

# New Ethics Framework for Social Researchers

*Phil Sooben,  
Head of Strategy and  
Communications with  
the Economic and Social  
Research Council describes  
the main features of the  
new framework.*

The ESRC has recently introduced a new Research Ethics Framework (REF) (see [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)). The document provides a four-page overview, followed by more detailed policy guidelines giving some background context and explaining how this will work in practice (including some illustrative case studies).

The REF takes effect from 1 January 2006 after when ESRC will only provide funding in institutions that satisfy the framework. It therefore has implications for applicants to ESRC, research ethics committees within HEIs and for those assessing research proposals. We are keen for it to be widely disseminated well in advance of implementation and we are arranging a series of workshops (see website for details). We are also developing a series of 'frequently asked questions' and welcome any comments or queries (send to [ethics@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@esrc.ac.uk)).

The framework has been some two years in development and has been subject to wide-ranging consultation with the social science community and other key stakeholders. A team led by Professor Andrew Webster at the University of York carried out most of this work. All of the main

*continued...*



## New Ethics Framework for Social Researchers

*Continued from page 1*

### *All of the main funders of social science research in the UK have now given their support to the framework*

funders of social science research in the UK have now given their support to the framework. It is not intended to be yet another bureaucratic imposition on the HEI sector but an attempt to reflect, disseminate and standardise current good practice in the context of a rapidly changing research environment and to ensure that the public remains confident (as we are) in UK social science.

We are also conscious of the increasing importance of interaction between the social sciences and the natural and medical sciences and the new challenges that these are creating in sensitive areas such as genomics and stem cells research. In addition, it is important to have standards and guidelines that are relevant specifically to social science research rather than relying on general codes of practice more relevant to research in the physical and natural sciences or on those developed primarily for clinical research.

The framework sets out six key principles:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved
- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and

the anonymity of respondents must be respected

- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion
- Harm to research participants must be avoided
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

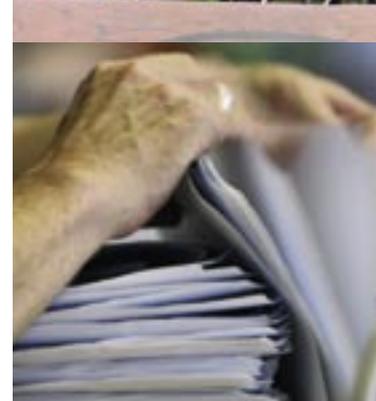
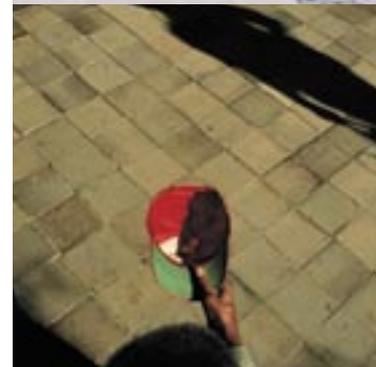
We do not intend to impose a particular mechanism on institutions or to review in detail each institution's particular arrangements. We propose a model of 'minimum regulation, maximum sanction' that allows for extremely stringent forms of sanction, including, ultimately, the withdrawal of funding. The ESRC can only require adherence to the framework for research it supports directly. However, we anticipate that most research organisations and other funding bodies will adopt it as an appropriate set of standards.

The REF must be responsive to further developments over time, and may be revised in due course. For example, we are currently looking at the issues raised by the possible linkage of biomedical with social and economic data. We are also having a very positive dialogue with the Department of Health about how this relates to its Research Governance Framework and to research carried out within the NHS, particularly in non-clinical areas such as social care.

### Contributions:

If there is anything you would like us to publicise in SRA News, please send details to the SRA admin office. You can also receive regular updates as a member by subscribing to the SRA e-bulletin.

See [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) for membership details.



# Four Years of Change

SRA Chair, *Ceridwen Roberts*, gives her quarterly report.

*I am writing my last editorial as chair. The last four years have flown past but there have been enormous changes. The SRA has never been stronger with doubled membership, increased income and expenditure and more activities.*



We now run more training courses and hold more seminars and bigger and better conferences. Our public affairs work has increased and we now have a thriving group in Scotland with embryonic groups in Ireland and Wales, which will develop their activities during 2006.

None of this expansion would have been possible without the enthusiastic work of the executive, subject committees and working groups. It has been a pleasure to work with them and to meet so many members keen to engage in our activities and develop their skills, knowledge and professional networks. We have been lucky in our administrators, initially Susanne Cohen and this year Jean Harrison and Gemma Pikett based in our new office.

## The changing context of social research

There have also been some important changes in our working context. These range from full economic costing for the academic sector to increased concern about the quality of training and development available for social researchers and the shortage of capacity at all levels of those with quantitative skills. There is also increased discussion about assuring standards of competence.

Ethical issues have risen up the agenda with the pressure to formalise good ethical practice. Concern is still high that we may be moving to both a mechanistic and overly

bureaucratic approach that drives out innovative research. We are also now working within the context of the Data Protection and the Freedom of Information Acts.

We are still concerned about the variable quality of the commissioning and procurement of social research, which is marked by enormous variability in the competence of purchasers as are the practice and standards of dissemination and utilisation. There is much for the SRA still to do.

