

Promoting Professional Standards in Social Research

by Ursula Huws

This year's SRA Summer Event took place at Local Government House where a lively audience gathered to hear about the RESPECT project. Funded by the European Commission, RESPECT aims to draw up professional and ethical guidelines for international socio-economic research. For the past year, the SRA has been a partner behind this important initiative.

Papers were presented by Ursula Huws (Analytica Social and Economic Research and Institute of Employment Studies), Christoph Hermann (Working Life Research Centre, Vienna), Ron Iphofen (University of Wales), Sally Dench (Institute of Employment Studies) and Ellen Schryvers (Higher Institute of Labour Studies, Belgium). Vigorous discussion followed, initiated by Roger Jowell (International Director, National Centre for Social Research).

The context for RESPECT is one of major change in the legislative and technological environment and in research practice. On the legal front, new European directives are transforming the rules governing data protection and introducing new rights and obligations in relation to intellectual property. On the technological front, developments such as the Internet and sophisticated data mining techniques are transforming research practice. And European funding practices are encouraging ever-larger research projects, with partners drawn from increasingly diverse national and disciplinary backgrounds, a variety set to grow exponentially with ten new countries poised to join the EU, each with its distinctive research tradition.

In the resulting Babel-like atmosphere, it is easy for standards to slip and misunderstandings to multiply. The RESPECT project has been set up to establish a level playing field in European research, with clearly agreed common standards and the ultimate goal of establishing a voluntary code of practice.

As the only body in Europe which represents practicing researchers across a range of different disciplines, the SRA has a key role in the development of such a code.

The project, which is led by the Institute for Employment Studies, with partners in Austria, Belgium, Germany and Hungary, has carried out an extensive review of the existing regulations on intellectual property and data protection as well as of different professional and ethical codes. See the RESPECT website www.respectproject.org.

A draft code of practice has been produced and circulated for consultation. The vast amount of information reviewed by the project has been synthesised into a four-page document, grouped under three main principles: upholding scientific standards; compliance with the law; and avoidance of social and personal harm.

Some aspects of these principles will often sit in tension with each other, and sometimes even directly conflict. There will always be a need for informed debate within the research community, and for individual researchers to take difficult decisions to balance these conflicting imperatives. The project will produce some discussion materials to support such decision-making, as well as a practical guide for research users.

The team is soliciting inputs from as many stakeholders as possible in the socio-economic research community, including practising researchers, and people involved in training researchers, commissioning, evaluating or reviewing research or providing legal advice or services to researchers and research funders.

You can read the code and give your feedback on it at www.respectproject.org/code. For a hard copy, write to the RESPECT Project at IES, Mantell Building, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RF.

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Ceridwen Roberts

25 years on - SRA from 1978 to today



Improving the Quality of Social Research

This year the SRA celebrates the 25th Anniversary of its founding in 1978. Social Research has come long way since then. There has been an enormous increase in the volume of social research and the numbers of people working in it. When the SRA started, social research was a relatively new concept. It had to be explained as something different from both academic research and the work undertaken by market researchers, though linked to both. There were limited career trajectories and training programmes, and the arenas of work were dominated by central government both as a purchaser and an employer.

25 years later there are many more actors in the field. Research as a key tool of policy and practice has become accepted. So, we have seen social researchers working in local government, health and education authorities, as well as in consultancies and commercial organisations and a burgeoning not-for-profit and voluntary sector. It is time therefore, to take stock, for with this growth have come new challenges.

The key issues facing the social research community now are how to protect and raise standards in all aspects of social research work. And by this we mean standards of commissioning and procurement of social research as well as standards in its execution, dissemination and utilisation. Linked to this is the question of how we ensure that enough good quality social researchers are being trained and retained. A key theme for this year's SRA conference therefore is *'improving the quality of social research'*.

Annual conference and birthday reception- 3rd December

This year's conference has a varied mix of plenary and workshop sessions and, throughout, focuses on the technical, ethical and practical issues involved in improving 'quality'. Come along and hear how to develop a framework for assessing qualitative research or how to ensure both quality and equality when using bilingual interviewers and interpreters for example, or the advantages and disadvantages of using tried and tested questions from the CASS Question Bank. Take part in a panel discussion with key employers and senior academics running research methods training about how to develop a cadre of good social researchers for tomorrow. And finally, come to the special 25th anniversary reception to celebrate the work of the SRA.

The next 25 years – a programme for action

In May, the SRA Executive held a special review day to look at how to develop the organisation and its services for its growing and diverse membership. We know that we have the highest levels of membership ever, and that technological changes mean we need to update our services. We know too that since the SRA started there have been a number of other organisations set up to meet some of the needs of particular segments of the social research world. An important question, therefore, was whether there was still a role for the generic grouping we are. Past SRA Executive members and senior social researchers, employers and funders were clear that there was still a need for the SRA to play a crucial role in representing and acting for social research as a whole. And a number of valuable suggestions for change to improve our work were made.

Over the last few months the Executive have been busy putting these into practice. We have revamped our website; established a monthly email bulletin to ensure you get frequent and up-to-date news of policy initiatives affecting the funding and governance of social research and of research opportunities and events; increased our volume of events; reviewed our training programmes and planned increased training courses for 2004. We are reviewing the role of the newsletter, re-establishing the public affairs committee and increasing our links with other key organisations like ARCISS, the Academy, the ESRC, and the MRS, to name just a few, to ensure that the SRA is playing a cutting edge role in representing your views and contributing to the key debates about social research. This is just what the SRA was set up to do.

This will continue. In the next months we will be publishing our revised Ethical Guidelines to ensure the growing UK and EC debate about ethical committees and practices can be informed by our experience. Our role in the EC RESPECT project has enabled us to get our views across in Europe and to learn about promoting quality standards in other member states. In 2004, we want to establish a working party to develop guidelines on good practice in disseminating and utilising social research so we can promote good standards here too. Let us know if you would like to be involved in this.

