SRA news

First Government Chief Social Researcher Appointed

In September, Sue Duncan (a founder member of the SRA) was named the first Government Chief Social Researcher. Appointed to lead the profession of government social researchers as head of the Government Social Research Service, this post is regarded as government's commitment to develop and implement policies informed by sound evidence. Carol Riddington interviewed Sue for the SRA News and asked her about her new role and how, in her capacity of government's Chief Social Researcher, she would like to work with the social research community.

What is your role as Chief Government Social Research Officer?

The appointment is a development of part of my current role – having overall responsibility for high quality research standards within government departments. It builds on the work of the Heads of Profession Group for government social researchers chaired by Richard Bartholomew. I work within the Strategy Unit at the Cabinet Office which is headed by Geoff Mulgan. In developing a strategy for social research I will report direct to Sir Andrew Turnbull, Head of the Civil Service.

What is the significance of your role?

It gives me authority to take forward a strategy for social research. It puts social researchers on a par with the Government Economic Service and Government Statistical Service which have always had a head at the centre of government. Since the election [when Labour came to power] there has been an increased interest in using research evidence to inform policy development and a large growth in social research. This post is really a reflection of social researchers' enhanced position and their importance.

Will you be working with the economists and statisticians?

Yes it means that I can work more closely with them, to ensure specialisms work effectively together. A lot of research being done in government at the moment draws on a range of social science skills.

How will your role dovetail into other groups such as Heads of Profession?

The Heads of Profession are principally responsible for what goes on in their own departments but work together on issues of mutual concern. However, they've never really had sufficient time to tackle strategic research issues because they are inevitably busy running their own departments. Also, because there wasn't a head of research at the centre GSR didn't have a high profile in government. I will work closely with Heads of Profession.

The total government spend on Social Research has increased over the past few years. What is it now?

It is difficult to give a precise figure because departments organise the research function in different ways, but probably between £350-450 million is spent on research.

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

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SRA NEWS – next issue

Copy deadlines for the next issues of the newsletter are:

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

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

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report from the chair

Ceridwen Roberts

We all know that the social research world has grown enormously over the last ten years and our interview with Sue Duncan, newly created as the first ever Government Chief Social Researcher, is a public endorsement of this. There is much more government and quasi government spend on social research, many more researchers and much more emphasis both on the importance of evidence based policy making and on the links between research and practice. All this presents us with important professional challenges which are increasingly salient now.

At a simple level, there are some basic questions such as do we have enough social researchers and are they all good enough. But just as critical, are the political and ethical issues raised by doing research in a heightened political or policy context. Social scientists who have worked for 'clients', particularly business organisations, have long recognised they are 'servants of power' with all the complexities of handling that relationship. But as a higher proportion of the social research spend goes on commissioned research and more emphasis is put on evaluation and utilisation, the whole nature of the customer/researcher relationship becomes more problematic. This is particularly true when social research findings are used to 'prove' that policy and programme initiatives, often with big public expenditure or contentious policy outcomes attached to them are 'right'. Some of our members are talking to us about some concerns they have about this development of their role.

There are many other issues too. How do researchers get into the 'net' of those asked to tender, what are the rules or acceptable practices about commissioning – both research mangers and researchers ask this and a whole can of worms about the extent to which research findings can or should be disseminated. Is publicly funded work always adequately made available to the taxpayers who ultimately paid for it? Should it be? Also important is whether commissioned work is subject to some of the same scientific scrutiny associated with the peer review system in academia, though this is not faultless. Are there enough checks and balances to ensure that the evidence policy makers and politicians use is good enough or, the other side of the coin, that they do not use weak research to support their case? How are standards of social research to be maintained or raised?

As we become more concerned about the role of respondents in the research process and the practice of using research to empower people or using the public to do research, the ethical issues of this become more pressing as well as the technical ones. Should local people research their neighbours? What are the consequences of this and is it more about finding cheaper ways of collecting data than really empowering people? What too are the implications for social research as a knowledge based activity if we open it up to people with only a smattering of simple research techniques?

So it is very timely therefore that all these issues are being aired at the **Annual SRA Conference on the 4th December** - *The Politics of Social Research*. Sharon Witherspoon, Deputy Director of the Nuffield Foundation which has a strong reputation for supporting high quality social research will begin the conference with a frank assessment of the quality of social research in Britain today. Workshop sessions will cover three critical areas that we know SRA members are concerned about. Alan Hedges will be launching the revised SRA publication '**Commissioning Social Research**' and discussing good practice in his workshop. Ron Iphofen's workshop on **Ethics in Social Research** will use the revised guidelines, recently published by the SRA, to explore how to handle some of the ethical issues and dilemmas researchers tell us they are facing. The workshop on dissemination and publicising research will be led by David Utting who has done so much to make the Joseph Rowntree Foundation the model for practice in this area.

Sessions in the afternoon are equally important. The research implications of a devolved UK are considered by speakers from ONS and the National Centre for Social Research – two major players in the recent trends to produce more national data about the different parts of the UK. We look too at the issues of promoting change through social research and focus on the contested issue of how researchers ensure their findings are used appropriately. Our third workshop looks at how the public is or should be involved in doing research and the implications of this. Finally the plenary session on **'The Health of Social Science and Research'** has speakers from both the Economic and Social Research Council and The Commission for the Social Sciences and will both give SRA members an opportunity to hear their assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of social research as well as feed back to these organisations their views and concerns.

This is a critical time for social research. All of us who make our living by and believe in the important role played by social research in explaining the world and helping to change it, need to help shape the debate about its future. Do come to London on 4th December and take part in what will be a seminal annual conference. We look forward to seeing you there.

First Government Chief Social Researcher Appointed

How is the expenditure split between commercial research providers, the 'not for profit' organisations and the academic research community?