## Where next for the SRA?

As an organisation run by its members, the SRA can only do as much as people can manage on a voluntary basis. This limits us, so a key issue for the next Executive is how to increase capacity. There is so much more we want to provide for all our members regardless of where they live. I know we have achieved a lot but I still have a long wish list:

- more regional networks of members coming together for seminars and training
- a thoroughly developed members only section of the web
- an advice line /web page for frequently asked questions
- more active public affairs work
- good careers advice to attract quality people into social research
- larger programmes of training courses and seminars
- more good practice guides and the list could go on.

A first priority for the 2006 Executive is to continue with reforming our legal status. If the AGM agrees proposed constitutional changes in December, we can apply for charitable status and become a company limited by guarantee. Then, the Executive can concentrate on adopting the proposals of the training review, take on board the membership review and move towards recruiting a part-time executive director to take on the daily management of the SRA. This will give us the extra capacity we need.

## The AGM and Annual Conference: 7th December

### *Necessity or nuisance: the role of non researchers in research*

This will be a crucial AGM with plenty to discuss and vote on, so do come and make your voice heard. We want to know what you think of the ideas for the future. And we will be launching A Guide to the Data Protection Act for Social Researchers jointly produced by the SRA and MRS. Stay on too for what promises to be a fascinating conference and the drinks reception when we hope to announce another Mark Abrams prize winner.

I hope to see you there. Meanwhile, thank you for all the support and encouragement you have given the SRA and me while I have been chair.

**SRA CONFERENCE:**

**7 December, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London, Russell Square, London**

**Necessity or Nuisance?**

What input can or should non-researchers have? What are the particular issues and examples of good practice when dealing with peer interviewing? Can you have participatory research involving children? How can researchers keep the recipients of research on board throughout the process?

The SRA annual conference takes as its theme the role of non-researchers in participatory research. The conference will be an opportunity to hear about examples of good practice and lessons learned in involving non-researchers in research. The workshop papers vary from research with people living in poverty, cancer patients and young people to presentations on keeping the community and policy makers involved in a research project and getting the findings across.

The plenary and the panel sessions will focus on participatory research and the speakers will outline its benefits and limits, different approaches and the reasons for and rewards of such an approach. They will also critically discuss issues of professional knowledge, inclusiveness and sustainability.

The conference offers a great opportunity to anyone interested in finding out more about engaging with the participants and end users of research and learning about the issues, the pitfalls and the opportunities.

**See online at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) or phone us on 020 7812 0634 for a programme and application form.**

**Diary**

The SRA runs an extensive training and events programme. Details are at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) or contact the SRA administrator.

**FORTHCOMING:****Wales**

On 8 December, SRA Wales, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Welsh Assembly Government and the Local Government Data Unit (Wales) will host a joint event at the Hotel Metropole, Llandrindod to build on the policy and practice implications of three recent research reports that have examined in detail the extent and nature of poverty and deprivation in Wales.

**SRA Constitution**

A Special General Meeting held at the SRA Summer Event agreed to ask the Executive to move towards registering the SRA as a charity and company limited by guarantee. This will bring the SRA into line with most other professional associations and give more protection to members and the executive (limiting their liability regarding financial and other decisions so long as these are taken in good faith and involve due attention to the SRA's best interests).

Since then the Executive has been working to revise the constitution to produce a Memorandum of Association and Articles suitable for submission to the Charity Commission and to Companies House. Before doing so, these must be agreed by a meeting of the members.

The revised document, which incorporates most features of the existing constitution, will be circulated to members before the AGM (to be held on December 7

**London**

**Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture** (joint SRA/RSS event): 15 NOVEMBER

**Qualitative Interviewing:** 22 NOVEMBER

**Scotland**

**Prevention, Perception and Policing:** 16 NOVEMBER

**Qualitative training:**

**Focus Groups:** 5 DECEMBER

**In-depth Interviews:** 6 DECEMBER

**Qualitative Analysis:** 8 DECEMBER

**Reporting:** 9 DECEMBER

**For the latest news and diary dates, why not subscribe to the SRA monthly e-bulletin at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)**

along with the annual conference) and a resolution put to the meeting requesting members' approval.

The key changes to note in the document are:

- The addition of an object concerning the promotion of ethical practice in the conduct of social research
- Procedures for the election of members of the executive committee and their terms of office
- Procedures for organising General Meetings

If the Memorandum and Articles are approved at the AGM, we shall submit these to the Charity Commission and hope to secure the new status in 2006. The new status will give us greater clarity about procedures and the roles of officers and executive committee members (who will become Trustees of the Charity and Directors of the Company).

*Susanne MacGregor, Honorary Secretary*

# Promoting Effective Training

*Cathy Sullivan, chair of the SRA training committee, reports on members' views of proposals to develop the SRA's training role.*

Social research practitioners with expertise, experience and responsibilities in training accepted an SRA invitation to spend a Friday afternoon considering its training review proposals in the context of wider training developments. Chaired by Ceridwen Roberts, distinguished guest speakers provided a stimulating and pertinent basis for discussion, outlining key developments in their sectors.

## The research context

Sue Duncan, Government Chief Social Researcher, introduced the new GSR Competency Framework for Social Researchers (see page 8). The framework aims to underpin future recruitment, promotion and performance assessment of government researchers, as well as help identify general training needs and priorities.

Adrian Alsop, Director of Research, Training and Development at the ESRC, summarised the priorities and thinking informing current ESRC training and development support

*Both speakers accented the use of research and training that optimises linkage to policy and practice*

for researchers. He emphasised the importance of working in partnership and a commitment to ensure that ESRC-supported training initiatives should in future be

accessible to researchers outside the academic sector. He highlighted the seven key objectives for a new ESRC strategic plan. These include a balance of responsive and directive research funding, and more focus on supporting career development through training and other support such as the new First Grants Scheme for post-doctoral researchers, and the RDI initiative addressing the training needs of those in mid-career. Both speakers accented the use of research and training that optimises linkage to policy and practice.

