



## Applying the 'gold standard'?

*Ron Iphofen, AcSS, research consultant outlines the issues*

*'Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are expensive, difficult to organise, and...too "pure" in design for the murky waters of primary care. They cannot address complex, multidimensional questions or explore the lived experience of illness.'<sup>1</sup> If that is the case for primary health care, then imagine the difficulty of applying RCTs in the social world. Yet the SRA Ethics Forum has increasingly received requests to judge the viability of RCTs in sensitive applications and the associated ethical risks.*

Advocates of the RCT in the biomedical sciences see it as the 'ideal' form of experimental design primarily as the best way to test causality. Necessarily, it has its advocates in social research. Increasingly, government departments and commissioning agencies wishing to assess the effectiveness of policy and add to the 'evidence base' are considering testing social interventions using the RCT.

In its simplest form, it involves doing 'something' to one group of people (the experimental group) that is not done to a comparison group (the control group) and measuring and comparing the responses. It is 'refined' by 'blinding' the experimenters so that they don't know which group is receiving the effective intervention to prevent their interactions with the members of each group affecting the process. The subjects of the research may also be 'blinded' as to whether they are receiving the intervention or not. When both subjects and experimenters do not know who is receiving the intervention being tested we have a 'double blind'.

The classic RCT includes a 'placebo' or dummy intervention. In biomedical fields this is relatively easy to accomplish. If a new drug is being tested,

the experimental group can be given the drug while the control group is given a dummy pill (an inert substance) that looks just the same. It is much harder to find similarly 'inert' interventions in the social research field.

***Blinding, random allocation and the use of placebos are evidently methodologically and ethically problematic for social researchers***

Blinding raises the problem of not allowing 'fully informed consent', a key principle in ethical research. Moreover, it precludes a major asset in social research - the rapport generated between researcher and participant - which can both reassure and offer the potential for extra unanticipated insights. Indeed, consenting usually needs to be managed throughout the research process. That is harder with an RCT since neither researcher nor participant can possibly be fully informed until the experiment is over.

The notion of a successful outcome being 'merely' a placebo effect misses the vital point that, if the placebo

*As with all research methods, choice of design is always a compromise, and made for a balanced combination of ethical and methodological reasons*

does have an effect, this constitutes adequate evidence that, to varying degrees, the placebo 'works'. In other words 'something' is going on to create that effect.

This is often dismissed as being merely psychological - that is, the assumption on the part of the participants that they are being experimented on is what produces the successful outcome - belief affecting behaviour. So the placebo cannot be used as a 'control' if it is assumed it may or could have an effect, since it is not actually 'neutral'. In policy terms, if there is a placebo effect it would be useful to know the constituent causes of that effect since it could have its uses in policy and practice. But if the placebo is 'inert' we cannot know how it 'works'. And if it is truly socially 'inert' it is unlikely to be a 'realistic' alternative intervention.

Randomisation is assumed to have integrity (statistically at least) since it is the cornerstone of survey sampling. But the difference here is the introduction of an intervention with 'unknown' effects. By randomly allocating participants, the researcher may be depriving them of something of value, or subjecting them to actions that could have disadvantages. It requires a serious and thorough assessment of risk and inclusion/exclusion principles.

Necessarily, RCTs are confined to testing one group or category of people at a time. Hence, repeated trials are vital to the ability to generalise beyond the particular group being studied. This is a major limitation on the RCT for social purposes. It could take many trials before one could be convinced that a proposed intervention actually works - hardly something evidence-based policy makers would be willing to fund, or have the patience to wait for!

When opting for an RCT design, researchers and commissioners need to consider what precise question would actually be answered and whether the outcome could have some wider applicability or only a very specific targeted recommendation. Proposals would have to clarify how blinding will be done and demonstrate full control over participants, experimenters and the variables to be measured.

In responding to enquiries, the Ethics Forum has offered such words of warning. And none of this rules out the use of RCTs in social research. It suggests considerable extra caution. It is as well to remember that the RCT is only one of many forms of experimental design which are all subject to varying 'threats to validity'. As with all research methods, choice of design is always a compromise, and made for a balanced combination of ethical and methodological reasons.

1. Greenhalgh, T. et al. (2000). *Seeing what you want to see in randomised controlled trials*, *British Medical Journal*, 321: 1078-9

## See

Iphofen, R., Krayer, A. & Robinson, C. (eds.) (2009). *Reviewing and reading social care research: from ideas to findings (A training manual with support materials)*. Bangor University (ISBN 978-1-84220-120-6)

Torgerson, D.J. & Torgerson, C.J. (2008). *Designing randomised trials in health, education and the social sciences: an introduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

An excellent case study of the problems of conducting an RCT in social science is: Jane Kerr et al. (2010). *Assessing the feasibility of conducting a randomised control trial or other evaluation of the FOR...A Change programme*, Ministry of Justice Research Summary 17/10 ISBN 978 1 84099 406 3. See: [www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research.htm](http://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research.htm)

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# Raising the flag for social research

SRA chair, *Patten Smith*, outlines a new future for the SRA

2011 was a make or break year. Although we started the year financially sound, it soon became apparent that cuts in social research were severely affecting main income sources: training, advertising, events and membership. So, to keep the SRA going, we had to radically cut costs. This included July's difficult decision to make our staff team redundant. Other savings included reducing office space, and relying on volunteers.