Most departments use a mixture of academic researchers, commercial researchers and not for profit organisations. I suspect that with the increase in very big projects being commissioned, more contracts are awarded to consortia. It is very much the responsibility of each department to make decisions about the research contracts and it depends on the demands of the project.

Your role is described as building on 'recommendations in a number of government reports and papers'. What specific issues do you intend to focus on?

I want to look at developing the idea that if government has a commitment to using evidence in policy making, then that evidence must be good. We need a well trained group of government researchers; we have to have systems in place across government to ensure that we are commissioning the right research at the right time; and we need to have a body of high quality research evidence that is readily accessible and, importantly, the implications of which are well understood. There should be more emphasis on data interpretation in its broadest sense - on understanding what research tells us in broad policy areas rather than concentrating on individual projects. I use the term 'evidence informed policy' because research is only one of the ingredients of policy development. It is important but not alone.

What is the current and future balance between basic social research, applied research and evaluation of programmes?

If you are going to look at that question in a meaningful way you have to look beyond what government commissions. I don't see government research as being 'self contained'; government tends to commission research that feeds the information needs of policymaking. A lot of the more strategic and longer-term research is often commissioned by other organisations like the ESRC. I see what we do in government as a part of that jigsaw, and it is only when you put all the bits together that you get the whole picture.

Some of our members feel that there is a move from funding research explaining the problems towards more research which monitors or evaluates the solutions.

Research has a very important role in addressing policy problems and that sort of research is used in policy development. If you don't understand the problem then you can't design the solution. Evaluation looks at whether government policies work. I think both these elements are still very important.

How can you reconcile the need for quick inputs to policy development against the need for more thorough research?

Although some of the research is large scale and fairly long term, there is also a place for small-scale research. Government researchers are the 'middle people' between the policy customer and the research contractor, working to make sure that the commissioned researcher understands what it is that the policy maker needs, interpreting the results for the policy maker and helping them to understand research findings. I will be looking at ways to ensure that future government research needs are anticipated by taking a more strategic approach.

With the government's emphasis on 'evidence based policy' how do you envisage high standards of social research within government departments and within other public sectors?

I think there are a number of strands to high standards: the way you recruit researchers, ensuring they have the right skills and are able to develop their careers are all important. Government researchers often operate as research managers and they are responsible for making sure the quality of the research is high. A number of organisations, the SRA being one of them, offer training courses. Another area is ensuring government researchers keep up to date with research techniques. For example, we have been developing methodology for evaluating policy pilots with some American researchers and are exploring quality in qualitative research; the idea is to look across the whole community of researchers and really develop standards that can be agreed across the profession as a whole.

The other area where we have been active is in producing guidance on research and evaluation. I think we have an important role to play in encouraging researchers to share their experience and expertise. We have fortnightly seminars where researchers talk about interesting new research methods. Researchers are so busy that sometimes they are not terribly good at sharing interesting approaches with other professionals.

How can there be more sharing of the 'whole research experience'?

It's something that could be developed. I'm very keen to see researchers move between sectors and I think it is very healthy for researchers to move in and out of government and to see outside researchers working in government departments. It's a good way to develop more rounded researchers.

How can government departments improve standards in managing research projects so that there is less management by contract rules alone, and more by intellectual partnership?

There is a range of models across the Government Social Research Service. All government social researchers are expected to ensure high standards in research and most have skills in research procurement, conducting and commissioning research and I think that's right. It is important for researchers to gain experience in conducting research themselves. For example, one of the biggest tests on questionnaire design is sitting and listening to someone responding to your beautifully crafted interview. The flaws just hit you in the eye. I'd absolutely agree that 'on the ground' experience is important for government researchers. Throughout their careers they tend to be involved in various stages of the research process and I think that helps keep their hand in.

How do you see the SRA taking a role in maintaining good standards to meet your remit within government?

I want to kick-off my job by talking to various organisations and the SRA is part of the picture. It's in all our interests to ensure good standards are maintained. As big consumers of research, I think government departments are a part of the picture on standards.

I'd like to move on to the question of publishing reports. Do all government departments which fund social research put their reports in the public domain?

The research that is commissioned in government has a customer, and that customer is the person who is responsible for that area of policy. Departments make their own decisions about publishing research. Most departments publish research, either in their own series or through contractors. Many departments also submit research reporting to Select Committees, which makes sense. The whole area of publication is changing because of Freedom of Information requirements; I think it is an area that I may need to look at.

What issues concern you most and will be discussed with the external research community?

I want to build bridges in terms of the way we link with the wider research community, especially the experts in key areas of research. We have always had links but I want to build on these. There are already some good examples of involving researchers in policy development. The Social Exclusion Unit for example brought policy makers, service deliverers, consumer groups and researchers together in Policy Actions Teams. That was a very effective way of bringing researchers into the early stages of policy development. In fact, we have done an evaluation of the whole PAT process; the report was published on 25 September and can be viewed on Policy Hub (www.cmps.gov.uk).

I wouldn't want to be too prescriptive at this stage about how exactly I will handle my role in developing social research. I have some clear ideas on priorities, but I want to be sure I have the full picture. I need to listen and find out how other people in the research community see where social research is going.

How do you see the role of the SRA?

I see the SRA as being an important part of the wider picture as well as other organisations such as the MRS, the Evaluation Society, ESRC and other research funders. They all have a role to play. One area of my work is encouraging and helping the research community to understand what exactly the government wants from research. A lot of researchers, and social scientists more generally, have an awful lot to offer but aren't really sure how they might do that. The other side of that is developing greater understanding among policy makers so both sides understand each other, and I want to facilitate that process.

sra news round up

The Politics of Social Research

The SRA AGM and Annual Conference will be held on 4 December in London. Further details from the SRA admin office on 020 8670 5460.