Patten Smith, Director with BMRB International, explained the rationale for in-house training from the private sector research perspective, outlining BMRB's in-house training programme for graduate recruits and new plans to develop continuing professional training for existing, more experienced researchers. He offered a challenge to the social research community to improve the quality of social research skills through more and better training, pointing to an important role for the SRA in encouraging improvement.

## The SRA role

Jane Ritchie of the SRA training working group summarised key issues and proposals from the training review (see last issue). She concluded that there is a need for a concerted push within the social research community to advance training for practising social researchers. The SRA, with its high representation of practitioners and a range of training providers, is uniquely positioned to play a wider

role in such a drive, although we need more time and money to do so effectively.

## Next steps

Participants discussed next steps and how the SRA might contribute. Issues explored included 'accrediting' training and forms this might take, e.g. quality assuring courses, training for trainers, certification for learners and the standard

*There is a need for a concerted push within the social research community to advance training for practising social researchers*

competencies approach. A clear consensus emerged about the need to develop the quality of research practice through training, including work-based learning and mentoring. Participants thought that, whilst the SRA was constrained by lack of time and resources, it had an invaluable role to play in supporting experienced researchers, raising awareness of training issues and promoting markers of good research. They reiterated the value of the practical and topical training currently offered by the SRA.

The SRA thanks all those who took part in the discussions. We will now carefully consider the day's deliberations to inform training developments. A more detailed summary of discussions will follow along with information about how the SRA intends to respond.

## SRA SCOTLAND: *Chris Nicol reports*

### Activities

After our usual summer recess (if it's good enough for MSPs, it's good enough for SRA Scotland!), we kicked off the autumn 2005 seminar programme with Dr Lisa Hanna from the University of Edinburgh Research Unit in Health, Behaviour and Change presenting a paper entitled *'Carrying out good quality survey research across ethnic groups: the challenge of language and culture'*.

*The seminar addressed some of the common pitfalls when working with groups from outwith a country's dominant language and culture*

The seminar addressed some of the common pitfalls when working with groups from outwith a country's dominant language and culture. Dr Hanna shared some of the misconceptions that may be generated by research designs that have not been fully tested for cultural sensitivity, and some methodologically rigorous ways to avoid making such mistakes in future research.

Peter Mouncey repeated his successful course on *'Survey Research and Data Privacy'* in September. The course attracted over 35 delegates, who were updated on the implications of data privacy and freedom of information legislation for research. They were also given practical advice on the steps required to ensure their own research practice meets current legal requirements regarding use of personal information, transparency and informed consent.

The SRA Scotland committee met in September. We discussed forthcoming events and also strategic issues. Over recent years the number of events we have organised has increased considerably. As a result, we can no longer rely solely on getting volunteers from the committee or our contacts from the social research community to run and facilitate these – there are only so many favours you can call in! So, we discussed how to improve event organising to make it easier for committee members who get involved in this.

### Contact SRA Scotland

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

## SRA IRELAND: *Peter Humphreys reports*

### Planning

SRA Ireland is looking to organise a joint event with the Irish Evaluation Network (IEN). There is a shared interest in the issues arising from good practice in commissioning research. So watch this space.

### IEN

The IEN is a network for individuals involved or interested in forwarding the theory and practice of high quality evaluation in an Irish context. Established in 2002, it has operated as an informal network guided by a voluntary steering group. There is no formal membership structure, but the network mailing list has approximately 260 subscribers, and 176 people registered for the IEN's first conference held in Dublin City University (DCU) in 2004. These include a wide range of individuals who commission or undertake evaluations and related research in public sector bodies, research institutes, academia and consultancy. It is

*There is a shared interest in the issues arising from good practice in commissioning research*

administratively supported by the Policy Institute at Trinity College Dublin, and to date, financial support has been provided by the Department of Finance Change Management Fund.

Since its foundation, the IEN has:

- run several well-attended seminars presented by international and national evaluation experts
- held a training workshop attended by over 70 civil servants; and a conference entitled *'A culture of evaluation: exploring the Irish experience of evaluation'*, run by DCU and attended by over 150 participants
- developed a web page hosted on The Policy Institute website including the development of a searchable database of Irish evaluators (Irish Evaluation Network Directory). The Policy Institute also hosts and maintains the network's mailing list.

See [www.policyinstitute.tcd.ie/aboutthe.php](http://www.policyinstitute.tcd.ie/aboutthe.php) for more details about IEN activities.

### Contact SRA Ireland

If you are interested in knowing more about the SRA in Ireland, and (even better) would like to help, do get in touch with me at [phumphreys@ipa.ie](mailto:phumphreys@ipa.ie)

# Making an Impact

CCPR manages and develops the database on behalf of the Scottish Executive, which originally created it in 2004 while conducting a literature review<sup>1</sup> on the evidence base for culture, arts and sport policy (see [www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/resfinds/edrf2-00.asp](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/resfinds/edrf2-00.asp)).

The database contains just over 300 references and new research is added every week. Research themes relating to arts and culture are education; social inclusion; health; audience development; society; the economy; cultural tourism; and major cultural and sporting events. Study types include academic research projects, academic and professional journal

*The Centre for Cultural Policy Research (CCPR) Impact Database is a bibliographical resource comprising studies relating to the impact of the arts, culture and major events.*

papers, evaluations, impact studies, literature reviews, conference presentations and findings from large-scale surveys. The emphasis is on research carried out since 2000 and current work.