I can now report that the worst is over. Thanks to our prompt action, the capable stewardship of treasurer, Graham Hughes, and the generous contributions by members to our development fund, we remained solvent. In September, most management and administrative activities transferred to board members and other member volunteers. In the autumn, we appointed Gabrielle Elward part-time to deal with membership administration. And, in January, Graham Farrant joined us as temporary, part-time, office manager. Both Grahams are streamlining and automating office functions, and, thanks to them, we continue to provide good and improving services to members and the wider social research community. A recent grant from the Nuffield Foundation means we are upgrading our website so it is more interactive, and also easier to update.

We have significantly improved our activities (only a few months into our new training and events programme, income from these has increased).

Simon Haslam, who recently took over managing our training programme, has already substantially improved its efficiency, working with Lindsay Adams (see page 4), and is developing a new governing vision. We ran a successful annual conference; a popular event on using social media in social research (see page 8), and have reinstated our much-missed evening seminar series (see page 14). Nicola Lloyd is now in charge of events, and, with her team, is planning more first-class events. She would welcome enthusiastic SRA members to join - do offer to help if you can (see page 14).

The improving health of the SRA is matched by improving circumstances for the applied social science sector. As articles about GSR, DCLG and HSE research show (see pages 11 and 12), after a period of non-commissioning and retrenchment, there is evidence of more research opportunities for SRA members and their organisations. There is potentially good news with a ground swell of support for establishing a government chief social scientist (see last issue's editorial).

The SRA was at the forefront of campaigning for this and eventually managed to get the Academy of Social Science to take it up. AcSS has been active on our behalf and its evidence to the recent House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's Inquiry into the Role of Departmental Scientific Advisers has borne fruit with the report recommending such a post be established.

However, it is still going to be tough. There is little evidence of a return to pre-2009 levels of commissioning. Despite an emphasis on more analysis of data sets and a greater emphasis on data transparency sets, there are also concerns about the implications of this for practice. There is much to be done!!

We have to improve the presentation of our policy and public affairs work. For too long we have worked behind the scenes. There is a considerable amount to press for whether continuing with our work on improving procurement practice; arguing for senior representation in government; protecting key data sets; and more. These are all issues for which Roger Jowell, an SRA founder, (see appreciation on page 10), so keenly advocated.

So now the SRA is back on track, we are determined to improve our public affairs work. If you want to join SRA's Public Affairs Forum, do get in touch - it goes live soon.

The SRA is now more volunteer-managed and we want to open it up to greater involvement from the wider membership. It's your SRA and as an association we need to work together to improve and develop.

I would like to end with a big thank you to board and other members whose enormous commitment has ensured that we will not merely continue to fly the flag for high quality social research but raise it ever higher.





## Introducing the new team at the SRA

The SRA office team, left to right: Gabrielle Elward, membership, advertising and general admin; Graham Hughes, treasurer; and Graham Farrant, general office manager and events support.

## A reminder of how to book

Details of our training programme are at: [www.the-sra.org.uk/training.htm](http://www.the-sra.org.uk/training.htm)  
Fees for a one-day workshop for SRA members are £195. Reduced fees are available for the unwaged.

## SRA training

*With interest in the SRA's training programme high, SRA trustee, Dr Simon Haslam, outlines some recent and proposed developments.*

The SRA training programme has always been popular. It combines a top drawer training faculty and excellent value for money resulting probably from the most competitive fees in the sector. Although we offer some specialist workshops at an 'advanced' level, the biggest call is for

*These courses are pitched at people either looking to develop insight into a technique or to build on their initial experience*

'foundation' level. These courses are pitched at people either looking to develop insight into a technique or to build on their initial experience in the area. For many, they help form the bridge into new roles, while for others, they are part of a considered post-graduate professional development programme. The evaluation of the workshop programme is strong. As well as seeking qualitative feedback from participants, we use various key metrics as part of the quality assurance process. For example, based on their experience in 2011, 96%

of participants rated the SRA programme as either good or excellent for course content, and 97% gave a similar rating to its value for money. Overall satisfaction currently rates 8.4 out of 10 across the programme.

### Linking to sector competencies

For 2012, we have been able to align the core of the foundation level training programme with the Government Social Research (GSR) social research competence framework. For the SRA, it is essential that what we offer meets the needs of the sector. Being in step with the sector's major employers on

development pathways and competence is clearly valuable.

The foundation training programme divides into three main areas. The first two cover what are considered core research approaches. We offer a suite of workshops on quantitative method and also on qualitative method. Each suite comprises workshops that also work on a standalone basis, meaning that people can sign up to cover specific areas if they wish. The third area within the foundation programme is 'related subjects'. These might be specific research contexts and methods

(for example cognitive interviewing) or other related skills areas (such as consultancy skills or project management).