NEW FOCUS FOR STRATEGY WORK AT THE CENTRE OF GOVERNMENT

A new unit has been formed to provide a clear focus for strategic thinking and policy analysis at the heart of government. The Strategy Unit formally began operating in July and has been created by a merger of the Performance and Innovation Unit, the Prime Minister's Forward Strategy Unit, and part of the Policy Studies Directorate of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies.

The Strategy Unit will carry out long-term strategic reviews and policy analysis, which can take several forms:

• long-term strategic reviews of major areas of policy

• studies of cross-cutting policy issues

• strategic audit, (e.g. where does the Government stand in relation to its main objectives?)

• working with departments to promote strategic thinking and improve policy making across Whitehall.

Further information from www.cmps.gov.uk/policyhub

International Journal of Market Research

Next year, the International Journal of Market Research (IJMR) will be publishing a special edition on social research, to be edited by Michael Warren.

Anyone wishing to contribute should email a synopsis as soon as possible to michael.c.warren@btinternet.com.

Papers which explore methodological questions, which take social research into unfamiliar territory, or which have a multi-national element will be of particular interest.

There may also be a need for shorter notes, perhaps of no more than 1000-1500 words each, on particular points of current interest to social research, whether ethical, technical, commercial/contractual, 'political', or whatever.

All thoughts, whether for full papers or for notes, will be gratefully received.

Aqr Trends Day – A Step Beyond

'Beyond research' is the theme of this year's Trends Day, the annual conference of the Association for Qualitative Research (AQR) to be held in London on 29 November. The conference, which is expected to attract a wide cross section of delegates from the marketing and research industries, will examine ways to extend qualitative research beyond its traditional boundaries.

For further details on Trends Day, please refer to the AQR website at www.aqr.org.uk

First 'Young' Voluntary Sector Researchers' Conference

Are you 'young' in term of experience and currently undertaking research on issues relating to volunteering and/or the voluntary sector? Then this conference to be held in London on 2 December could be of interest to you. The event is free and includes refreshments.

For further information contact: Angela Ellis or Priya Lukka, Institute for Volunteering Research, Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London, N1 9RL
Tel: 020 7520 8907/31
Email: angela.ellis@thecentre.org.uk or priya.lukka@thecentre.org.uk

The conference is supported by: the Institute for Volunteering Research, National Centre for Volunteering, NCVO, ARVAC and Community Development Foundation.

2003 Campion Fellowship - Fellowship in Official Statistics

The Society is inviting applications for the second award of the Campion Fellowship. The Fellowship is awarded to Fellows of the Society to promote a specific piece of work or project that would make a significant contribution to the development, use or exposition of statistics on the economic or social well being of the population.

The work might relate to the collection, processing, analysis, presentation or distribution of statistical data by central or local government or other bodies in the UK or amongst a group of countries including the UK. Fellowships may be concerned with the development or evaluation of methodology, policy issues or with the lessons of history. It should contribute to strengthening cooperation between Fellows working in different sectors – public, private and academic. The Society welcomes applications from statisticians working in all sectors.

The Fellowship is awarded every two years to a maximum of £10,000. For further information contact Paul Gentry (p.gentry@rss.org.uk) or check out www.rss.org.uk/about/campion.html. The deadline for applications is 24 February 2003.

Local Government Matters

By Roger Sykes, Head of Research, Local Government Association

Welcome to a new column to feature in SRA News to keep you in touch with research issues in local government. But before some discussion on some topical issues, a little background about the LGA and local government.

The Local Government Association (LGA) represents all 410 local authorities across England and Wales. We provide a range of services to local authorities, as well as working closely with the Government on policy development. Research is important for the LGA in supporting our policy work. The LGA Research team is responsible for carrying out or commissioning research projects to support our policy priorities; liaison with government researchers, research councils, and other research funders; and work with National Statistics – for example the 2001 Census, and Neighbourhood Statistics.

Local government expenditure accounts for about a quarter of all public expenditure and employs over 2.1 million people. Local authorities provide a wider range of services to local people including education, social services, housing, environmental services, and cultural and related services. Local authorities also now have a statutory duty to develop a community strategy for their area and act as community leaders in bringing a range of partners together. They also have new powers to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area.

So what is of interest on the research front at the moment?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation recently published research on Promoting change through research: the impact of research on local government - for details go to www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop.

It shows that research findings are not always reaching the right people in the right form at the right time. The report's authors set out to investigate ways in which local authorities were using research to inform policy and practice, and the factors supporting or inhibiting this. Many councillors questioned felt they did not have the skills for interpreting and applying research findings to their local context – a view supported by officers.

But officers were often failing to provide research to members in useful ways: dissemination within local authorities was often 'patchy', and research undertaken in-house or commissioned by the authority was more likely to be used than research generated externally.

The report also identified variation in the effectiveness with which research was conducted and co-ordinated. Some authorities had a culture of supporting and encouraging research, while others lacked this.

Larger authorities had dedicated research teams with appropriate skills, but in many others, policy officers took on research activities for which they had little or no specialist skills or training.

The report argues that local authorities must have an adequate research capacity to underpin the modernisation agenda. It recommends that the LGA and Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) should provide guidance, training and support to local authorities in their research activity.

The LGA's own research programme seeks to support local government through a series of research reports and briefings, together with a bi-monthly research update. We will be discussing the recommendations of the report with the IDeA and the Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA) to explore how we can provide more support to authorities in the future.

Other issues of interest in local authorities in the coming months will be the publication of the 2001 Census data which will come out in the months ahead – more on this in a future column. Local authorities will also start to think about preparing for the requirement to carry out user satisfaction surveys in the autumn of 2003. Guidance is expected from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in early 2003.

More news from local government land in the next issue.

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Surprising Census findings cause concern

By Sue Brooker

Have you ever found yourself in the position where the findings of your survey are not quite what you expected, and some convincing interpretation and explanation is required? That's what Len Cook, Registrar General for England and Wales, had to provide for the biggest survey of them all, and in the most public forum.