Your contribution

All this takes time and resources. But the more people who contribute, the more we can do and the less there is for individuals to do. We need people to stand for the Executive at the next elections and volunteer to work on the various committees. We also need people to tell us of the interesting projects and research they are doing or courses they are running and help us develop interesting programmes of activities for SRA members – often as joint activities. This really is an opportunity to make your mark. The next few years will be critical for social research. The SRA is growing fast and is ready to meet the new challenges. Will you help us?

Looking Forward, Looking Up

The 2003 SRA Conference and AGM will be held on 3 December in London. Over the last ten years, the importance of evidence-informed policy making has increased enormously as has the volume of social research. Yet there are serious concerns about the quality of much of the research and the circumstances in which it is carried out. There is also a growing shortage of well-trained and experienced social researchers.

Promoting quality and good practice has been a central objective of the SRA from its inception 25 years ago. It is even more important to improve the quality of social research now. This conference brings together a number of key players in social research who are involved in promoting quality and good practice. Attendance is essential for social researchers, research commissioners and users who are interested in the future of social research and in ensuring its quality is increased.

For further information contact the SRA administrator: email: admin@the-sra.org.uk; telephone/fax: 020 8880 5684; post: Social Research Association (SRA), PO Box 33660, London N16 6WE.

Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture: 18 November

Trials on Trial: Early Experience of Designing Randomised Control Trials of Labour Market Programmes in the UK

Randomised control trials have been widely used in medical research but are relatively new for UK social research. Now, for the first time, two large-scale trials are being conducted to evaluate labour market programmes.

Susan Purdon (Director of the Survey Methods Unit, National Centre for Social Research) and Alan Marsh (Deputy Director, Policy Studies Institute) will talk about the Job Retention and Rehabilitation Pilot (JRRP), and the Employment Retention and Advancement Scheme (ERAS). They will focus on the technical, practical, political and ethical problems overcome in the design of the two trials. Harvey Goldstein (Professor of Statistical Methods, Institute of Education) will lead the discussion. The lecture will be chaired by Sue Duncan (Government Chief Social Researcher, Cabinet Office).

The seminar is free, and will take place at the Royal Statistical Society headquarters, 12 Errol Street, London, EC1 (see www.rss.org.uk for a map of directions). It starts with coffee at 4:30pm, and ends with a drinks reception at 7:00pm, sponsored by the Office for National Statistics.

See SRA Online

The SRA's website has received over 300,000 visitors

since it first went live some five years ago. The website is very important to us. It tells the world what we are, advertises our courses and events and attracts new members. Over the years, the website had become rather dog-eared and in need of a makeover, which we are happy to report has now been done.

Our website can still be found at www.the-sra.org.uk however we hope that visitors will find it easier on the eye and simpler to navigate. The new version of the website went live at the beginning of May. Since then, visitor numbers, number of pages viewed and length of time spent, are all on the increase.

We plan to expand the site to include a members' area containing our members' directory and other features. We would like to hear your views of our makeover and what additional features we might include. You can send your comments to our administrator using the site's feedback form.

Mark Dunn

Research at the Heart of Government

Established in 1997 to bring local authorities and the research councils into closer partnership LARCI (Local Authority Research Council Initiative) was seen as a mechanism for bringing the councils' research to the heart of local government. LARCI is managed and resourced by representatives from the partner organisations, including five of the research councils (BBSRC, EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC*); the Local Government Association; the Improvement and Development Agency; the Local Authority Research and Intelligence Association (LARIA); the Department for Transport; and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. For further information on forthcoming seminars see www.larci.org.uk.

*Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, Economic and Social Research Council, Medical Research Council, Natural Environment Research Council.

Researchers Unite

A consultation exercise on the use of qualitative research resources in the UK has been commissioned by the Research Resources Board of the ESRC (the main UK social-science funding body) as part of an effort to promote the development and use of qualitative research resources. The project is currently trying to identify researchers who have either been successful in their application of qualitative methods (whatever their area of study) or who are carrying out methodologically innovative work. If you are interested in contributing, please contact Dr Iain Lang, Qualitative Research Resources Review and Consultation, Exercise School of Medicine, Health Policy and Practice University of East Anglia Norwich NR4 7TJ. Tel: 01603-593 593, Email: I.Lang@uea.ac.uk

In the Mail

The Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) is offering a suite of new JISC mailing lists. The Economic and Social Data Service is a new UK national data service that brings together four centres of expertise in data creation, preservation and use, based at the Universities of Essex and Manchester: UK Data Archive; Institute for Social and Economic Research; Manchester Information and Associated Services; Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research. These centres are working collaboratively to provide preservation, dissemination, user support and training for an extensive range of key economic and social data, both quantitative and qualitative, spanning many disciplines and themes. The new JISC mailing lists include: news list; esds-govsurveys; esds-international; esds-longitudinal; esds-qualidata. For further information see www.esds.ac.uk or email vanessa.higgins@man.ac.uk

Capital Gains

Mruk (formerly Market Research UK) has announced a restructuring of the company which is currently listed in the top 30 UK research companies by turnover. The organisation's tripling in size in the last ten years, has led to the organisational change with new board directors appointed from within the company to oversee the business development of defined UK Client Service regions. Mruk says that the restructuring allows key personnel to develop and reinforce client relationships whilst accessing its extensive UK network of over 1,300 field based research professionals.

ESDS Launch

The Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) was officially launched on Monday 30 June 2003 at Regent's College, London. The ESDS, funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), provides researchers, teachers and data support staff with access to a broad range of economic and social data.