Details are at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)

### New developments

Looking ahead, the SRA is keen to extend the its training programmes. We will run one-day workshops on systematic reviews, research with children and young people, research with people with disabilities, and research using social media. We are also introducing certificates of attendance for workshop participants who need to furnish evidence to support continuing professional development programmes and exploring eLearning material to support the workshops.

### The 'in-house' option

All of the SRA's open training programme is available on an 'in-house' basis, and many more besides. For organisations with more than seven participants interested in a certain subject, or organisations looking for a focused exploration of a subject purely for their own team, the in-house route applies. The SRA has several prominent clients which prefer this delivery format. Fees for in-house training start at a very competitive £1,500 per day which includes workshop preparation and materials, and trainer costs.

Contact the SRA on [admin@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:admin@the-sra.org.uk) for specific enquiries.

## Measuring equality

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) recently published guidance, 'Measuring equality: a guide for the collection and classification of ethnic group, national identity and religion data in the UK' [<http://bit.ly/HjC01b>]. It aims to help social researchers and others to collect (using different modes) and present ethnic group, national identity and religion data. Its content follows the development of the questions for the 2011 England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland censuses and the

*The guidance touches on the key legislation and aspects relating to ethnicity, national identity and religion and notes some of the complexities that need to be considered when collecting and classifying data in these areas*

recently published GSS primary and secondary harmonised standards. Using a harmonised approach across the data collection process will achieve consistent and comparable statistical outputs from different sources in the UK.

The guidance marks the end of the ethnicity, identity and religion harmonisation project set up to develop questions through a cross-government partnership. The project consulted and held workshops with key stakeholders between 2008 and 2010. These included the ONS; Scottish Government; National Records of Scotland; Welsh Government, Office of the First Minister/Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency; Equality and Human Rights Commission; Data Standards Working Group; other government departments; and academics.

The guidance touches on the key legislation and aspects relating to ethnicity, national identity and religion and notes some of the complexities that need to be considered when collecting and classifying data in these areas. It mainly focuses on providing advice and instruction on layout; and what to ask, how to ask and when to ask questions

and present data on social surveys in the UK, using the recommended questions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Harmonising questions across the UK is particularly challenging because of the different requirements of the constituent countries. These requirements have meant that there are some differences in the format of questions. For example, there are specific requirements for collecting data on religion in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is to gather data on which to measure or examine sectarianism, rather than looking at 'Christian' and 'non-Christian'. For 'ethnic group', in Northern Ireland 'Irish Traveller' is a main category separate from 'white'. This is because the Irish Traveller community is specifically identified in the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 as a racial group against which racial discrimination is unlawful. There are further differences which have implications for producing GB and UK outputs and the guidance highlights these.

The guidance will be useful for those collecting data on ethnicity, religion and national identity from social surveys.

**If you have any queries or wish to feedback on its content, contact Angela Potter-Collins at: [equalitiesandwellbeing@ons.gov.uk](mailto:equalitiesandwellbeing@ons.gov.uk)**

Angela Potter-Collins, ONS

## 5th ESRC Research

### Methods Festival: 2-5 July

**Venue: St Catherine's College, Oxford**

Bookings are now open for the biggest social science research methods event of the year. With over 60 sessions from introductory to advanced level, PhD student poster exhibition, inspiring keynote talks, and an exciting social programme for evenings, it will be an action-packed four days for social scientists, across a wide range of disciplines and sectors, and at different points in their careers.

The festival themes are:

- The interface between social and natural sciences
- Methodological innovations
- Mixed and multimodal methods
- Career and skills development
- Interventions and evaluations

Book by 16 April for early bird fees:

Students: £5 on Mon 2 July,  
£20 per day on 3-5 July  
Others: £12 on Mon 2 July,  
£25 per day on 3-5 July

**Information and booking:**  
<http://bit.ly/HjNameo>

## Keep up to date

Join the SRA and sign up for regular email bulletins at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)

# Putting social research in the spotlight

*Isabella Pereira, IPSOS Mori, describes the SRA conference held in December 2011*

The recent conference was all about celebrating and sharing the very best of current social research. Once again, members and delegates gathered at the British Library, and the conference drew together the UK's leading practitioners from a range of methodologies and approaches, both familiar and new. Jude England, the library's head of social sciences, opened the event, reminding us not only that many of the challenges that we face as a society are similar to those faced 30 years ago, but that research conducted in those times could still help inform our approach to our work today. As the day progressed, other contributors demonstrated that today's research thinking is as fresh and vital as ever.

The challenge of claiming causality was the focus of Professor Patrick Sturgis's (National Centre for Research Methods) discussion, asking us to consider ways in which researchers could go beyond

correlations and descriptive approaches to making causal inferences from data. He suggested that we could benefit from making the most of 'natural' experiments to approximate randomised controlled trials, and also from 'hugging an economist' to better understand their confidence in claiming causality. He thought there was an important role for qualitative research in helping us understand what is behind the causal inferences we might make.