The database offers both simple and advanced search functions, and users can keep track of their results using the 'pinboard' and email facilities. Users can register to receive a quarterly e-newsletter with an update on new research, which is also published on the database web pages. Researchers can also use an online form to submit information about their work for inclusion in the database and are strongly encouraged to do so.

CCPR hopes that the Impact Database will prove to be a valuable resource for those working or researching in the arts, culture and major events, who have an interest in their social, cultural and economic effects. The database is on the CCPR website at [www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk](http://www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk) and by linking directly to the web page at [www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk/site\\_resources/frame\\_set.php?l=1&mf=%2F](http://www.culturalpolicy.arts.gla.ac.uk/site_resources/frame_set.php?l=1&mf=%2F).

**For further information, contact the Impact Database administrator, Nicola Birkin, [N.Birkin@arts.gla.ac.uk](mailto:N.Birkin@arts.gla.ac.uk)**

<sup>1</sup> Janet Ruiz (2004) *A Literature Review of the Evidence Base for Culture, the Arts and Sport Policy*. Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.

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## ENGAGING SCIENCE

### Society Awards: Research

*An opportunity to make a significant impact on public engagement research and practice, focusing specifically on biomedical science.*

Engaging Science is a £3 million grants programme to support projects that investigate biomedical science and its social contexts. A range of awards is available for projects that consider the social, cultural, ethical and historical issues related to biomedical science.

This range now includes **Society Awards: Research**, which offer sums of £50 000 upwards to support **academic research** that aims to **advance knowledge** about **public engagement with biomedical science**.

Deadline for applications: **1 March 2006**.

For more information, visit [www.wellcome.ac.uk/engagingscience](http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/engagingscience).

# New Competency Framework for Government Researchers

*Sue Duncan, chief government social researcher and head of the Government Social Research Unit (GSRU), hails the launch of the new Government Social Research Competency Framework as a significant development for the profession.*

Formally published in September 2005, and closely related to the new Civil Service Professional Skills for Government initiative (PSG), the Competency Framework details the skills and functions required of government social researchers at all levels, and is designed to guide recruitment, appraisal, promotion and training.

## Purpose of research

Government has always used research for policy evaluation and development, but its use has grown dramatically since 1997 – there are now over 1,000 social researchers working in 20 government departments with an annual spend of about £150 million. Government social researchers commission and manage research and evaluation, carry out in-house research studies and analysis, advise on the use and interpretation of social research, and aim to ensure that government has access to the best available evidence.

A significant part of the work of GSRU is to help social researchers understand what the government needs from them in the development and implementation of policy, and how they can best contribute. As the profession has developed, there has been an increasing need to clarify the range and standard of skills and behaviours required of GSR members.

It is the role of social research to inform policy, but this is not as easy as we sometimes assume. Social research is about looking at human behaviour, organisations and social structures, and these can be rather messy – social research does not always give the clear answers that policy makers and politicians would often like, and can be a bit more difficult to use.

The picture is complicated further by the fact that social researchers' working arrangements and practices differ according to employer department. Some researchers work together in single-disciplinary teams, but early findings from the GSRU research project 'Analysis for Policy' confirm that multi-disciplinary teams comprising policy teams and

CabinetOffice



Government Social Research Unit

## Competencies for Government Social Researchers

The GSR Competency Framework sets out a comprehensive set of competencies relevant to research work and grades in the Government Social Research (GSR) service. It is designed for use in recruiting, promoting, appraising and developing all GSR members and is accredited by Professional Skills for Government (PSG).

### Policy and delivery focus

- Understands and directs effort to meet customer needs.
- Works in partnership with other analysts, policy colleagues and wider customers to provide relevant and high quality contribution that adds value to government policy decision making.

### Delivering results

- Plans work activities, reviewing and prioritising as necessary, to achieve high standards and meet deadlines.
- Is proactive and uses initiative when problems arise or progress is slow.
- Shows resilience under pressure and does not let setbacks affect performance.

### Learning and improving

- Acknowledges own development needs and seeks new skills, knowledge and opportunities for learning.
- Learns from others.
- Adapts quickly and effectively to new people, situations and task demands.
- Operates effectively in a range of roles and contexts including times and situations of uncertainty.

### Critical analysis and decision making

- Critically evaluates data and information with accuracy and perception, and is able to synthesise and use data drawn from a variety of different methods appropriately.
- Makes sound, evidence based decisions (and/or helps others do so).
- Assesses risk and defends decisions and action.
- Responds effectively to unforeseen situations.

### Constructive thinking

- Thinks imaginatively whilst keeping the goal in mind.
- Understands the bigger picture and can make the link between issues.
- Shows an open mind with the intellectual rigour to generate original ideas and develop practical solutions from them.
- Able to facilitate, encourage and build upon the ideas of others.

### Professional expertise

- Demonstrates the detailed knowledge and experience necessary for the job of a government social researcher, expressing the core technical capability, knowledge and awareness in terms of behaviours.

### Developing constructive relationships

- Uses interpersonal and other communication skills to build rapport with others.
- Shows awareness of the effects of own behaviour on others and understands their situations and concerns.
- Values diversity and shows flexibility of style.

### Communicating with impact

- Communicates written and oral information clearly, concisely and persuasively.
- Communicates own viewpoint succinctly and defends it appropriately.
- Facilitates discussions effectively to achieve clear outcomes.

### Leading and directing

- Takes an active and prominent role in providing direction to staff and contractors.
- Champions high standards.
- Gains the trust, commitment and co-operation of others.