At the launch, Ian Diamond, Chief Executive of the ESRC, addressed a packed conference room: 'The ESDS is fundamental to the delivery of ESRC objectives over the next few years...The investment in the ESDS was singularly the largest that the ESRC has ever made.' Kevin Schürer, Director of the ESDS, explained how the ESDS would support the needs of researchers, PhD students and teachers by means of four specialist data services: ESDS Government; ESDS International; ESDS Longitudinal; and ESDS Qualidata.

ESDS staff presented an overview of services for users including: dedicated help desks and web sites; enhanced data and documentation resources; online support materials; a training programme; and outreach activities. Enhancements in data access pointed to one-stop registration using Athens authentication; and delivery services via the UKDA Download Now service, Nesstar II, Beyond 20/20 for International data and Qualidata Online for qualitative data.

Participants were given an extended opportunity to roam through a range of displays and demonstrations, with ESDS staff on hand to answer questions. ESDS staff offered insights into services for data creators and providers, including: a streamlined, more accountable, data acquisitions review process to support the ESDS Collections Development Policy; an improved strategy to implement the ESRC Datasets Policy; new user-friendly forms for data depositors; and developments in data processing and management.

Guest speakers - John Pullinger of the ONS, Ian Diamond, and Len Cook, Registrar General of the ONS - expressed their support for the new data service.

Anne Etheridge

Guy Medal for SRA Member

SRA member Professor Peter Lynn of the University of Essex has been awarded the 2003 'Guy Medal in Bronze' by The Royal Statistical Society. The medal is awarded to recognise an important contribution to the statistical profession. The award to Professor Lynn was for five papers published in the RSS journals, for his contributions to the development of social survey data collection methods in the UK and for his influence on the design of national surveys.

UKES 2003 Conference

This year's UKES evaluation conference (Evaluation: strengthening its usefulness in policymaking and practice) will be held in Cardiff on 1-3 December.

For further information see www.evaluation.org.uk or email the conference administrator: fiona.house@btopenworld.com

Social Exclusion: a role for law

The fifth LSRC international conference will be held at Selwyn College, University of Cambridge, from 24th to 26th March 2004. Details are on www.lsrc.org.uk or contact Aoife O'Grady on 020 7759 0349.

SRA News – Can you help us?

Are you interested in helping us improve and re-vamp the Newsletter? We need one or two people with an eye for a story and a willingness to write or commission copy to join the newsletter committee and work with our editor to develop the newsletter. The newsletter has been a key way of communicating with SRA members and acts as a voice for the SRA. The introduction of the monthly email bulletin now means we can re think the role of the newsletter. So this is a very good time for energetic and interested SRA members to get involved. Do contact Susanne Cohen, administrator, at the SRA office if you are interested.

Commissioning Research

In March, the SRA hosted a seminar at the Nuffield Foundation to launch Commissioning Social Research: a good practice guide. The seminar brought together commissioners and suppliers of social research to discuss some of the issues arising from commissioning. Ann Bridgwood, Director, Research, Arts Council England reports.

Key issues in good commissioning

Alan Hedges, the author of the guide, opened the seminar by outlining some of the key issues in good commissioning. He pointed out that the *process* of commissioning can either help or hinder good research. Good commissioning always involves a complex balancing act between criteria such as quality, speed and value for money. Although buyers are often constrained by their organisation's procurement policies, it is important for them to conduct the commissioning process in a way which is conducive to good practice. Competition in the commissioning process can be beneficial, but not if it inhibits dialogue, if there is an obvious supplier or if budgets are too small to warrant it. Alan emphasised the importance of maintaining a dialogue with possible suppliers, of using a procurement process which is appropriate to the scale of the project and of trying to strike a good balance between maintaining long-term relationships with known and trusted suppliers with bringing in 'new blood'.

The suppliers' perspective

Roger Jowell from the National Centre for Social Research, Malcolm Rigg of BMRB and Janet Walker from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne spoke from the suppliers' perspective. Like Alan, they stressed the importance of maintaining a dialogue between commissioner and supplier. At all times, the objectives of the research should be kept clearly in mind, to ensure that this is paramount at every stage. A plea was made to take the guesswork out of the commissioning process, by specifying a brief in sufficient detail to enable suppliers to cost it accurately. It is helpful to suppliers to know how many competitors are being asked to submit bids.

Malcolm mentioned some of the dangers of attempts by commissioners to beat down price; at times, the pressure to reduce costs meant cutting so many corners that the research became close to being undoable or there was a severe risk of compromising quality. It is important to provide feedback to suppliers, successful ones as well as unsuccessful.

The brief or the Invitation to Tender (ITT) should not be the definitive word on the research, but the basis for discussion. Suppliers expressed a preference for a brief rather than an ITT, as this enabled them scope to put forward alternative approaches. Janet suggested that commissioners look on researchers as architects or building contractors, who can help design the research so that it meets client needs. Slippage in timetables can cause particular problems for small suppliers, who do not have the same flexibility to stand staff down from or bring them back into projects as large suppliers.

The commissioners' perspective

Some of the approaches adopted by commissioners were presented by Richard Abraham from the London Borough of Southwark, George Clark from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and Michael Clegg of the New Opportunities Fund (NOF).

Richard argued that working closely with in-house colleagues was key to improving the commissioning process. Helping them to clarify their research objectives and providing tools, so that, for example, briefs were clearly specified improves the process. For researchers working in commissioning organisations, identifying a unique selling point - we can both do research and commission other people to do it - can help bring in-house colleagues on board. An important role for researchers is to act as brokers between suppliers and in-house clients to ensure that the findings and results of research are presented in a way which is intelligible and useful for policy-makers and politicians. In this way, research is more likely to influence policy development and decision-making.

George talked about some of the steps which DWP has taken to improve the commissioning process. One approach is to core fund a number of organisations. While this has the advantage of building a relationship with a supplier who understands the commissioner's agenda, over time, it can result in being locked into a particular contractual relationship when the commissioner's interests have changed. Withdrawing core funding is then seen as problematic. George argued that partnerships work best when they are clearly focused.