Focusing solely on qualitative research, William O'Connor (NatCen) presented an optimistic picture. He reported that, despite the cuts, many projects were still standing, and that the growing fields of neuroscience, ethnography, gamification and online reporting were now presenting the most exciting opportunities for qualitative researchers. He thought that, although the 'old' tools, such as interviewing and discussion groups

*Inspiring, confident and engaging throughout, this year's conference drew together the best of the year.*

were still useful, today's toolkit was much bigger and bolder, and qualitative researchers now had many more choices when designing research.

Other speakers gave us a flavour of some of the most important emerging areas in current research. Darren Bhattachary (BMRB) gave us

a whistle-stop tour of the history and ideas behind behaviour change research. In his view, this was a world which was now moving from straightforward qualitative research towards experimental design and evaluations, and towards greater involvement for researchers in user-centred design. Lorraine Dearden (Institute for Fiscal Studies) also explained the pleasures and pains of evaluations, and described how IFS collected and used quantitative data to tease out the differences that a policy makes to the people it affects.

Throughout the day, delegates were treated to a choice of short presentations followed by questions from academics, agency and government researchers on issues as diverse as doing evaluations 'at breakneck speed'; how to create a mental health/wellbeing scale; and using longitudinal approaches to research vulnerable young people. Finally,

rounding off the day, Debrah Harding (MRS) and David Johnson (HM Treasury) told us what we needed to know about new directions in research commissioning.

**Put in the date in your diary for the 2012 conference which promises to be just as inspiring: 10 December (see page 14).**

## SRA Scotland

### Sophie Ellison and Alastair Bowden

It has been a busy few months for SRA Scotland. There have been some changes to the committee membership with Wayne Morris stepping down as treasurer. We would like to thank Wayne for all his great work over the past few years, and wish him all the best for the future. If you're interested in getting involved in the committee, please get in touch with us.

### Courses and events

Main activities have been:

- Delivery of one quantitative and eight qualitative modular courses between September 2011 and March 2012
- Delivery of our new two-day course, 'Quality in Social Research', in September 2011 and March 2012
- Attendance at careers events for Dundee University and University of West of Scotland

Our programme of training courses is now online for spring and summer 2012 - see below for dates.



## What's on in 2012?

We are keen to develop a range of learning and networking opportunities, which meet the needs of our members. We are currently planning our seminar series for the year, to include events on social media in social research, and social return on investment (SROI). If you have any suggestions, would like to volunteer to deliver a seminar, or would like to attend one, we'd love to hear from you.

**The SRA Scotland committee looks forward to welcoming you at future events. For more information contact:**  
**Lindsay Adams** ([lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk))  
**Alastair Bowden** ([Alastair.bowden@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Alastair.bowden@scotland.gsi.gov.uk))  
**Sophie Ellison** ([sophie.ellison@gmail.com](mailto:sophie.ellison@gmail.com))  
**Or visit:** [www.the-sra.org.uk/sra\\_scotland.htm](http://www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_scotland.htm)

## Diary dates

- 23 April:** Mastering the art of questionnaire design
- 24 April:** Implementing your survey effectively
- 25 April:** Getting to grips with sampling
- 26 April:** Understanding the basics of statistical analysis
- 9 May:** Designing a qualitative study
- 10 May:** The art of qualitative interviewing
- 11 May:** Running effective focus groups
- 14 May:** Introduction to qualitative data analysis
- 15 May:** Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings

## SRA Cymru

### Jennifer Evans

SRA Cymru has had a successful revival in 2012! We have updated our contact lists, re-established very strong and useful links with the SRA board in London, and have an incredibly popular evening seminar series on our hands.

Launching with a session on mixed methods from Wavehill in January, news of our re-emergence spread. An oversubscribed event on social media use in Wales took place in February, which presented independent work undertaken by Beaufort Research. Cardiff University has also presented as part of the series.

Future sessions include an event on May 24 to be run by Welsh Government colleagues on the Magenta Book and we also have a June seminar in the pipeline exploring the Welsh Government's work on data linking.

A new element to our series is the post-event social, which provides a more relaxed networking opportunity and is proving extremely popular. We hope our members will continue to find both the formal discussions thought provoking and the informal networking valuable, and we would like to thank everyone who has come along and helped make them such a success. In particular, we are grateful to our Welsh Government members who provide a venue free of charge.

With such a great focus on research community in SRA Cymru, the organising committee has been considering ways to make effective use of social media tools. Keep your eyes peeled for potential LinkedIn groups, Twitter accounts and possibly even a blog. There are some keen social media users in Wales, and we will surely be making our mark before the year is out.

**More information on SRA Cymru:**  
[evansjr5@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:evansjr5@cardiff.ac.uk) and [richard.self@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:richard.self@wales.gsi.gov.uk)

## SRA Ireland

### David Silke

In March, SRA Ireland held its first seminar of the year on the topic 'New ways of gathering evidence'. There were three presentations:

- 'Clarifying differences between different designs and methods of systematic review', given by Professor David Gough, professor of evidence informed policy and practice and director of the Social Science Research Unit and its EPPS-Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London
- 'Consultation: a double-edged sword', given by Dr Kathy Walsh, an independent researcher with many years of experience designing and implementing consultations with and for different stakeholder groups
- 'Online research: the truth and myths', given by Jonny Caldwell, director of strategy and knowledge with Research Now, an independent research company with over six million panel members worldwide

The seminar took place in Trinity College, Dublin, with about 25 people, from statutory and voluntary bodies, research companies, independent researchers and students, attending.