First findings from the 2001 Census, which costs around a quarter of a billion pounds, indicate that the total population of the United Kingdom is 58,789,194. This is one million fewer than anticipated from the publicly quoted Office for National Statistics estimates which are derived from tracking births, deaths and emigrations since the 1991 Census. This shortfall provoked quite negative news coverage.

'The 2001 census is shot through with inaccuracies' commented the Daily Telegraph. *'The 2001 census attracted controversy with the same ease that John Major attracts women. There were the acidulous yellow forms that one and a half million people hadn't received in time, even if they were threatened with jail if they didn't return them before they arrived'* said an editorial in the Independent. Aside from the press, many were quick to criticise the results: Michael Fallon, Conservative chairman of the commons committee which oversees ONS, including the Census, said, "It puts a question mark over the whole thing and whether we should go on spending a quarter of a billion pounds on a snapshot if we cannot rely on the figures'. Leaders of Westminster Council, where 64,000 people fewer than expected were identified, went even further. They called the census a 'statistical travesty' and said they would even consider court action against ONS to establish an accurate demography of the borough. Population figures affect funding received from central government so the lower estimates are of real concern to boroughs.

So, what could be the cause of such surprising findings? The Office for National Statistics have put forward a fairly convincing argument. They say the missing million can largely be explained by the number of young men who have gone abroad for a period of time – as emigrants, either in the long or short term. As records of emigrants vary in accuracy from country to country, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not this is the true reason, but certainly the arguments that this sort of behaviour is increasing as students take a gap year to travel and as people are increasingly prepared to work abroad, at least for short periods, seems convincing enough. Also, in countries where records of emigrants are quite robust, quite large numbers of young men from the UK have been 'found' – 50,000 to be precise (well sort of) in Australia. It is unfortunate that such a trend has not been identified by the International Passenger Survey, which was hitherto regarded as reliable. However, this measures travellers' intentions at the time of departure and it is possible that intentions change.

Reflecting this explanation, we have the change in profile of the population: in the 1981 and 1991 Census,

women did not outnumber men until they were in their 40s. In the 2001 census, women outnumbered men at the age of 22. So, the Bridget Jones's of the world complaining that they cannot find a man, have a point. There is a real shortage.

Another criticism made of the Census, apart from of the surprising findings, is that the response rate was lower than at any time previously. It dropped to 94% (88% by post, with an additional 6% by personal follow up), compared with 96% in 1991. In some London boroughs it was considerably lower than this – as low as 64% in Kensington and Chelsea, for example. To address this, a follow up survey was conducted in which enumerators visited 300,000 addresses and from any information they could glean obtained estimates of who was resident at each. This raised coverage to 98%. And for the remaining 2%, data were extrapolated from an analysis which provided the likely population statistics.

Despite the lower response rate, only 38 people were prosecuted for failing to complete the form – compared with 342 in 1991 and 692 in 1981.

So, assuming you do believe in the accuracy of the data, here are some key findings:

- The population of England is 49,138,831 (83.6% of the UK), Scotland is 5,062,011 (8.6%), Wales is 2,903,085 (4.9%) and Northern Ireland is 1,685,267 (2.9%).
- Populations grew in all countries except Scotland, which had a 2% decline. England's population rose by 5%, Wales by 3% and Northern Ireland by 9%. The UK's population overall rose by 4%.
- The over 60s now outnumber the under 16s for the first time.
- Milton Keynes, hitherto famous for its concrete cows, is now identified as being the fastest growing local authority, with a population increase of 64.4%.

These findings will affect us all as researchers. For example, mid year estimates of the population for 2001 will be based on the 2001 census, and these will be somewhat different from what we now know to be inaccurate mid year estimates in 2000. So any weighting adjustments on government surveys – and indeed any other surveys – should reflect the new population profile. If those groups now known to differ in size from what was previously thought are in any way different from 'average' in what is being measured, then overall findings and conclusions will be affected.

There is one final reason to have confidence in the 2001 Census results and accept that the mid year estimates from ONS in 2000 were less accurate. On the Census website it is revealed that the 800,000 missing young men were originally identified in the 1991 census! However, they were not confident in the results of the follow up survey so revised the numbers to reflect the predicted population profile. Now 'similarly surprising results must be accepted'. So, we have been using inaccurate population data for the last ten years which will be a concern for a number of researchers.

Government Social Research – Annual Conference

By Jane Aspden, Inland Revenue and Laura Twomey, Department for Work & Pensions

180 delegates, with nearly 30 speakers, attended the GSR three-day annual conference in September. (All engaged in social research grades are automatically members of GSR.) There are now over 850 social researchers working in 14 departments, including researchers working in devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This has more than doubled since March 1997, when there were 376 social researchers. In addition to research studies conducted within departments, the members of GSR are responsible for commissioning and managing over £70m worth of applied social science research, commissioned from universities and research institutes as well as social research agencies.

Among the remits of GSR are training and development and engagement with the external research community and other specialists, and the conference is an opportunity to meet and exchange experience and knowledge with those inside and outside government to gain a wider and more integrated perspective on research.

The central theme of this year's conference was 'Making Research Count: Supporting Delivery'. A variety of speakers, from academia, research organisations and the civil service, were invited to present papers in the four broad strand areas of:

- evidence based policy
- making policy inclusive: researching difficult to reach groups
- research with impact: new methods and communication
- a wider agenda: working across departments, disciplines and nations.