DWP has a framework agreement with agreed suppliers. George outlined some of the ways in which DWP tries to bring 'new blood' into the commissioning process. Suppliers are asked to send in expressions of interest, using a newsletter and the website to invite interest. DWP sometimes seconds people to research organisations, which has influenced the procurement process. In concluding, George expressed one concern about the *Guide*; he said that it appeared to be focused on process rather than on what the research is for.

Michael Clegg of NOF made a plea for suppliers to think about commissioners as their friends. He believed that clear procurement guidance could be helpful as it forced people to plan well in advance and encouraged good practice among suppliers. Sometimes commissioners have a genuine open mind about the most appropriate methodology for a particular project; NOF tries not to over-specify briefs. Suppliers should feel able to take problem-based briefs on face value and put forward proposals for suitable approaches. It is

continued opposite

important for suppliers to include a clear schedule of what they will do, and transparent costings when preparing their bid.

Michael argued for taking account of all elements of a bid when decisions about awarding contracts are made. Interviews are important, but the written materials which suppliers provide are likely to be more substantive and more thoroughly prepared.

Discussion issues

Common issues emerged from discussion. One important issue is how to recruit new researchers, particularly researchers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds and with BME expertise. Suggestions included:

- Including one new or unknown supplier in each tender list
- Letting small contracts to new or unknown suppliers
- Taking risks where the risk is not too great
- Asking people to send in expressions of interest, which would not involve them in a great deal of work, but would give an idea of their capacity and experience.

Ways of improving the *specification* process included:

- Commissioners building good relationships with in-house colleagues to help them clarify their research objectives
- Providing tools for in-house colleagues which will, for example, improve the quality of briefs
- Building a research-literate culture in the commissioning organisation.

Suggestions for improving the *commissioning* process included:

- Tailoring the commissioning process so that it is appropriate to the scale of the project
- Not specifying invitations to tender (there was a noted preference for briefs) too tightly. Allowing researchers the scope to help design the research
- Devising multi-stage contracts, which are let in stages, with each subsequent stage being reviewed in the light of completed stages
- Maintaining a pool of core-funded suppliers, while taking steps to recruit new or unknown suppliers
- Maintaining dialogue during the commissioning process, by seeking clarification and further information from commissioners, and answering questions from suppliers
- Taking account of all elements of a bid when decisions are made and not relying too much on interviews.

It was agreed that partnerships for commissioning or supplying work best where the work is clearly focused, where all parties are clear about their remit and responsibility and where there are clear lines of reporting. Finally, the importance of focusing on the research and its aims, and not being too focused on process was emphasised.

Under the Microscope: experimentation in the social realm

By Rebecca Stanley

The SRA and UKES recently joined forces to run a thought-provoking conference on social experiments. The event focused on practical examples of randomised control trials (RCTs) that are currently being undertaken in social policy. Fifty delegates attended and we were privileged to have speakers with practical experience of experimental design as well as senior figures in the research and policy fields.

Phil Davies, Government Chief Social Researchers' Office (GCSRO) opened the day with a tour through the origins of social experiments. Stephen Morris (GCRSO) then spoke about the design stage of the Employment Retention and Advancement project. Nick Axford and Vashti Berry (Dartington Social Research Unit) described their youth justice trial, and Sue Purdon, National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) and Laura Smethurst, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) spoke about the Job Retention and Rehabilitation pilot. Chloe Chitty, (Home Office) outlined lessons learned using a quasi-experimental design. She exhorted researchers to 'aim high' when seeking to get RCTs considered despite the difficulties and opposition sometimes faced. Norman Glass, Director of NatCen, rounded up the day with a 'rallying cry' for social researchers to take advantage of a more open climate where RCTs can be considered as a real option in research design.

The presentations sparked considerable debate. Some of the key themes raised in discussion were:

- Is it ethical to run experiments for social interventions?
- How do randomisation and informing participants work in practice?
- Would social research ethics committees be useful?
- Understanding *why* something works is crucial in addition to what works and whether it is cost effective.

It was clear from the day that the use of RCTs in the social realm remains a contested issue provoking strong argument on all sides. However, there is also growing interest in considering when they could be used. To enable researchers to address this issue with confidence and skill more dissemination of practical experience in this field is needed.

Materials from the conference will be available on the UKES and SRA websites, including presentations and discuss group contributions (www.evaluation.org.uk; www.sra-org.uk).

Holyrood, The Early Years

Connie Smith of the Scottish Parliament and Sue Morris of The Robert Gordon University recently presented a SRA seminar to consider the extent to which the parliament in Scotland is open and accessible.

Popular involvement in the Scottish Parliament and its business was an aspiration from the outset. Devolution was viewed as an opportunity to re-engage people in the political process. This seminar considered the Scottish Parliament's position in adopting a participative approach. This was looked at against the backdrop of the principles of the parliament, particularly of openness and accessibility.

Connie Smith and Sue Morris described the Scottish Parliament as grounded in representative democracy, but with the added dimension of promoting and facilitating active public participation in the decision-making processes. They argued that the Scottish Parliament model seeks to extend representative democracy (but not replace it) by increased participation in the decision-making process.

Consequently, the parliament was sited between the academic position of either wholesale acceptance of decision making by elected representatives (representative democracy) or alternately, acceptance of direct citizen control of decision making (participative democracy). They argued that existing tools for assessing the extent of participation in the democratic process were not suitable. For example, in Arnstein's ladder of participation, citizen control is the only genuine form of public participation.

Instead, Smith and Morris presented a framework of participation based on people's level of active engagement in the public policy arena generally. It ranged from those already actively engaged with the business of the Parliament, active citizens in issues but not policy/scrutiny finally to the public in general that did not regularly participate. There was consideration of the extent to which the parliament could and should engage with individual members of the public, and the mechanisms appropriate for such engagement.

