines in social science.

Six different types of data are essential to help address research questions and to inform and guide policy:

- census and population surveys: examples include the decennial Census of Population, the Annual Census of Employment and the proposed Integrated Household/Continuous Population Survey
- administrative data: a wide range of statistical information arises from electronic records (e.g. payments, purchases, registrations, licensing, taxation, treatments)
- longitudinal surveys: these are important for capturing detailed information on transitions and relating these to longer-term outcomes

- socio-medical data: these combine biomedical information with socio-economic data from individuals, some of which are also longitudinal
- business and economic data: information collected by or from organisations, often for commercial purpose
- international data: many countries collect similar data. Some resources have been developed specifically to facilitate comparative research or for supra-national requirements.

Work to promote the development of new data and to improve access to existing data has already begun. This will require considerable cooperation between government departments, devolved administrations, research councils and foundations. To help achieve this, a new body (the UK Data Forum) has been formed with representation from the research councils and others responsible for funding data collection activities. It meets regularly to promote and review progress. To date, the UK Data Forum has prioritised the following work:

- The UK Census departments and the ESRC will prepare a plan to establish the nature and extent of their cooperation to develop future population censuses and surveys. This will cover data access arrangements, historical continuity with existing census and survey data and the nature of future output requirements identified by the research community.
- The ONS and the ESRC will develop a strategy for access to sensitive micro-data. This will cover data licensing arrangements and methods of access.
- An audit will be undertaken of the scope that several specific administrative databases offer in research potential.
- Following a major review of panel and cohort studies, the ESRC will consult with funding partners and act upon main recommendations.
- The ESRC, the MRC and the Wellcome Trust will work together to establish common procedures for sharing access to linked biomedical/socio-economic data resources.
- The ESRC will work with international partners to provide improved data and access arrangements for research based on information from outside the UK.

For further information, please contact Professor Peter Elias on Peter.Elias@warwick.ac.uk

Using Narrative in Social Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

J Elliott
2005, Sage

*Reviewed by Jide Olagundoye,
Senior Research Officer,
Crime Reduction and
Community Safety Group*

This book explores the way narrative is applied and interpreted in the social sciences. The writer examines how narrative can be used as a tool to encourage conceptual and methodological developments in social research. As a social researcher, I found the book useful in challenging and informing the traditional viewpoints of methodology and research strategy. I would recommend it to research colleagues and students.



The author presents an alternative to the dichotomised approach to research strategy (i.e. quantitative and qualitative) and shows how narrative can be used as the analytical tool that bridges the divide between the techniques. The three key features of narrative, i.e. the chronological or temporal dimension, the evaluative meaning or interpretation of events or experiences and the public aspect of the communication are highlighted as fundamental to both research methods.

Innovative analysis and the use of narrative to present alternative approaches is encouraged in the

text and a good example is the contextualisation of quantitative data by examining its chronological nature. These perspectives are useful to experienced researchers seeking innovative inspiration and students of social science searching for a more complete understanding of the techniques used in social research.

The aim and objectives of the book are clear, well presented and can be easily understood. The chapter summaries included at the end of each chapter also work well in synthesising the key issues of each stage in the text.

Whilst the writer includes research examples to increase the practical value of the book, some of the literature reviews aimed at synthesising historical concepts are difficult to follow. Using plain English in these areas could alleviate these problems.

Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior

Erving Goffman
2005, Aldine Transaction

*Reviewed by Dr Marian Hawkesworth,
Research Associate, Department of
Geography, King's College London*

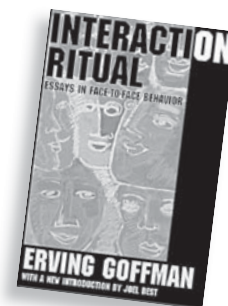
This reissue of Goffman's 1967 book includes an informative introduction by Joel Best, which highlights the 'small scale' nature of Goffman's subject of investigation on the risks and rewards of face-to-face interaction. Goffman claims that in social encounters there is the desire for individuals to feel well regarded by others and have a sense of self-worth. Otherwise, damage, shame, personal failure, or embarrassment is a strong possibility if the 'self' suffers rejection in any particular social situation. The objectives

of the book are to consider, systematically, moments of bodily experiences and to uncover the behavioural rules regarding 'peopled places'.