The conference began with Paul Wiles, Director of Research Development Statistics at the Home Office, laying down some challenges to Government Social Research, and British social science as a whole. He prompted GSR and research institutions across Britain to develop the capacity to quench the Government's thirst for evidence in policy making. He advocated the need to educate and train social researchers to replace the missing generations, as social science was neglected under previous administrations and suggested that researchers need to think about developing specialist knowledge within government and improving links with other European Union research communities when seeking evidence for Ministers. He challenged researchers throughout the UK to improve the power of their research methods, make better use of existing evidence and improve the way in which they present it to Ministers and Officials, to ensure it meets their needs and make the research count.

The idea of making the best of our evidence was picked up by Sandra Nutley, St. Andrews University, in the first of the parallel sessions. She outlined the different types of evidence researchers should could consider and noted that in Canada and Switzerland 10% of research budgets are set aside for the dissemination of the findings which has proved to be an effective method for ensuring messages are communicated.

Malcolm Wicks, MP and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Work, addressed the conference on the second day and stressed the importance this government places on research and its commitment to evidence based policy making. The Minister noted that there are important social research questions that need to be answered and these questions will stretch the research community in the years ahead. However, the most important questions for all research to consider are 'What works?' 'What is cost effective?' and 'How do we deliver and improve these policies?'. He noted that the relationship between policy makers, politicians and researchers was never a cosy one, and nor should it be. However, there is a need to improve the relationship and improve understanding between officials with different responsibilities, and challenged researchers to consider ways to improve the current situation.

Aside from issuing many challenges to the government research community, speakers also discussed other issues, including random assignment, social capital and using video recordings in social research. Ron Iphofen from the Social Research Association (SRA) and Helen Simons, UK Evaluation Society (UKES), spoke about research ethics and evaluation. Ron talked about the work of the SRA in developing guidelines to assist researchers in this area. He also discussed the RESPECT project, which is a pan-European project aiming to produce a universal set of guidelines for people who work in a range of different disciplines with different methodologies. More information on the RESPECT project can be found on the website www.respectproject.org. Helen highlighted a set of principles of good evaluation practice that have been developed by the UKES, with sections for research sponsors, evaluators, participants and those conducting institutional self-evaluation. This led to debates around how GSR can remain independent, as it is part of the political process, and the ongoing challenges for us to consider in the future.

Feedback from the conference indicates that delegates found the range of sessions interesting, and appreciated the chance to take 'time out' from day to day work to meet others in GSR and beyond. Members can now look forward to working to help Sue Duncan (see cover article) in her aim to work with researchers and analysts inside and outside government and maximise their input to policy development and review.

For further information contact: Jane Aspden, Analysis and Research, Inland Revenue, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LB Tel: 020 7438 9084 Email: Jane.Aspden@ir.gsi.gov.uk

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Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method
Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2000)
London: Sage (Paperback - £16.99)

Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-structured Methods
Tom Wengraf (2001)
London: Sage (Paperback - £19.99)

Handbook of Ethnography
Edited by Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland (2001)
London: Sage (Cloth - £69.00)

Reviewed by Ron Iphofen, Faculty of Health Studies, University of Wales, Bangor

Once again, Sage have excelled themselves in producing these three books on qualitative research methods that are not only timely but essential reading for anyone wishing to advance their knowledge of such methods. These are not introductory works, but aimed at the 'serious' researcher prepared for systematic adherence to a method.

I was attracted to the Hollway and Jefferson book by the promise of something 'different' in an interview strategy which they propose as particularly apt for the study of 'defended subjects'. Some might suggest their method is not particularly new – the free association narrative interview – and, indeed, that is a method we used in the Child Language Survey thirty years ago. The major differences have to do with the precise data generation technique and in what is then done with that data. The method falls clearly into the interpretive theoretical tradition and its authentic credentials are guaranteed by giving precedence to the respondents' free associations rather than have the interviewer seek any premature narrative coherence. The implications of such an approach are tested at the design, data collection/analysis, ethical decision-taking and generalisability stages of empirical research. This is demonstrated through the vehicle of an extended case study of 'Ron' and his criminal activities. (Not me! I hasten to add.)

All such focused case studies serve to highlight the difficulties of reconciling the nomothetic/idiographic dilemma in social science: the stress upon biographical uniqueness is inevitably lost in the data reduction necessary to the production of generalisability. Hollway and Jefferson cast subjects as 'psychosocial beings' and strive by their technique to minimise the ambiguous representation of their recounted experiences. But it does seem a little naïve to criticise standard coding and retrieval techniques for the 'disappearance' of the 'case'. Qualified generalisation is a necessary outcome for any technique that moves beyond the uniqueness in time and place of any biographical account. Thus a conclusion that '…generalisations about the nature of crime need to be based on biography as well as demography…' is hardly surprising.

What is particularly useful, though, for the serious researcher is the detailed discussion of how such dilemmas can be addressed and resolved even if only in a 'qualified' manner. Reflexivity and narrative negotiation are discussed in a readable, fluent style and proposed resolutions offered. And their additional ethical principles of 'honesty, sympathy and respect' when researching psychosocial subjects are worthy of further attention.

Tom Wengraf's book is thorough, comprehensive and meticulous with excellent illustrative examples that are worked through from abstract concept to data analysis. The focus is on semi-structured methods, and the range of alternative approaches to the current obsession with narrative and biographic themes is useful. Such approaches have been taken up with relish particularly in the health field and in the hands of eager amateurs have become a little crudely formulaic. It is gratifying to come across a work that does more than offer homilies on how difficult, time-consuming and repetitive qualitative research can be. Wengraf provides us with systematic and logical procedures that are much more than just another version of grounded theory.

Some might balk at the concentration upon the biographical narrative interpretive method advocated by the Institute for Qualitative Research, but I will feel safer recommending this to my postgraduate students since it represents the culmination of a thoroughly considered approach that draws prescriptively from all that is best in the literature.