Analysis of the parliament's arrangements for public participation in its first session stressed the importance of the information, education and promotional roles of the parliament in stimulating public participation in the work of its committees. Evidence indicates that people who had been involved with the Parliament generally felt positive about its openness and accessibility, but those who had had no contact were less convinced. Well-established external organisations appeared to have made strong links with committees, although there were concerns about the resources these groups had at their disposal to respond to the demand.

The parliament had a range of successful civic participation events in the first session. These enabled external groups to participate in the business of the

parliament through committee business. The challenge for the next session was to build on this.

Discussion following the presentation was lively.

It was suggested that the parliament could benefit from a strong positive, branding as a participative institution. Participants also identified the issue of resources as a key factor in engaging with the parliament. There were concerns about 'consultation overload' in general and the relatively short time available for preparation of evidence to committees.

The presentation stressed that this is a two way process and called for both the parliament and public to want to participate in the governance of Scotland.

Great Expectations: The Social Sciences in Britain – Where next?

Professor David Rhind, Chair of the Commission on the Social Sciences, addressed a full house at Jury's Hotel in June, speaking to the report of the Commission – Great Expectations: the Social Sciences in Britain. Angelique Praat reports on this SRA evening seminar.

Professor Rhind gave a whirlwind tour of the impetus for and development of the report, alighting briefly on the process of producing the report, the context within which it sat, the commission's findings, and some of the 60 recommendations for government, funding councils and academics to improve the impact and health of the social sciences resulting from the commission's work. Some of the concerns picked out by Professor Rhind were reflective of those discussed at SRA Conference 2003, such as improving communication between the social sciences and government, and finding an effective voice for the social sciences for disseminating findings to society more generally.

When asked what he personally thought were the key points from the report among the many recommendations in discussions after his presentation, Professor Rhind touched on the three big issues addressed in the report's 'Looking ahead' section. These were the need to encourage cross and inter-disciplinary working to meaningfully and fully address emerging societal concerns, the need to upscale social science research projects so research became more than a 'cottage industry' and the need to encourage international partnerships and projects within the social sciences.

Professor Rhind finished with perhaps his most important message for the SRA membership: a call for those present, individually and through professional memberships, to take up the opportunity to action the recommendations made by the commission to strengthen the health of the social sciences.

Mandy Littlewood gives her quarterly update

Recent Events

Ethics in research

In April, the Edinburgh Local Group of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS) held a joint discussion meeting with the Social Research Association in Scotland. The topic was 'Ethics in Research', with two speakers offering different perspectives, followed by a lively and lengthy discussion.

Professor Stephen Senn of University College London gave a presentation on 'The Misunderstood Placebo'. He pointed out that the design and conduct of clinical trials involve not just the patient and the doctor, but society as a whole, and that this leads to some interesting philosophical points. Pausing only to demolish the "myth" of equipoise, Stephen argued that the use of placebo run-ins in randomised controlled trials was unethical, as it involved either lying to patients or giving them sub-standard treatment.

Carol Horne, who is both the manager of a cancer support charity and a lay member of a Multi-centre Research Ethics Committee discussed the ethics of research from the point of view of the participants. The nature of consent, how truly it can be informed consent, and some general points about communication between researchers and participants were the main themes. She argued that it is not just the written patient information which is important, but also the context and manner in which it is introduced to the potential research participants.

A plague on all your houses? Understanding the Scottish election

Hot on the heels of the election, on 28th May, Professor John Curtice of the University of Strathclyde and the National Centre for Social Research gave a presentation on voting behaviour. The elections to the Scottish parliament on 1st May were characterised by low turnout and substantial increases in the number of seats won by the Green Party and the Scottish Socialist Party. Using data from the annual Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, John explored the reasons for low turn out and the reasons why people have begun to vote in larger numbers for the smaller parties.

Information, communication, participation – Holyrood the early years

Connie Smith from SPICe (Scottish Parliament Information Centre) and Sue Morris from Robert Gordon's University presented a paper on the first four years of the Scottish Parliament. See page 8 for a full report.

Training

We held a very popular training course on sampling methods in June, with contributions from Steven Hope, Director of NFO Social Research and Susan Purdon, Director of the National Centre for Social Research's Survey Methods Centre. The course gave an introduction to sampling, examining sampling methods, sampling error and bias and the practicalities of random probability and quota sampling. As the training day was over-subscribed, we hope to be able to run another sampling training day in the New Year.

Thank you to all speakers and participants. If you have ideas on events that you would like to see us hold in future, please get in touch.

Future events

Evening seminars

In late November, Andra Laird, Director of Social Research at George Street Research will present the findings of recent research on the Rough Sleeper's Initiative, commissioned by the Scottish Executive, monitoring the target of ending the need to sleep rough by 2003.

This will be held in the Friends' Meeting House, Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh at 6.30pm (refreshments available from 6pm).

The loneliness of the long distance social researcher...

Congratulations to Mark Diffley, committee member and Associate Director from MORI Scotland, who successfully completed the Edinburgh Marathon recently, raising £1,000 for the Maggies Centre. Having caught the bug, Mark is now in training for the New York Marathon in November.

Call for speakers

The SRA in Scotland holds evening seminars throughout the year. These tend to take place monthly, and cover a wide range of topics, from research methods to social policy. The seminars are held in Edinburgh and run from 6.30pm (6pm for tea and biscuits) until around 8pm. We ask for a donation of £2 from non-members to cover costs.

If you would like to host a seminar as part of our evening seminar series, in Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland, or if you have an idea of a training event **please** let us know.

Contact us

If you would like to know more about SRA events in Scotland, have your email address added to our email mailing list, or have any bright ideas, please contact us. Email Mandy Littlewood, mandy@madmoog.co.uk, 07866 476 752, or Kerstin Hinds, k.hinds@natcen.ac.uk, 0131 557 5494.