For more detailed information, including user guidance and detailed indicators for each competency, visit

[www.gsr.gov.uk](http://www.gsr.gov.uk)

## *The new Competency Framework will help ensure that GSR is prepared to meet future challenges*

specialists are increasingly popular. The project examines key relationships between analysts and stakeholders, and assesses the impact of initiatives to improve policy making. Findings are informing the development of PSG, and will inform relevant training such as that provided by the National School of Government.

### **The framework**

Researchers have to juggle departmental, civil service and professional cultures, which can be hard. We've tried to throw some light on such issues, and social researchers now have a clear definition of the competencies required both to do their current job and to progress.

The GSR framework is underpinned by a rigorous job analysis, and reflects human resources good practice and other successful frameworks. Nine competencies under the headings 'delivery skills', 'intellectual capacity', 'interpersonal skills', and 'leadership and management' reflect both the jobs being done in departments now and the key role that our researchers have to play in the future of policy delivery. The framework, designed to assist recruitment, promotion, appraisal and development, captures the standards set out in the new PSG skills framework. PSG is designed to ensure that civil servants, wherever they work, have the right mix of skills and expertise to enable their departments or agencies to deliver effective services and to make career progress.

Ultimately, the new Competency Framework will help ensure that GSR is prepared to meet future challenges – by having the right social researchers in post, with the right skills, to contribute fully to the development, evaluation and delivery of policy.

The new Competency Framework is available online at [www.gsr.gov.uk](http://www.gsr.gov.uk)

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### **EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT**

SRA News will include any copy that may be of interest to its readers in the social research community. We will notify you if we are unable to include an item. Copy submitted for publication is accepted on the basis that it may be edited to ensure coherence within the publication. The views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

### **SRA NEWS PUBLICATION**

SRA News is published quarterly in February, May, September and November. Copy dates for future issues are: 31 December (February issue); 31 March (May issue); 30 June (September issue); and 30 September (November issue).

For more on the SRA see online at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk).

# Dependent Interviewing Can Reduce Survey Errors

*Annette Jäckle of the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), University of Essex, explains the findings from a programme of research carried out at ISER about interviewing methods that can reduce measurement error in panel surveys.*

Panel surveys interview respondents at different points in time, usually at regular intervals such as monthly, quarterly or annually, and repeat a core set of questions on each occasion. Over time, the interviews provide rich information about individual histories. Examples of panel studies in the UK include the British Household Panel Study, the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing and the Millennium Cohort Study. Compared to cross-sectional surveys, where respondents are only interviewed once, panel studies offer distinct analytical advantages. Following individuals over time makes it possible to disentangle gross and net changes (the unemployment rate may, for example, remain constant at 10%; only with repeated observations on the same individuals can one identify whether the same 10% were unemployed in different years, or whether there were gross inflows and outflows from unemployment). The temporal ordering of events also makes it possible to infer causal relationships.

Individual histories can also be compiled by asking respondents to a one-off survey about their past. Panel studies, however, offer advantages in terms of data content and quality, since it is impossible to collect certain information about the past. For example, if you were asked about attitudes you had several years ago, your memory would certainly be tainted by later experiences. In addition, memory decays with time and so the longer ago an event took place, the more difficult it is to report on it correctly. Do you, for example,

remember the starting salary in your first job and when you received increments and of how much? The quality of survey data on individual histories is therefore far better if respondents are regularly asked about their current situation, and possibly about changes in a relatively short period since the previous interview.

## The issues

Panel studies also have their hitches, however. The first is that respondents can get annoyed at having to answer the same questions if their situation has not changed, especially if the intervals between interviews are short. As a result, respondents may lose motivation and no longer make the effort required to answer survey questions well, and worse, may not be willing to participate in a future round of interviews. Secondly, when individual histories are reconstructed, one typically finds a disproportionate number of status changes at the 'seam', where information from different interviews is joined together. For example, if respondents are asked each year about receipt of different benefits during the past 12 months, then this information often does not fit together in a seamless manner; many respondents will appear to have moved on or off benefits in the month after an interview. Most of these changes are spurious, for example because respondents forget to report an income source in one year, but some changes may simply be misplaced in time. All measures of change derived from repeated panel surveys suffer this problem.

## Dependent interviewing

With the development of computer-assisted interviewing technologies for telephone and face-to-face interviews, it has become possible to pre-load substantive information from previous interviews and to make the current interview 'dependent' on previous answers. Previous information can be used to determine routing, to reduce the redundancy of questions if no changes have occurred, and to improve data quality. Respondents can either be reminded of previous answers, to jog their memory, or follow-up prompts can be programmed to query apparent changes since the previous interview. Dependent interviewing has been introduced in several panel studies worldwide (for example the Canadian Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, the US Survey of Program and Income Participation and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing), but until recently little evidence existed of the effects on survey estimates.

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## The study

Researchers at ISER carried out a study on 'Improving Survey Measurement of Income and Employment' (ISMIE), funded by the ESRC Research Methods Programme H333250031, to evaluate the potential of dependent interviewing to reduce measurement error. The study revisited respondents from the UK low-income sub-sample of the former European Community Household Panel Survey (ECHP). This sample had been interviewed annually since 1994, and since 1997 jointly with the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). When funding for the ECHP expired in 2001, it was decided that respondents should be interviewed once more for purely methodological purposes. Fieldwork for the experimental study took place in spring 2003 and 1,033 adults (aged 16+) were interviewed. The study also matched respondents to their benefit records held by the Department for Work and Pensions, which were then used to validate the answers given in the survey.