We are now planning our next event, hopefully to take place in May, and would welcome any suggestions about possible topics. Also, if you would like to help organise an event, or have any ideas about how SRA Ireland can better serve the research community, we would be very grateful to hear from you.

**You can contact us at [sra.ireland@gmail.com](mailto:sra.ireland@gmail.com)**



# Social media in social research

*The 2nd SRA 'Social Media in Social Research' conference gave the capacity audience insight into a range of methodological approaches and experiences in this emerging field of research. Building on last year's inaugural event, the conference showcased some of the UK's most interesting work in this area. Conference chair and SRA trustee, Dr Simon Haslam, reports.*

## The presentations in a nutshell

George MacKerron spoke about his 'mappiness' project, which assimilates geo-located happiness data from over 48,000 UK citizens via smartphones. Professor Rob Proctor outlined his work, supported by the Guardian newspaper, into information flows around last summer's riots via Twitter. Michael Richardson explained his research into threatening behaviour and online social media and introduced us to the concept of 'digital citizenship'. Kate Bloor gave a pragmatic account of using social media in her research into Lyme patients' experience of health care. Dr Helene Snee used her research on the blogs of gap-year students to help the audience explore some of the ethical issues around social media in this context, using the term 'moderate disguise' to describe her stance as an investigator on this project. Jamie Bartlett from Demos described a pan-Europe project which surveyed far-right political groups via Facebook and engaged with over 13,000 participants in a project which was completed in under four months.

The conference also included a presentation of the second SRA annual survey of social media use in the

social research sector. In this survey, 120 social researchers in practitioner, academic, policy and commissioning roles reported their use and views of social media. The full dataset is available on the SRA website but the main points from the survey data are:

- The majority (82%) of social researchers who responded had some experience of social media in their personal and/or work lives
- Only 15% of respondents had used social media in a social research project
- 89% of these said that their use of social media was integrated with other, more traditional, research methods
- Half of these might be described as 'power users', having employed social media in social research on more than one occasion whereas the other half reported a single experience of social media in this research context

The types of uses could be grouped into three categories: using social media to facilitate access to research stakeholders (to recruit participants or disseminate findings); using social media as a data

generation/data gathering tool (some projects generated original data via social media whereas others were based on the analysis of extant social media data); and experimental work based on the deliberate trial of social media approaches with the primary objective of methodological insight.

Both the survey and the conference raised a number of issues regarding the use of social media in social research.

## Web 2.0

There is an inevitable blurring or even confusion between social media and broader Web 2.0 enabled methods such as online surveys. This is perhaps natural as social media is a relatively recent phenomenon within the Web 2.0 family in research. Whether we will be treating social media as a distinct area of research interest in five years' time (rather than looking more widely at Web 2.0 as a whole or more narrowly at specific social media channels such as Twitter), remains to be seen.

## Confidentiality and ethics

Much of the conference discussion centred on rights to data access and use. There are various factors. One is the degree to which someone posting on a social medium understands that their post has an enduring quality, unlike the content of, for example, a phone call. Related to this, is the ethics of being able to use data in a way that those generating it did not see as possible, for example, creating macro insight from assimilating many individual opinions expressed using social media. Another is the degree to which someone using social media realises their communication may be readily seen by an audience beyond that originally intended. Related to this, is the access that social media often provide to



information about those posting which extends beyond the subject/content of the post - the avenues social media can provide into people's private lives. A further consideration is the perspective the researcher thinks they should adopt when considering social media content. For example, should they view those posting opinions as authors (who might intend a wide readership but own the copyright)? Related to this, is the degree of transparency the researcher declares about themselves and their intentions during a research enterprise involving social media, which takes us back to the term 'moderate disguise'. Finally, there was the view that much needs to be done to develop guidance for researchers. One area of agreement was that the ethical codes which cover traditional research approaches are unlikely to be directly transferrable to research involving social media. There was also concern that the research community might be detrimentally more constrained than those in other investigative endeavours such as journalism or computer science/data mining.

### Data quality

This was the other main issue raised. The remoteness of social media can make it more difficult for researchers to verify and authenticate data quality. Factors such as false identities, hijacked identities (such as frapping on Facebook) and troll behaviour further complicate the social researchers' lot. There were also concerns about the degree to which a response generated via social media can be seen as representative of a wider community, with aspects like digital inclusion as an enabler, and the motivations behind a person's voluntary participation in social media having a bearing on the end result. Some respondents thought social media have more to offer in the area of consultation than in robust

research but the prevailing sentiment was that, like any other research approach, social media present various challenges to be understood and managed in their prudent application. And, as the research community's experience of this grows, the ability to address these will also grow.