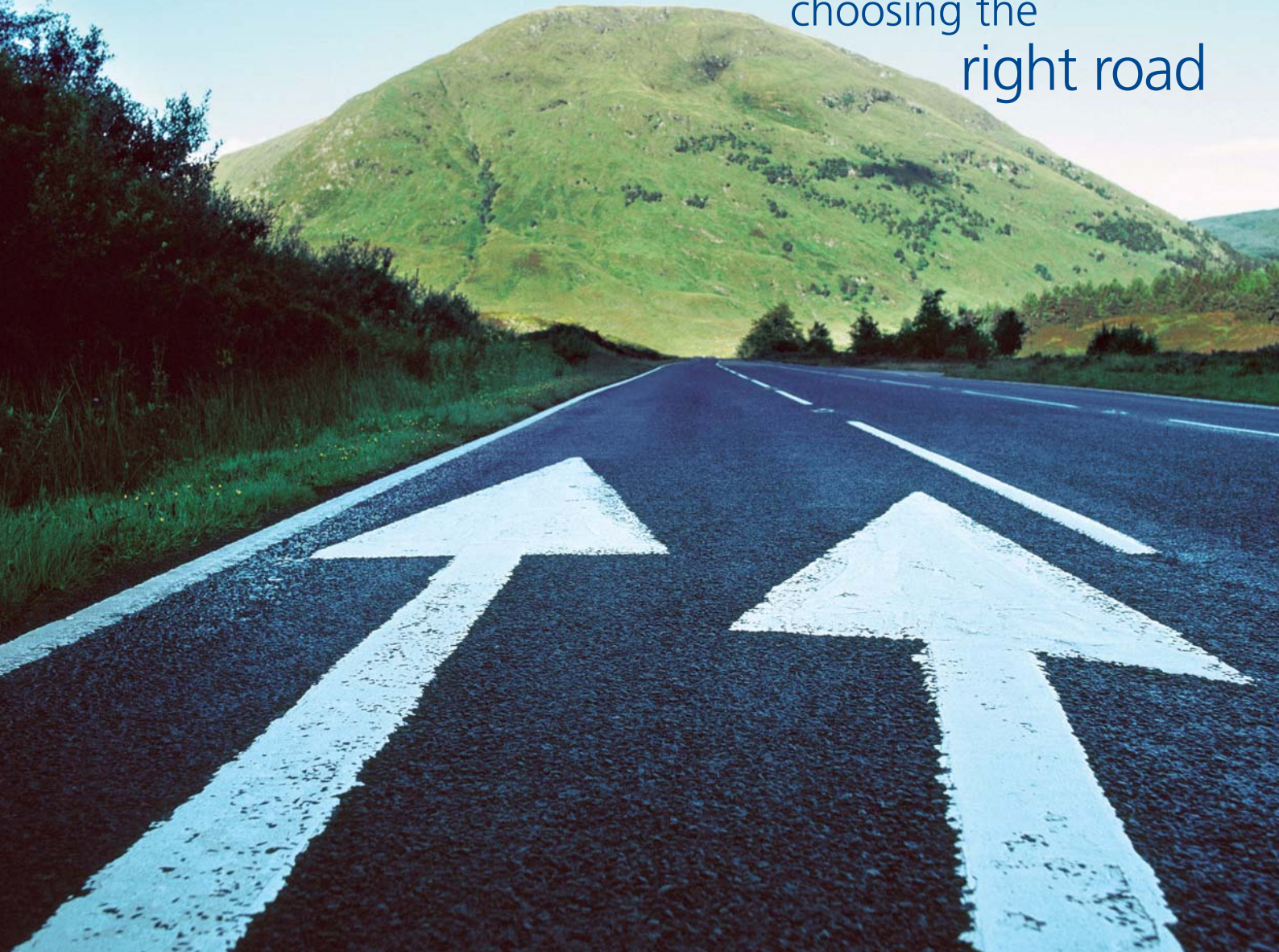
Goffman develops a conceptual language to discuss these normative rules, for example, 'civil inattention'. He recognises the vulnerability of the body that can put the person 'on the line' and at risk.

The book is divided into two parts. The first draws together five earlier papers published separately elsewhere. Part two is lengthier, published for the first time in the 1967 edition. The book provides ample illustrations, some from Goffman's ethnographic research – in a mental institution for example – as well as instances of conversational encounters, sporting events, executions and scenes and stories from books and newspapers. What may deter potential readers is that it is, in part, the product of a particular temporal and socio-political frame of reference, with references to 'negroes', and an over-heavy emphasis on, and discussion of, white American males. Women only make a peripheral appearance, for example, as psychiatric patients or in traditional female roles, such as nursing.

However, the book is pertinent to 21st century readers who are interested in moral activity and human conduct. For instance, Goffman's condemnation of coercion and constraint, manifest in the use of constricting devices on mental patients during the 20th century, proves a timely reminder in the wake of contemporary alleged injustice and abuse, for example, at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba and prison camps in Iraq.



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Contact Sue Brooker
BMRB Social Research

T: 020 8433 4405

E: sue.brooker@bmrbr.co.uk

W: www.bmrbr.co.uk

Ealing Gateway
26-30 Uxbridge Road
Ealing
London W5 2BP