And although it's pricey, no self-respecting qualitative researcher should be without Paul Atkinson (et al's) handbook on ethnography. This really is encyclopaedic in concept and scope. Many 'big names' in the field have contributed so this has to be the starting point for anyone looking to understand the field in substantive topic, theoretical tradition and methodology. The chapters on visual ethnography and on semiotics expand the field marvellously, while those on field notes and on ethics are accomplished surveys of the field. Books of readings cannot substitute for the more prescriptive methodological texts such as the first two books which offer a method and a rationale without fully contextualising any theoretical debate. The Atkinson reader offers an adequate theoretical base for the ethnographic tradition, and helps move it on with an essential discussion on developments consequent upon the contributions of postmodernism and post structuralism.

SPSS Survival Manual: a Step by Step Guide to Data Analysis Using SPSS for Windows (Version 10 and 11)
Julie Pallant (Lecturer in Psychology in the School of Mathematical Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology, Australia)
Open University Press,Buckingham/
Philadelphia, 2001
ISBN 0 335 20890 8 304pp. £17.99

Reviewed by John F Hall (previously Principal Lecturer in Sociology and Director, Survey Research Unit, Polytechnic of North London, now retired and living in France.)

This book draws on Dr. Pallant's experiences in planning, conducting and supervising research projects and on her teaching. Sympathetically written and liberally sprinkled with helpful tips, it is not suitable for absolute beginners, or for all social researchers, as it deals primarily with using SPSS to develop and test psychological and personality scales and with experimental methods.

Publicised as *'an excellent introduction to using SPSS for data analysis'* and as throwing *'a lifeline to students and researchers grappling with SPSS'*, this manual will be most useful to students and researchers working with data derived from attitude and personality scales or from experiments, whose analysis is largely based on multivariate inferential statistics, and who may be doing their own projects with inadequate supervision or support.

Researchers needing analysis based largely on percentages and contingency tables get short shrift. There is only one frequency table (for sex, repeated once) and only one contingency table (a 2x2 for sex and smoking, to obtain chi-squared, for which the percentages presented are totally irrelevant).

Problem formulation, research design, data collection, cleaning, management and preliminary analysis are compressed into the first 48 pages, followed by sections on graphic presentation and data manipulation. After a short discussion of theoretical models, the book deals with advanced statistical techniques for developing and testing psychological scales from her own research.

The latter covers a large range of appropriate parametric and non-parametric statistics (some very advanced) with a particularly useful table on pp106-7. Although she claims that there is no non-parametric alternative to multiple regression, this is not quite true as statisticians have been working on the problem for several years, and SPSS already has facilities for this.

There is a tendency to accept SPSS output in its entirety without editing which makes for cluttered presentation at times. This is partly due to the design of SPSS, but tighter editing could often make the key features of the analysis much clearer.

Data entry is assumed to be by the researcher, but Julie admits this could be a problem for large data sets. No mention is made of hierarchical data or multiple response, both of which can be handled by SPSS. She covers simple checks on ranges for codes and suggests ways of correcting errors, but a major omission here is any mention of logical checks on coding anomalies. Whilst rightly recommending keeping full and accurate data codebooks and day-to-day log-books of all analysis, Julie rather surprisingly omits any mention of **DISPLAY** to list contents of files. Other commonly used features of immense practical use, **DATA LIST**, **COUNT** and **LIST**, do not appear in this book, nor is there any mention of **ADD** or **MATCH** for combining data from two or more files.

For all procedures she gives a full example of point and click, however tedious this may seem, but she does twice concede that sometimes it is easier and quicker to go to the SPSS syntax editor. At one point no less than 11 steps are used to calculate a score across six scale items when a simple **COMPUTE** command would suffice.

Where Julie presents examples of SPSS syntax, they appear in full in upper case (except for her own variable names). Granted this is what the **PASTE** button does from the dialog box, but SPSS is case insensitive and in most cases only reads the first four characters of commands or the first three of sub-commands and specifications. Once busy users have got the hang of this after a few sessions, they can save time and money (and tears) and avoid RSI! Unfortunately it doesn't save the paper or trees consumed when SPSS output is printed up unthinkingly, especially if it is full of error messages.

Once she gets into data analysis proper, there are well written, thorough and sound explanations and advice, including the use of graphic causal (path) models and blank tables to illustrate hypotheses to be tested about the relationships, if any, between two or more variables, before running the actual analysis. Perhaps the blank tables for entering statistics (in this case means) for the dependent variable within cells defined by the categories of the independent variable(s) should be expanded to include statistics for the whole and intermediate samples as well, but SPSS will produce these by default when the analysis is actually run.

This section could well benefit from expansion in future editions to include analysis based on percentages or proportions (elaboration) since the logic of analysis and the research question (What happens to a zero-order statistic for the relationship between a dependent and an independent variable when controlling for the effect of one or more test variables?) are identical.

UK readers will be unfamiliar with most of the bibliographic references. One key reference is not given: for research design, data analysis, statistics and SPSS in a single volume, there is still nothing to compare with the relevant edition of the SPSS Guide to Data Analysis by Maria Norusis.

To produce training materials such as these, with appropriate examples, drawn from general populations rather than psychology sophomores, demands a great

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deal of very hard work. This is a commendable effort that fills a gap in the market and will probably run to more editions: it has already been reprinted twice. If a second edition or a companion volume is to follow, and appeal to a wider audience, it will need much expanded sections on data capture, definition and cleaning, file management and, above all, analysis based on contingency tables and percentages.

How to Research (second edition)
Loraine Blaxter, Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight, Open University Press, £14.99, ISBN 0 335 20903 3.

Reviewed by Tania Fisher, Centre for Public Policy, Northumbria University

How to Research is about the practice and experience of doing research. It is aimed at the less experienced researchers and students working on small-scale projects, but is an excellent resource and reference tool for anybody undertaking social research. It provides practical advice on how to choose the most appropriate method for the research being undertaken and offers valuable advice and direction in negotiating various issues.