### Next steps

There is little doubt that social media are establishing themselves as contributors to valuable insight. This year's survey showed a broader range of methods and approaches in the use of social media in social research compared to last year's baseline study. The conference included some excellent examples of work that would have perhaps been unfindable and/or impractical by any other known approach. If the findings of this year's survey are to be believed, the appetite for extending the use of social media in research projects is strong, with 26% of respondents stating they were going to use such methods in the future (only one respondent fell into the 'once bitten, twice shy' category). The appetite appeared strongest in researchers in a community/voluntary sector context.

The SRA will stage the third Social Media in Social Research conference in spring 2013. It will be interesting to see how far practice has evolved from the discussion at the conference and the findings of next year's survey.

The SRA also recommends that researchers interested in this area engage with the social media network that NatCen Social Research is developing with Sage (the publishers) and Oxford University. Carli Lessoff from NatCen Social Research promoted this opportunity to the conference and the contact information is across. Probably, the final area of work rests with the SRA and other industry bodies to help develop ethical guidance

in what is an intriguing array of ingredients and considerations.

Thanks, as always, to the sponsors for supporting this conference - data specialists, Gide, and the Nuffield Foundation.

## Blurring the boundaries: new social media, new social science?

Should social science researchers embrace social media and, if we do, what will that mean for our methods and practice? A team led by NatCen Social Research, Sage and the Oxford Internet Institute has been awarded a grant from the NCRM to explore these questions and examine the impact of social media on social science research. Our network of methodological innovation will bring together academics, researchers and research stakeholders. It will be drawn from an international audience and include cutting-edge thinkers from academia, market research and applied social research. The network is free to join, will run for 12 months from May 2012, and is open to anyone with an interest in how social media are affecting what we research, how we research and who we involve with it. Using a combination of collaborative online platforms, social media and face-to-face events, participants will come together to shape the agenda for the network and explore methodological issues.

**If you would like to join the network, please email Kandy Woodfield ([kandy.woodfield@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:kandy.woodfield@natcen.ac.uk)) with your contact details.**



# Appreciation

*Professor Sir Roger Jowell CBE, AcSS: an appreciation*

By *Ceridwen Roberts, AcSS*

On 25 December the world of social research lost a key pioneer with the death of Roger Jowell whose contribution to the profession and status of social science research in the UK was immense.

Arriving in the UK from South Africa in 1964, he joined RSL and was mentored by Mark Abrams. Beginning his career in market research, he quickly found that his interests lay in social and political research, and in 1969 he left RSL to co-found Social and Community Planning Research (which became the National Centre for Social Research in 1999) with Gerald Hoinville.

This charitable organisation specialised in high quality research based on random sample surveys and, within a fairly short time, became a major player in British applied social science. SCPR grew throughout the 70s and 80s developing a field-force, a highly respected Qualitative Research Unit and a Survey Methods Centre and an enviable reputation. By the time Roger stepped down from NatCen in 2001, it had 350 permanent staff and 1,200 interviewers. And, as many social researchers had passed through its doors over this period, Roger's influence on generations of good social researchers was very far reaching.

Throughout his life he was active in the wider aspects of promoting quality and high standards. He was also a key figure involved with other social researchers in establishing the SRA in 1978, and gave it his continued support until his death. In the 1980s, he became involved in the International Statistical Institute's work on its professional code of ethics, leading the team which developed the first 'educative' rather than prescriptive code. He initiated the SRA's early work on developing the ethical guidelines for social research which have been so influential in British social science more generally. Roger kept a lifelong interest in ethical work, and was a member of the SRA's virtual Ethics Forum, happy to advise on members' ethical dilemmas.

His sense of the importance of improving quality underlay his interest in improving research commissioning. He worked on the first SRA good practice guidelines, 'Commissioning social research', published in the 1990s and which set out clearly

the principles of effective commissioning. It was typical of his even-handed approach that this guide was equally concerned to develop principles of commissioning both fair to providers of social research and effective in delivering quality research for commissioners. Roger's interest in this continued and he made trenchant criticisms of some of the worst effects of some badly conceived framework agreements when helping the SRA produce its recommendations for effective procurement of social research in 2011.

Among his outstanding achievements are three landmark studies in social research which epitomised Roger's ability to work creatively with some of the best academic social scientists in the UK and elsewhere. 'How Britain Votes' written with Anthony Heath and John Curtice became a controversial classic study showing a new view of the class basis of British voting. But among social researchers, perhaps Roger is best known for the British Attitudes Survey series which he and colleagues at SCPR started in 1982. Roger edited 19 annual volumes and established a series which has been a major influence on public policy. His final key academic achievement was to take forward his work of the 80s and 90s at NatCen in running the International Social Survey programme by co-founding, in 2001, the European Social Survey, a 34-nation comparative study of changing social values throughout Europe. This is one of the most widely used surveys in Europe, setting the highest survey standards, and was the first social science project to be awarded the prestigious European Descartes Prize in 2005.

Roger became a research professor at City University in 2003 where he set up the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys. He held many posts on committees throughout his working life including, most recently, deputy chair of the UK Statistics Authority, and continued to write and lecture widely on substantive and methodological issues in social research.