Question Bank

Harshad C. Keval explains the value of the CASS Question Bank to social science researchers.

The ESRC CASS (Centre for Applied Social Surveys) Question Bank (QB) is a unique on-line, free resource available without registration. We provide questionnaire facsimiles and other information on major survey topics. Currently, the Question Bank website holds 46 large-scale, social science surveys, all relevant to the UK survey arena. In addition, there is a variety of other information related to the study and implementation of standardised measurement in the social sciences. The site is the most accessible source of survey questionnaires and related material in the UK, and currently holds over 27,000 pages of information (in PDF and HTML format), all searchable via an intelligent search engine.

Its ultimate aim is to contribute to the overall training of the quantitative social science research community, and provide substantial support to maintaining the standards of excellence crucial to the implementation of social surveys in the UK.

Who is it for?

The QB is aimed at:

- Researchers devising their own survey questionnaires
- Secondary analysts of survey data
- Teachers of survey methods
- Students of survey methods

What material does it hold?

The QB has three core elements: surveys, topics and resources. Whilst the Surveys section holds facsimiles of all the questionnaires we have acquired (split into blocks for fast downloading), the Topics section (now with 21 topics) contains specially written critical and explanatory commentary, intended to help users understand the conceptual structure of each topic and the related instruments. We aim to provide a summary account of the main concepts involved and of current approaches to measuring them using survey questionnaire methods.

The Resources section provides a comprehensive user guide to the QB, links to other sites and information sources, various publications (all downloadable), CAPI resources, teaching material and contact details, as well as a large bibliographic section.

See the Question Bank at <http://qb.soc.surrey.ac.uk>.

For further information contact: Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH.

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If you would like a copy of any of the books/reports listed below all you have to do is write a short review of no more than 300 words. In return you can keep the reviewed item. Alternatively, if you would like to submit a review of a book or report that you think would be of interest to SRA members, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk.

Qualitative Research Practice

Edited by Jane Ritchie and Jane Lewis of the National Centre for Social Research
 Sage, February 2003

Social Research; Theory, Methods and Techniques

Piergiorgio Corbetta, Universita Degli Studi di Bologna
 Sage, April 2003

Feminist Sociology

Sara Delamont
 Sage, March 2003

Combining self-employment and family life

Alice Bell and Ivana La Valle
 The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
 June 2003

Happy Families? Atypical work and its influence on family life

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

Children, Family and the State: decision-making and child participation

Nigel Thomas
 The Policy Press

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

Stephen Lissenburgh and Deborah Smeaton
 The Policy Press and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2002

Guy Palmer, Mohibur Rahman and Peter Kenway
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Evaluation of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

Sarah del Tufo and Lucy Gaster
 The Evaluation Trust/Joseph Rowntree Foundation

New roles for old: local authority members and partnership working

Mick Wilkinson and Gary Craig
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Devolution in Scotland: the impact on local government

Michael Bennett, John Fairley and Mark McAteer
 Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Idea of Community, Social Policy and Self

Kevin Loughran
 APJ Publications

Ground Rules For Good Research

Martin Denscombe, OUP, 2002, 224 pages £14.99 (pb)
ISBN 0-335-20651-4

The Good Research Guide

Martin Denscombe, OUP, 1998, 256 pages £16.99 (pb)
ISBN 0-335-19805-8

Reviewed by Rosemary Lamport, Planning & Partnerships Manager, Islington Social Services

Ground Rules for Good Research sets out to provide a user-friendly starting point for students and others doing small-scale social research projects. It identifies the key ideas and practices that underlie good research and gives guideline to help non-researchers and researchers alike to design and conduct a successful research project.

Denscombe's ten point guide covers all the themes of good research: purpose, relevance, resources (so often overlooked), originality, accuracy, accountability, generalisations, objectivity, ethics and proof. Its format combines the best of do-it-yourself research books in that it is full of useful checklists, summaries, text boxes and cross references and is mercifully jargon-free, while maintaining the intellectual rigour of the strictly academic methodology textbook.

The book is intended for undergraduates and postgraduates who need to undertake social research projects as part of their studies, and is suitable for a wide range of disciplines including business, social sciences, health, media and education. It is also aimed at professionals with little training or practice in research. I believe it will also be of use to more experienced commissioners and supervisors of research – the ground rules providing a useful framework against which a competent piece of research can be measured, defended and justified.

As a local government researcher, with responsibility for implementing the new research governance framework for social care, I found this a timely and helpful publication. However, mindful of the needs of ad hoc and early career project researchers, I did feel a strong need for this book to be read alongside a comprehensive and pragmatic research methods guide.

This is where Denscombe's earlier work, *The Good Research Guide*, comes into its own. Essentially aimed at small-scale project researchers, it covers strategies for research and a sizeable section on quantitative and qualitative analysis as well as a clear and relatively detailed identification of the range of methods, their respective advantages and disadvantages and practical guidance on how to use them. It's format is very similar to *Ground Rules* and the style again accessible and attractive, with useful information on issues that are often overlooked in methods textbooks, such as documentary research, and the crucial aspect of the final stage of writing up the research. There is also a postscript of Frequently Asked Questions – to my mind, a wasted opportunity and the only disappointment I have with this book: it essentially only covers issues of

definition, rather than the real life research problems the main body of the work addresses so competently.

Overall, then, I would commend these two works to the fledgling or project researcher, and to the experienced professional who needs to be able to respond to requests for help with small scale social research projects: my advice to such requests would be 'go away and read these two books and then we can have a useful discussion!'

A Concise History of World Population

Massimo Livi-Bacci,
Published by Blackwells, 2001, third edition, 256 pages,
£16.99
ISBN 0631 22335 5

Reviewed by Dr Peter Brierley, Executive Director, Christian Research

This book fascinates from the start! From the title, I expected it to begin with human populations, so was surprised to find the first chapter talking of the length of time animals take to reproduce, but soon realised that this was part of the lively mind of the author, who draws comparisons on the history of population across a variety of specialisms. Doubtless this vitality has caused the interest shown in this being no less than the third of this book.