Focusing on the research process rather than methods in isolation, the book comprises a number of elements to help the reader to engage in the various issues and debates that are addressed. It is written in an accessible format, with a series of exercises and questions interspersed throughout the text, to encourage the reader to consider the research process from a practical and personal viewpoint. Within the text, cross-references guide the reader between linked parts of the book. Suggestions for further reading are listed at the end of each chapter.

This second edition of the book includes new and up-to-date material and touches on areas often neglected in mainstream research methods books. These include using the internet and computer based analysis; new techniques such as action research; and key issues such as time management and choosing a research supervisor. The book addresses the 'writing-up' process in some detail and covers a number of fundamental issues often ignored by more experienced researchers, such as grammar, referencing, spelling and use of tables and graphics.

How to Research is best used as a reference tool to dip in and out of when required. Not only is it an excellent starting point for new researchers and students, but undoubtedly the more experienced researcher will also find it valuable. Furthermore, those involved in teaching research methods or supervising research students would find this a useful source of information, exercises and ideas.

Religious Trends 3 - 2002/2003
Peter Brierley (ed)
Christian Research (2001)

Reviewed by Peter Corbishley

The author says that he has only given us 'facts and figures' for dipping into. However these are so well presented that they easily yield basic scenarios.

About a third of the world continues to be Christian, and just under half of that Roman Catholic. Islam is on the rise worldwide (1.2). However Christianity is growing in Africa, and in the smaller congregations and denominations. Something of a vaguely 'Christian' presence remains in England in around 60% of the population (2.2). Yet practice is in increasing decline. The 'spiritual' is in high ascendance over the 'religious'. Perhaps this was always so. Church attendance on Sundays in England since 1850, and perhaps before, has always been a minority activity. But from under 25% in 1850 it is now around 10% with a big dip in the last decade. (2.15) About a third of children are still baptised, down by nearly two thirds since the Second World War. Yet religious practice among teenagers, in the unlikely circumstances of its actual occurrence, produces more liberal attitudes to third world poverty, the environment and immigration along with the belief that something can be done about these issues (5.5). Belief follows practice.

The book is intended for practical outcomes among Christian congregations. It is about mission and evangelisation, and the local structures that best support such outreach (2.4, 5.5, 5.17 for example). Theoreticians, in contrast, might well ask just what is meant by a 'congregation' or a 'denomination'. But for an academic, the book, with its very useful listing of recent research reports, is more about suggestive hypotheses than theoretically defined 'findings'. In terms of tight measurements it is unclear, for example, how well local authority boundaries match with Roman Catholic Diocesan boundaries. But such comments, while they may be relevant when it comes to linking the UK data to the questions on religion in the 2001 Census, easily miss the value of a work that provides evidence of rates of change over periods of time and geographical areas. Perhaps we can look forward to the data becoming available on disk. Certainly the series should be finding its place on university library bookshelves.

books/reports for review

Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research
Christina Hughes
Sage

What works locally?
Mike Campbell and Pamela Meadows
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Making the Most of It: Economic evaluation in the social welfare field
Tom Sefton, Sarah Byford, David McDaid, John Hills and Martin Knapp
JRF

Understanding Social Science: Philosophical introduction to the social sciences (second edition)
Roger Trigg
Blackwell Publishing

Journal of Sociological Methdology Vol 31
Ed Michael Sobel and Mark Becker
Blackwell Publishing

Journal of Sociological Methdology Vol 32
Ed Ross M. Stolzenberg
Blackwell Publishing

Qualitative Research Methods
Edited by Darin Weinberg
Blackwell Publishing

Demography: Measuring and Modelling Population Processes
Samuel H. Preston, Patrick Heuveline & Michael Guillot
Blackwell Publishing

A Concise History of World Population (third edition)
Massimo Livi-Bacci
Blackwell Publishing

Report of the Dfes: Research Conference 2001
Dept for Education and Skills

Devolution in Scotland: The impact on local Government
Michael Bennett, John Fairley and Mark McAteer
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Evaluation of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power
Sarah del Tufo & Lucy Gaster
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Promoting Change Through Research: The impact of research in local government
Janie Percy-Smith with Tom Burden, Alison Darlow, Lynne Dowson, Murray Hawtin and Stella Ladi
Joseph Rowntree Foundation

SRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2002

Wednesday 4 December 2002
London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 56 Holloway road, London N7

The Politics of Social Research

Morning Address:
Sharon Witherspoon, Nuffield Foundation Ben Page, MORI (tbc)
Conducting and Commissioning Research in Today's World

Morning Workshops:
Researchers' Responsibilities
◆ **Commissioning Social Research**
◆ **Ethics in Social Research**
◆ **Publicising Social Research**

Afternoon Sessions:
◆ **Research in a Devolved UK**
◆ **Promoting Change Through Research**
◆ **Empowering Respondents**

Afternoon Address:
David Rhind, Commission for the Social Sciences (tbc)
The Health of Social Science & Research

The day will end at 4 pm with a drinks reception
For further information contact admin@the-sra.org.uk or 020 8880 5684

Meetings, seminars, courses and conferences

TRAINING DAYS

• **6th November: Report Writing and Presentation Skills**

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

Any queries relating to the content of these days or about future SRA training events should be addressed to Joanne Maher, on 020 7533 5372, email joanne.maher@ons.gov.uk. Fees are members £65, non-members (includes membership of SRA for one year) £110, student/unwaged £16. To make a booking, either print out the specific booking form or print out and complete our standard booking form (at www.the-sra.org.uk) and send it with payment to the SRA or contact the SRA administrative office.

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

EVENTS

• **4 December: SRA AGM and annual conference**
at the London Voluntary Sector Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London, N7

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

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Association for Survey Computing

• **17-19 September 2003: The Impact of Technology on the Survey Process**
at Warwick University – the fourth ASC International Conference.