Roger combined a passion for quality social science with a keen concern that social science should be useful to policymakers and practitioners. And his influence on several generations of social researchers in the UK and Europe, and on the development of the social survey as a vehicle of enquiry contributing to better evidenced policy making, has been profound. For many of us, he embodied all that was best about being a social researcher, as well as being a compassionate and humane person. He was widely respected and deeply loved and will be very sorely missed by his professional friends and colleagues. All our sympathy goes to his family and many friends.

**There will be a memorial service in June in London. All SRA members are welcome. Watch the website and SRA newsletters for further details.**

# Social research in the Health and Safety Executive

By **Beverley Bishop**, chief social researcher, Health and Safety Executive

Social research is not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Indeed, the bulk of our £30million annual science budget is spent on 'hard' science, which can include anything from support for accident investigations to understanding the health and safety implications of nanotechnology.

However, as most accidents and work-related ill-health are related to human behaviour, understanding human behaviour and how it can be changed to protect the workforce, is vital to HSE's effectiveness.

The work of the HSE Behavioural and Social Science Unit is immensely varied with recent projects including:

- Segmenting duty-holders by attitudes to workplace safety, in order to communicate with them better
- Evaluating the impact of the agricultural safety 'make the promise' campaign

- Exploring compliance with the law, using innovative techniques to overcome social desirability bias

Ideally, social researchers take part all through the HSE policy cycle, from design to evaluation. For example, the 'leadership and worker involvement' team designed an intervention to provide workplace training in health and safety to worker representatives, who would then advocate for good practice respectively. In preparation, BSSU explored whether the intervention's assumptions were justified. In-house quantitative work strengthened the evidence base that high levels of worker involvement in health and safety encouraged good outcomes, rather than just being correlated (that is, good employers tend to have both!). Although HSE was providing the training, there are costs to employers and employees in taking time off to attend, so we conducted qualitative research with both to see what would make them 'buy in' to the initiative,

and how employees could be encouraged to use their training in the workplace. This led to good sign-up, and early outcomes are encouraging. The BSSU's early involvement also made it possible to obtain good baseline data, so that we can measure subsequent changes in attitudes and behaviour.

We have tried to add value to improve our internal functioning. For example, we have worked with economist and statistician colleagues on a joint project to produce bespoke analysis for HSE from the 'people survey', the civil service employee engagement survey.

Like most government departments in challenging economic times, grant aid to the HSE has reduced. This makes it even more important that policy and operations have the best possible evidence to ensure that resources are not wasted. A recent and welcome development has been the merger of BSSU with the Economic Analysis Unit, which has facilitated social researchers' input into impact assessments, testing whether the assumptions that go into them are grounded in people's actual attitudes and behaviour.

BSSU has also considered how we can make best use of our own resources and existing evidence. Fortunately, HSE has its own research function at the Health and Safety Laboratories where a team of researchers conducts social research

projects to support HSE, so we can still commission cost-effective research. There are other areas which would be best practice at any time, but in austere times, we think they are even more important:

- Being more strategic in the research we commission - prioritising research where the evidence is most likely to have an impact on policy
- Working with and through stakeholders, for example, using the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC) to collect evidence on electricians' understanding of the 'duty to manage asbestos'
- Using existing datasets and administrative data through 'in-house' secondary analysis of data, and working with universities and others to enable them to conduct useful analysis
- Using existing evidence by disseminating research more widely and assessing existing knowledge before commencing more research - this may mean advising that research should not go ahead
- Conducting more research in-house, such as interviewing outreach workers to inform how HSE works with migrant workers

**For further information about social research at HSE, contact Bev Bishop: [beverley.bishop@hse.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:beverley.bishop@hse.gsi.gov.uk)**



# Government Social Research: reaching across and beyond government

*Joint heads of the Government Social Research service (GSR), [Jenny Dibden](#) and [Richard Bartholomew](#), discuss how the profession is working with other government analysts and reaching out to the wider analytical community.*

GSR's one thousand members make the civil service possibly the largest single employer of social researchers in the country. GSR, in turn, represents a significant part of the social science community in government, and is known for setting standards for the recruitment and professional development of social researchers.

Its purpose is summed up in its long-established strapline: social science in government. It provides objective, reliable, relevant and timely social research to support policy development and evaluation, and to ensure policy debate is informed by research evidence and thinking from the social sciences.

Recently, we have added significant cross-departmental and cross-sector responsibilities to this traditional role. This is because we believe that for GSR and other government analytical services to influence policy, they must work together. And, that GSR's credibility is helped by working with the key players in the top social research organisations in the academic, research and business sectors.

One way in which we make cross-analytical working happen is through GSR's major role in the groups which coordinate the work of the five analytical disciplines in government (statistics, operational research, social research, science and engineering, and economics).

These groups are:

- Heads of analysis
- Analytical coordination working group
- Departmental directors of analysis network

Each has a distinct role and complements and supports the work of the others. All aim to ensure evidence is central to government decision-making.