The survey was based on the BHPS questionnaires, although different experimental questions were developed. Respondents were randomly allocated to one of three treatment groups: 1) independent interviewing, where respondents were administered the standard BHPS questions, without reference to answers given in previous interviews, 2) reactive dependent interviewing, where respondents were asked the independent questions and answers were compared to those from the previous interview; in case of inconsistencies, follow-up questions were prompted to check whether changes were real, and 3) proactive dependent interviewing, where respondents were reminded of their previous answers as part of the question wording.

## Some findings

If respondents are asked to report on the characteristics of their employment every year, without reference to previous information, the answers imply an implausible amount of change. Among respondents in the ISMIE study who had not changed their job, 24% appeared to be in a different occupation, 15% in a different industry (even according to the coarsest measures of the Standard Industry and Occupation Classifications) and 16% reported having managerial duties they did not report in the previous year, or the other way round. These spurious changes were significantly reduced when respondents were reminded of their previous answers. Dependent interviewing worked especially well for the occupation and industry information, where the descriptions given by respondents are coded to complex coding frames and spurious changes can occur, either because the respondent used different words to describe the same occupation or industry, because the description

## *Dependent interviewing seems to be a good tool for panel surveys to reduce errors in measures of change*

was ambiguous, or because of coding error. If the previous information is available, the respondent can be asked to verify this and the previous codes can be brought forward, eliminating spurious changes.

Dependent interviewing also reduced spurious changes in labour market activity. Respondents were asked about their current activities in the 2001 and 2003 interviews, and about any changes that had occurred in the meantime. Of those respondents who had been unemployed in 2001 (without a job and looking for work), 22% said in 2003 that they had not been looking for work at the time of the first interview, and 19% even said they had had a job at that time. When respondents were reminded of the activities they had reported in the first interview, the number of spurious changes in status attributed to the month after the interview was reduced significantly, although not eliminated.

When respondents were asked which of 33 different income sources they had received during the previous year, dependent interviewing significantly reduced under-reporting, especially of relatively common and easily forgotten sources, such as Council Tax Credit, Housing Benefit and Child Benefit. For example, 25% of respondents who received child benefits according to the DWP records forgot to report this in the survey. With the reminder or edit check, only around 5% forgot to report this source. Underreporting was however not eliminated, since respondents who had failed to report a source in the previous interview were not reminded of this by the dependent interviewing.

## A useful tool

Dependent interviewing seems to be a good tool for panel surveys to reduce errors in measures of change. The study also confirmed the potential to reduce redundancies of questions and thereby reduce respondent frustration, interview durations and coding costs (industry and occupation information, for example, need only be coded for respondents who have experienced a change since the previous interview). The caveats are that dependent interviewing can be quite costly, mainly because of the complex programming of computerised questionnaires and editing of pre-loaded information from previous interviews. Dependent interviewing also works best for items which are clearly defined in the respondent's perception and which are relatively stable over time.

For more information see [www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/methods/research/ismie](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/ulsc/methods/research/ismie)

# Systematic Reviews and Qualitative Research – Uneasy Partners?

By *Mary Dixon-Woods*, Department of Health Sciences, University of Leicester

The beginnings of the evidence-based practice and policy movement were characterised by the development and deployment of a very particular view of what 'systematic review' of bodies of evidence might comprise. This promoted the very tight specification of review questions; methods for conducting comprehensive searching; a 'hierarchy of evidence' approach that favoured randomised controlled trials; and methods of synthesising evidence that emphasised aggregation of data. Despite the acknowledged strengths of conventional systematic review methodology for some types of questions, we are now beginning to see growing dissatisfaction with this approach for other types of questions. One key criticism has focused on the privileging of quantitative forms of evidence implicit in conventional systematic review methodology, which can produce a partial and partisan view of the evidence in a particular field.

## Questions and challenges

Methodological developments in systematic review are now being driven by the ever more complex questions being asked by decision-makers at all levels, including policy-makers, practitioners and managers. Chief among these developments has been an interest in how more diverse forms of evidence, including evidence from qualitative research, can best be incorporated in systematic reviews. However, integration of quantitative and qualitative forms of evidence poses a range of challenges.

One of the most important of these challenges concerns the 'fit' between the template offered by conventional systematic review methodology and the kinds of ideas and practices that underlie qualitative research. Conventional systematic review methodology is perhaps best suited to aggregative reviews, which begin with well-defined, stable categories and summarise data under these categories. However, such an approach is potentially problematic when it is neither possible nor desirable to specify precisely the question of the review or the data categories in advance, or when the aim of the review is to provide a critique and insight into an area rather than an aggregative summary. Under such circumstances, interpretive reviews might be more suitable. Qualitative researchers might feel that the approach they take to primary research, and the kinds of tasks they are suited to undertaking, is best placed to contribute to the production of such reviews.

## Interpretive reviews

Interpretive reviews see the generation of categories as a product (not a starting point), and would therefore avoid specifying this until towards the end of the review. Interpretive syntheses would generate what are known as mid-range theories – theories that are moderately abstract and are useful in explaining particular phenomena. Interpretive reviews would achieve synthesis through processes of interpretation that mirror those used in primary qualitative research. It might conduct a critique of the literature

rather than critical appraisal of each individual paper, and might sample the literature purposively rather than conducting comprehensive searching. An interpretive synthesis would therefore not make the same claims to reproducibility or 'transparency' as an aggregative synthesis, and its claims to credibility would instead rest on the extent to which its theory is grounded in the available evidence; in the plausibility and intellectual scope of its critique of that evidence, and in demonstrating the robustness of the theory it has produced to apparently disconfirming evidence. Although a growing number of interpretive syntheses are now being published, whether these should be termed 'systematic reviews' is an open question.