Details: ASC Administrator: Diana Elder, ASC, PO Box 60, Chesham, Bucks HP5 3QH, UK
tel/fax: 0494 793033,
email: admin@asc.org.uk
www.asc.org.uk

University of Reading SSC Courses In Applied Statistics

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

• **5-6 February: A Review of Basic Statistics**
• **7 February: Introduction to Regression Analysis**
• **24-26 February: Scientific Data Analysis**

The current online pdf-format brochure gives details of the courses and costs. The new brochure, showing the dates for the 2003 programme was expected shortly when we went to press.

For more information contact: Statistical Services Centre, The University of Reading, tel: 0118 931 8689, fax: 0118 975 3169, email statistics@reading.ac.uk

http://www.rdg.ac.uk/ssc/

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

• **19-21 November: Applied Social Science Research**
• **3-5 December: SAS**
• **12 December: Sampling Design**
• **16 December: Questionnaire Design**
• **21-23 January: SPSS for Windows II**
• **18-20 February: Excel for Social Scientists**
• **26-27 February: Secondary Data Analysis**

For details of fees and other information, telephone 01524 593064, email: m.peckham@lancaster.ac.uk
www.cas.lancs.ac.uk/short_courses

CASS Courses

• **20-22 November: Multilevel Discrete-time Event History Analysis.**
The course provides a practical introduction to discrete-time methods for the analysis of event histories.

• **4-6 December: Short Course: Survey Data Analysis I**
The course aims to develop an understanding of the basic principles of statistical analysis.

• **15-17 January: Survey Data Analysis II: Exploring Relationships**
The course is intended to develop a practical understanding of the basic statistical principles and methods of modelling relationships between variables.

Fees: £400. Because of ESRC support, a number of bursaries are available which reduce the fee to £85 - applicants must be full-time students, UK academic staff or ESRC-funded researchers.
All courses take place at University of Southampton.

• **17, 24, 31 January and 7, 14 February: Short Course: Quantitative Survey Design And Data Collection**
at the City University, London with Pamela Campanelli, and Roger Thomas

This course runs on Fridays only. It is being held jointly by CASS and the Social Statistics Research Unit at City University. It provides the Survey Methods component of the City University MSc in Social Research Methods (and Statistics) and is also open to CASS students.

The course enables participants to understand the integrated processes of designing and conducting quantitative survey research projects. It is aimed at researchers, research managers and research students, including those who intend to design and execute quantitative surveys and those who specify and commission such surveys.

Fees: £650 or £150 with ESRC bursary.

Students will be expected to attend at City University on five successive Fridays from 17 January to 14 February inclusive, between 10am and 5pm.

For further information on the CASS courses contact: Jane Schofield, Department of Social Statistics, University of Southampton, 023 8059 3048, email cass@socsci.soton.ac.uk www.socstats.soton.ac.uk/cass

CCSR Short Course Programme

Level one courses

- **27 November, 26 February: Introduction to Data Analysis Part 2**
- **23 October: Introduction to STATA**
- **22 January and 24 January: SPSS for Social Scientists**
- **30-31 January: Introduction to STATA and Data Management with STATA**
- **12 February, 26 February: Introduction to Data Analysis Part 1**

Level two courses

- **11 December: An Introduction to Sampling Theory**
- **13-14 January: Multiple Regression**
- **28 February: Logistic Regression**
- **19 March: Conceptualising Longitudinal Analysis**
- **20 March: Introduction to Longitudinal Analysis**
- **12 March: Data Management with STATA**

Level three courses

- **13-14 November: Demographic Forecasting with POPGROUP**
- **27-29 March: Design and Analysis of Complex Surveys**

Fees: one day courses £120, two-day courses £200, three-day courses £500 (reduced fees for those from educational institutions).

For more information please contact Nasira Asghar, tel: 0161 275 4736, email nasira.asghar@man.ac.uk www.ccsr.ac.uk/courses/shortsum m2002.htm

University of Surrey Day Courses in Social Research

- **20 November: Qualitative Interviewing**

Hilary Thomas and Jo Moran-Ellis introduce methods and problems associated with qualitative interviewing.

- **4 December: Managing Data with SPSS for Windows**

Led by Jane Fielding

- **11 December: Research Reviewing**

Annette Boaz and William Solesbury introduce a rigorous approach to the review of past research.

All courses take place at the University of Surrey campus at Guildford.

Courses cost £120 each, inclusive of course materials and lunch. A reduced rate of £100 per course is available for those from educational institutions and registered charities. Standby places for full-time PhD students cost £20.

For further information please phone the University of Surrey at 01483 689458.
Email: day.courses@soc.surrey.ac.uk www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/daycourses/

Scottish Centre for Mental Health

Developing the Mental Health Research Agenda in Partnership with Users and Carers

- **Seminar 2: Making Good Use of the Answers
  Wednesday 27 November 2002, Dundee**

Organised by the Scottish Development Centre for Mental Health, this seminar aims to advance the mental health research agenda in Scotland using a participative approach. It follows on from the October seminar on *Asking the Right Questions*.

Further information from Events Secretary, SDC,0131 555 5959 or events @sdcmh.org.uk www.sdcmh.org.uk

Regional Studies Association

ESRC-funded Postgraduate Training Workshop

- **17 December, CURDS, University of Newcastle upon Tyne**

The Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), University of Newcastle and the Regional Studies Association are running a this workshop. The workshop seeks to provide advanced training and debate in methodological development and research strategy for postgraduates doing regional research in a devolving state. The workshop will include an opportunity for participants to reflect on, discuss and develop existing practice for regional research.

Further information from Dr Andy Pike, CURDS, 0191 222 8011 or a.j.pike@ncl.ac.uk www.ncl.ac.uk/curds/ www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk

Are you running a course, seminar or conference?

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