The text examines population growth from an environmental, historical (starting at the 10th millennium BC), employment, economic (with especial and excellent reference to poverty), and productivity viewpoints. Naturally it looks at the normal demographic processes of birth, death, marriage, fertility, migration and future forecasts. There are extensive notes, case studies and many tables. As a consequence, this is a book which is both reference and an interesting read, and well worth recommending for those interested in population development and the mechanisms by which it has and does do so.

After the initial chapter, there are five each focusing on a key topic. Chapter 2 looks especially at the forces of constraint imposed by different environments and their varying consequences across different periods of history. The Black Death (and infectious diseases) increases mortality initially but the subsequent labour shortage increases nuptiality and population.

Chapter 3 focuses on land and labour and suggests that analysis needs to be across the long term not short term for the real impact of change to be seen. Chapter 4 thinks especially about European population change and life expectancy change over the past three centuries, with particular reference to fertility change and migration.

Chapter 5 looks extensively at poor countries and how demographic change is linked to economic variation, and the impact of poor health on fertility rates. India and China are singled out for attention. Chapter 6

concentrates on the 2050 UN forecasts, and the problems of AIDS and the limits which emerge: consumption, food, land-use and atmospheric pollution.

This is therefore a comprehensive tool for thinking about population and its components and trends. This new edition is warmly welcomed, and we trust will serve academics, social researchers and many others in the days ahead.

Past it at 40? A grassroots view of ageism and discrimination in employment
A report undertaken for the Third Age Foundation by SMA Associates

Margaret Bass, Kemal Ahson and Lucy Gaster
Published by the Policy Press, Bristol, October 2002,
Price £15
ISBN 1 86134 484 8

Reviewed by Patrick Carroll, PAPRI Pension And Population Research Institute

The job seekers whose views are summarised in this report, were drawn from 1,200 students of the Third Age Foundation and 700 who had been helped by a Bristol-based sister organisation. In all, 102 people were interviewed with a structured interview schedule. There were 57 women, 45 men and 16 people of pensionable age. Those interviewed felt disadvantaged by their age when applying for jobs.

Employers were also contacted for interview. Uptake among a London sample was small and a wider sweep was instituted, using known contacts in the field of regeneration and workforce development. 30 semi-structured interviews were held, covering organisations of different sizes in the public private and voluntary sectors.'

There is little attempt to analyse the data gathered. No explanation is given for apparent inconsistencies in employers' responses. Positive aspects of employing older people include 'less likely to be off sick' but the negative aspects include 'too much sick leave' and 'want part-time work'. 'More life skills and experience' is seen as a positive but 'Naive, lack 'street skills' is seen as a negative. Older people are praised for their 'ability to work as a member of a team' but criticised for being 'not good at taking advice or management from younger people'. While they 'may stay too long' is seen as undesirable, their tendency to be 'stable and loyal' is seen as attractive.

There is a welcome call for further research. The report states that 'dependent women in their forties and fifties' and 'the pensions issue' are among 'the groups and issues which could well be explored in more detail'. But, I wonder if the new Code of Practice on Age Diversity which is promoted, and the new European anti-ageism legislation will be just another layer of wasteful bureaucracy. Employers will not be allowed to specify the age of the people they are seeking to recruit: 'Employers should screen job advertisements and

selection procedures to avoid reference to age'. And it seems that job seekers will not be expected to disclose their age in their CVs in future.

Who cares? Childminding in the 1990s

Ann Mooney, Abigail Knight, Peter Moss, and Charlie Owen
Published for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by the Family Policy Studies Centre
April 2001, Price £13.95
ISBN 1 901455 62 9

Reviewed by Patrick Carroll, PAPRI Pension And Population Research Institute

This study is concerned with childminders as regulated by the Children Act 1989. They must register and pay an application fee to their local authority (£12-50 in 2000). Following registration, childminders are inspected annually by their local authority. The number and ages of children who can be looked after are limited to no more than three children under the age of five including the childminder's own.

This report includes statistical background. Numbers of registered childminders increased from 83,900 in 1989 to 109,200 in 1992. It then varied and decreased to 75,000 in 2000. The numbers of children cared for also varies. 'In 1989 there were 2.2 places per registered childminder; this figure rose to 4.2 in 2000.' 'The childminders in our 1999 postal survey reported on being registered for 4.8 children on average. However they were actually caring for 3.5 children and half said they had vacancies.'

The postal survey carried out by the researchers covered 497 childminders. Of these only two were men. There were 10.1% single parents and 3.2% ethnic minorities. 98% had their own children. The main reason (given by 66.7 % of the 487 who responded) for becoming a childminder was the desire to be at home with their own children. 15.4% said that wanting to work with children was the main reason.

There was also a case study in which 30 childminders were interviewed. Ten of these were former childminders who had stopped. The report discusses the various factors which influence why childminders take it up and why they stop. For many it is a temporary job while their own children are young. Generally, there was high satisfaction and contentment with the job (despite long hours and low pay).

An unresolved issue is the question of training for childminders.

The Well-being of Children in the UK

Edited by Jonathan Bradshaw

London, Save the Children, 2002, £18.95 (pb)

ISBN 1 84187 060 9

Reviewed by Nick Axford, Dartington Social Research Unit

This book provides an up-to-date and thorough review of existing data on the physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional well-being of children in the UK. The 23 chapters cover topics such as poverty, health, education, housing, the environment and crime. Key statistics, trends and references are presented, and particular attention is paid to cross-national differences – especially between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The question that many will want this book to answer is: are things getting better? Not surprisingly, a mixed picture emerges. Overall, child well-being appears to be improving; but whereas trends on some indicators are encouraging, such as poverty, there is deterioration on others, notably mental health. Even for measures that are moving in the right direction, there is often

considerable diversity, with children performing differently according to class, ethnicity, gender and family type. Account should also be taken of baselines: for example, the teenage conception rate is going down, but from the highest rate in Europe.