There are clear benefits to including different forms of evidence in reviews. For example, an interpretive synthesis undertaken for the NHS Service Delivery and Organisation research programme generated a theory about access to healthcare by potentially vulnerable groups that we believe to be useful, insightful and helpful to policy-makers. It is equally clear, however, that more needs to be done to ensure that suitable methods for synthesising qualitative and quantitative research are available.<sup>1</sup> Investment in methodological research, and accounts that offer reflections on attempts to produce syntheses of diverse evidence, are required.

<sup>1</sup> Dixon-Woods M, Agarwal S, Young B, Jones D, Sutton A. (2004) *Integrative approaches to qualitative and quantitative evidence*. London: Health Development Agency [www.publichealth.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=508055](http://www.publichealth.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=508055)

# Social Sciences Online: Past, Present and Future

By *Debra Hiom*

Eight years ago, staff working on the SOSIG (Social Science Information Gateway) service were asked to predict how IT might change the working practices of social scientists.<sup>1</sup> At that time, the internet was not yet widely used, but social scientists were quick to realise its potential, seeing it as both a research tool: enabling new research methods for data collection, analysis and dissemination; and a research topic: being a social phenomenon in itself, and an agent for political, economic and social change.

*The internet has become so embedded in everyday life for large parts of the population that it offers a valuable research medium for social scientists*

## Influence of internet

In June this year SOSIG ran a virtual event as part of ESRC Social Science Week<sup>2</sup> to specifically reconsider the question of how the internet has been changing social science information and research. We invited a number of social science practitioners to reflect on how the internet may have altered their own working practices and the impact that this has had on their research and/or teaching. These short articles were made available via a blog, a simple web technology (usually used as an online diary or journal), which gave readers the opportunity to read and post comments on the articles available. The articles and subsequent discussion highlighted just how much of an impact the

internet has had on social science learning and research in a relatively short time.

Indeed, the internet has become so embedded in everyday life for large parts of the population that it offers a valuable research medium for social scientists. Christine Hine's and Jacqui Taylor's papers describe their personal experiences of using the internet in their research and some of the pros and cons of internet-mediated research.

## Google generation

Academics now have to deal with the 'Google generation' of students who are already internet savvy when they arrive at university but at the same time lack information literacy skills. David Dolowitz argues in his article that the academic and information professions need to engage more fully with the e-learning process in order to be able to help guide their students to appropriate uses of the internet in their studies.

## New types of resources

In terms of information sources, we are now doing far more than recreating the past in electronic form; instead we are generating completely new types of resources (see Andy Ramsden's discussion on educational use of blogs and Andrew Ashwin's and Kieren Pitt's article on interactive learning resources). In addition, new ways of collaborating and sharing data are being used to support the research process, take a look at the e-Social Science papers from Borgman, Fraser and Procter.

These new forms of information don't necessarily make life easier (as Alistair Allan's paper on the problems of eGovernment

information points out) but it has opened up access to data at a speed and to an extent that most people hadn't envisaged. Melanie Wright and Robin Rice share their experiences of the changes of working with large-scale datasets and offer some thoughts on future trends. All of the articles mentioned above have been archived (along with any comments and discussion) and can be accessed from SOSIG at: [www.sosig.ac.uk/socsciweek/](http://www.sosig.ac.uk/socsciweek/).

## Current awareness

SOSIG has also recently introduced a current awareness facility using blog technology with subject experts working on SOSIG highlighting useful research resources behind the latest news stories. These seek to be inspired by topical events and to provide analysis rather than comment. In practice, this means pointing to press releases, government publications or research papers in full, rather than the editorialised versions that may have been in the press and putting these in a wider research context by linking to key sites where further research resources can be tracked down. During the general election, a dedicated section tracked news stories and useful election resources. This was cited as one of the 'five best election sites' and was used by the UK Web Archiving Consortium as a source for the archive. See [www.sosig.ac.uk/subject-news/](http://www.sosig.ac.uk/subject-news/).

<sup>1</sup> Ferguson, N, Hiom, D & Worsfold, E. (1997) *IT and the Social Sciences*, Information UK Outlooks, 30.

<sup>2</sup> ESRC Social Science Week [www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/events/Social\\_Science\\_Week](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/events/Social_Science_Week)

## Researchers and their 'subjects': Ethics, power, knowledge and consent

Marie Smyth and Emma Williamson (eds)  
2004, The Policy Press  
pbk 1 86134 514-3 £23.00  
hbk 1 86134 515-3 £50.00

*Reviewed by Carol Riddington*

This book began as a result of a seminar organised by the Academy of Learned Societies. Social science representatives from the SRA as well as the British Sociological Association and the Social Policy Association attended the event. The book's editors believed there was more to ethical matters in the social sciences than the issues discussed on the day. The contributors are all involved in various stages of action research, some within medical settings where their research required medical ethics committee approval.

The 11 chapters cover a wide range of social research settings and viewpoints (ranging from people with learning difficulties becoming involved in conducting research for themselves to researching the relationship between old age and death). It was interesting to read the arguments for training individuals who had learning disabilities or mental ill health and how they can contribute to a research study by providing invaluable insights into research questions and conducting interviews themselves. Similarly, it was helpful to understand the value research can bring to their lives, not only in providing a greater understanding of the ethical responsibilities when working in social research, but also the confidence such employment brings to them as individuals.

It was particularly enlightening to read the honest accounts of researchers' experiences with research and medical ethics committees and the need to ensure that social researchers and patients have a powerful voice when social research studies are being reviewed. Chapter 5 on research with psychiatric patients and chapter 11 on domestic violence and research ethics were especially interesting.

The chapter written by a freelance investigative journalist compared the professional ethics of journalism with those of a social researcher. She also discusses how a journalist's findings can be shared more widely (if seen as 'newsworthy') than the academic journals in which researchers often find their output.

The book's three sections: participation and inclusion; the review and governance process; and the researcher's relationship with participants each provide useful insights into the relationship between the researcher and the researched. It is a valuable contribution to the debate on ethical considerations and research governance and is likely to be invaluable to post-graduate students and social researchers who are involved in applied research settings and any researchers debating the role and remit of ethics committees. It could also be developed into a further seminar on ethical governance for the Academy of Learned Societies.

## Happy Families? Atypical work and its influence on family life

Ivana La Valle, Sue Arthur, Christine Millward, James Scott, Marion Clayden  
2002, The Policy Press

*Reviewed by Helen Harris,  
Dartington Social Research Unit*

*Happy Families?* is one of a series of publications from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation exploring the impact of work on family life and the response of policy and practice. Conducted by the National Centre for Social Research, this empirical study addresses the question of how many parents in the UK work atypical hours and explores the factors that influence parents to work these times.

The study used both a quantitative and qualitative approach and the methodology is well documented. Findings show that a substantial minority of employed parents work outside the normal 9am to 5pm day and that this impacts on their ability to participate in conventional family time such as evenings and weekends. Parents work atypical hours for a variety of reasons, including financial need, career ambition, avoidance of formal childcare and preference for balancing work and family. The study is based on the assumption that an alternative routine has a detrimental impact on children, and, although it does not provide evidence of this, other research has demonstrated a negative relationship between non-standard work schedules (specifically with mothers) and children's cognitive development (Han, 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The book is well structured with chapters addressing why parents work atypical times and the influence that family characteristics (e.g. children's age) may have on parental working patterns. Other chapters address how

parents divide their time and the influence that this has on different aspects of family life, for instance sharing evening meals and providing homework support. Parents also give their views of the kinds of policies that they think they need to support them.

The authors think that current policy does not support families adequately. The ability to negotiate flexible working patterns is largely dependent on an employee's position in the labour market and, unlike in other EU countries, parents in the UK are legally allowed to work more than the accepted 48 hours per week. Thus the issues raised in *Happy Families?* are relevant to policy makers, researchers and practitioners interested in family-friendly working.

<sup>1</sup>Han, W., (2005) *Maternal Nonstandard Work Schedules and Child Cognitive Outcomes*. *Child Development*, No 76, 137-154

## The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research: third edition



Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln (eds)  
2005, Sage Publications  
cloth 0-7619-2757-3 £85

*Reviewed by Dr Gary Jones,  
University of Winchester*

This is a weighty tome with 44 chapters covering past and present discourses in qualitative research. The structure of the book is sensible, dealing with the issues in a logical manner. This guides the reader through the qualitative research tradition and the research process in a natural manner.

The book has an adequate balance of theoretical and practical information, so there is something for everyone. The presentation of information and the user-friendliness of the book are its Achilles heel. At times, I would have liked more innovative ways of presenting the information and perhaps, the inclusion of worked examples and case studies to help bring the issues alive and to engage the reader more in the qualitative research journey. Still, this should not detract from the achievement of this book to bring together a wealth of interesting and useful information about qualitative research.

I would recommend this book to anyone with a keen interest in qualitative research methodology. However, I strongly suspect that it will only sit on the shelves of universities, as it costs £85.00. This is a shame educationally speaking, but I completely understand that many individuals and organisations will not want to pay the price for it. SAGE publications seem to be marketing

it as a 'designer label' book – but is it worth the price? In my opinion, it is not. For students and organisations with tight financial budgets, there are a number of 'high street' priced books that provide a cost-effective and valuable insight into qualitative research. One solution to this pricing issue might be for SAGE Publications to consider publishing it in softback as well as cloth.

## ITEMS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books or reports, simply write a short review of about 300 words. In exchange, you get to keep the item. Contact the SRA if you are interested. We also welcome unsolicited reviews of any other publications.

### Researching children's experience: approaches and methods

*Sheila Greene and Diane Hogan (Eds.), 2005*

### Interaction ritual: essays in face-to-face behaviour

*Erving Goffman with introduction by Joel Best, 2005*

### Using narrative in social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches

*Jane Elliot, 2005*

### Dictionary of statistics and methodology: a nontechnical guide for the social sciences (3rd edition)

*W. Paul Vogt, 2005*

### Conversation analysis and discourse analysis: a comparative and critical introduction

*Robin Wooffitt, 2005*

### Discovering statistics using SPSS (2nd edition)

*Andy Field, 2005*

### Families in society: boundaries and relationships

*Linda McKie and Sarah Cunningham-Burley (Eds.) 2005*



# Where to, Gov?

**Travel and transport policy, already a hot topic for public debate, is set to catch fire as it rises up the government's agenda.** There are key issues to be addressed as policy is formulated and monitored. For example, what are the public's attitudes to transport policies? How do they perceive the impact on the environment?

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Of course, our expertise isn't restricted to travel and transport. If you'd like to know more about our experience and capabilities, please contact us now or visit our website.



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