A major strength of the book is its dogged focus on outcomes. For instance, in relation to child maltreatment it avoids the number of child protection registrations, which to a large degree reflects agency policy, and instead uses self-report findings. The contributors are also candid about the limitations of the data. One health warning concerns the difficulty of tracing robust trends over short periods of time. Another relates to the contrasting definitions applied in different countries – a cost, perhaps, of devolution. Then there are the gaps in the data, stemming at least in part from the lack of a nationally representative survey of children.

As Bradshaw points out, it is amazing that the UK does not produce a regular, comprehensive analysis of children's well-being. This book will therefore prove an extremely helpful reference tool for researchers and policy-makers, particularly if, as it hints, it becomes the first of a regular series.

RESPECT meeting in Budapest

The EC funded RESPECT project programme of international dissemination and discussion has got underway. The first seminar was held in Budapest in June and was attended by several EC officials as well as senior members of the social science community across Europe. The UK was well represented with among others, Sue Duncan and Len Dawes from the Cabinet Office, Ros Rouse from the ESRC and Hilary Beedham from the ERSC Data Archive. Both Ros and Len are reviewing their organisations' policy documents and guidance on ethical issues and so the RESPECT project is very relevant to their work, while Hilary's work covered data protection.

The seminar heard many presentations covering all aspects of the growing European wide interest in intellectual property rights and the role of researchers versus commissioners in this, the problems posed by increasing use of the web in research, the ethical and data protection issues for international contract research as well as the response of national funders to this. Key presentations included a paper from the commission about the ethical standards being demanded of researchers in the Framework 6 programme as well as the presentation from Norway about their National Research Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Most directly worrying, however, was the discussion of capacity in international social science work. The Belgian team revealed the extent to which doing large scale multi-national and interdisciplinary research projects required an enormous number of project management skills on top of having considerable language and social science competences and



Taking a break in the sunshine from the RESPECT seminar in Budapest are Prof. Dr Czaba Mako, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Tina Mede, European Commission Information Society Directorate-General, Ursula Huws, Co-ordinator of the RESPECT Project (Institute of Employment Studies), Ceridwen Roberts, Chair of the Social Research Association, Salvi Maurizio, European Commission.

experiences. It was clear not enough was being done to develop these either within member states or across the EU more generally.

Subsequently, further dissemination took place in London in July when the SRA Summer event was given over to presentations about the RESPECT project and SRA members as well senior members of the social research community were invited to comment. Ursula Huws reports on this on page 1. The programme of discussion and dissemination continues with further presentations planned in a number of member states and at the commission in Brussels. For more details see www.respectproject.org.

SRA TRAINING DAYS

- **18 November: Better Questionnaire Design (London)**
- **26 January 2004: Qualitative Analysis (Edinburgh)**
- **27 January 2004: Introduction to Focus Groups (Edinburgh)**
- **28 January 2004: In depth interviewing (Edinburgh)**

CATHIE MARSH MEMORIAL LECTURE

- **18 November: Trials on Trial; early experience of designing randomised control trials of labour market programmes in the UK (London)**

The Royal Statistical Society Social Statistics Section and the Social Research Association present this annual lecture at 5pm at the RSS headquarters, 12 Errol St, London, EC1. Coffee at 4.30pm and drinks reception at 7pm. The seminar is free.

SRA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

- **3 December: Looking Forward, Looking Up: improving the quality of social research (London)**

SRA EVENING EVENT

- **3 December: SRA 25th Birthday Celebrations (London)**

For further details of all SRA events contact the SRA administrator admin@the-sra.org.uk or see www.the-sra.org.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.

SHORT COURSES AND SEMINARS

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

- **6-7 November: SPSS for Windows**
- **13-14 November: Visual C++1**
- **20-21 November: Statistical Inference**

Fees for two days courses £350 but reductions apply in some cases. Only a selection of courses is shown above. 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

At the Royal Statistical Society, London. See website for latest details.

Because of ESRC support, a number of bursaries are available which reduce the fee payable - applicants must be full-time students, UK academic staff or ESRC-funded researchers.

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

- **6-7 November: Random Effects and Latent Variable Models for Complex Data**
- **10 November: Multilevel Modelling**

For more information please contact Nasira Asghar, tel: 0161 275 4736, email nasira.asghar@man.ac.uk www.ccsr.ac.uk/courses/external/2003-2004

University of Surrey Day Courses in Social Research

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

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/

Joint LARIA/CCSR/LGA Seminar

- **8 December: Race and Religion Statistics from the Census: what can you make of them?**

At the Local Government Association, Smith Square, London. Further details: LARIA administrator, 01642 316576; email: lariaoffice@aol.com

CONFERENCES

NCVO/Centre for Civil Society

- **5 December: Joined up citizens? Does social capital add up? Government policy, voluntary organisations and social capital.**

At the NCVO conference suite, London. Further details: jayne.blackborow@ncvo-vol.org.uk

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

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

SRA NEWS – next issue

Copy deadlines for the next issues of the newsletter are:

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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APOLOGY

We are very sorry that due to circumstances beyond our control it was not possible to produce our Summer edition of the SRA newsletter. This is our November edition and we are back on course for the February 2004 issue.



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Opportunities at BMRB Social Research

BMRB Social Research is one of the UK's leading suppliers of social policy research. We specialise in researching sensitive social issues, often among vulnerable groups and in challenging environments – including prisons. Our work covers a wide range of subjects – from illegal drug use, sexual behaviour and childhood abuse to teenage pregnancy, adult literacy and self-reported offending.

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