The 'heads of analysis' group gives leadership to all analysts in government and is the ultimate destination for oversight and sign-off of all cross-disciplinary, cross-government issues. The analytical coordination working group coordinates the work of the five teams that provide professional support to the five analytical professions. Finally, the departmental directors of analysis network has a departmental, rather than discipline-specific, focus which it brings to key challenges facing government.

Through these groups, GSR aims to facilitate engagement between researchers and government; to encourage closer working; and to develop cross-cutting issues, across departments and disciplines.

We are giving priority to establishing networks, sharing information and helping academics demonstrate impact. The GSR external liaison group is one such network. This comprises leaders from some of GSR's most

important external stakeholders such as the SRA, the British Academy, the Academy of Social Sciences, the ESRC, and the leading independent research institutes and social and market research agencies.

The GSR external liaison group supports a catalogue of research interests on the ESRC website. The website's remit is to facilitate communication but, in contrast to showpiece events, it also guides and informs the detailed day-to-day leg-work across government and research communities that is necessary for building the relationships from which success stems. The group will also be a useful forum for developing how social scientists can get the most out of the new REF 'impact' criterion and what government analysts can do help them. We want to help the research community secure impact from existing findings and evidence and address the main questions and issues that arise when developing research proposals.

GSR is represented on the new SRA research commissioning group, whose objective is to work to improve the practice of research commissioning and procurement in order to improve the quality of social research being carried out.

As joint heads of GSR, we are determined to do our best to ensure government analytical services are effectively coordinated and networked. In doing so, we aim to encourage relevant and impactful work.

## Useful links

**House of Lords science and technology committee:**

<http://bit.ly/HorUge>

**House of Commons select committee enquiry into the Census and social science:** <http://bit.ly/Hqtcnh>

**GSR pages on the civil service website:** <http://bit.ly/HqtfzB>

**Contacts in government social research on the ESRC:**

<http://bit.ly/HhnNn4>

# The role of social research in the Department for Communities and Local Government

By **Lan-Ho Man**, senior research officer, Strategic Analysis Team, Department for Communities and Local Government

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is a ministerial department with a wide remit. It promotes the idea of the Big Society through its work with local government and communities and has five key aims, which are to:

- Decentralise power to the local level
- Meet people's housing aspirations
- Put communities in charge of planning
- Increase accountability and
- Let people see how their money is being spent

It's responsibilities include work with communities and neighbourhoods and local authorities to promote regeneration and deal with issues such as housing, planning, building and the environment. It is also responsible for supporting Fire and Rescue Services to promote fire safety and local and national resilience.

The department is supported in achieving its aims by staff from a variety of disciplines, of which social research is one. There are 35 social researchers and they are an important part of the policy development process and work of the department as a whole. Their influence spans the whole department and each policy area has one or more embedded researchers.

The research they carry out covers a wide range of topics and subjects and has to meet the differing business needs across DCLG. This means that there are a variety of ways in which it is commissioned. For example, Sustainable Buildings, which is a highly specialised area, own their framework agreements which they use to procure much of their research. The remaining business areas tend to procure research through a competitive tendering process. A Research Gateway, chaired by the director of analysis and innovation, approves any research estimated to cost above £50,000 to ensure that the project scope and methodology will deliver research which adds value to the department.

Some recent examples of research projects that have been commissioned to support policy development relate to three areas: housing, the riots and regeneration. A brief description of the projects is included below:

- Gathering evidence from local housing authorities which are developing innovative approaches to promoting moves amongst social sector tenants and testing a payment by results model. This includes an assessment of the costs, benefits and lessons from 12 housing mobility demonstration projects
- A project to better understand service provision with the types of offenders involved with the riots, the developmental pathways of offenders, and the risks and opportunities of deprived communities at risk of future riots. This includes a rapid evidence assessment

of different approaches to offender management, qualitative and quantitative research focussing on offenders and those at risk of offending as well as local communities around England

- Work to inform developing departmental recommendations to local authorities, landlords, owner occupiers and representative organisations to support viable parades to thrive. This includes gathering evidence through case studies and analysing national data to provide evidence about the performance of and issues faced by parades of shops

Jane Todorovic, a deputy director in Local Government Finance, became head of profession for social research last year. She says since she has taken on the role she has gained a greater understanding of the range and types of work that researchers are doing across the department as well as the skills they have.

Recent changes have led to a focus on internal analysis to support policy objectives, much closer working with policy colleagues and an increase in the skills of social researchers. Jane sees these as positive developments but is keen that social researchers in the department continue to develop links with key academics and the wider social research community and keep up to date with the latest developments in research.

This is because she sees the future role of social researchers as becoming in charge of their areas of expertise, to work with academics and act as a conduit between the department and the wider research community. She believes strongly that the evidence they provide continues to remain relevant for and has an impact on the work of the department as a whole.

**More information about DCLG research and publications:**  
<http://bit.ly/HoshYa> and <http://bit.ly/HqtECO>

## SRA events

*There is a great line-up of events from the SRA. Book the dates in your diary and keep up with the latest at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)*

### SRA summer event:

**21 June, LGA House, London**

This half-day event will focus on 'localism' with speakers discussing what the latest research has to say about its development through public services and the implications of this for how we do social research. A drinks reception will follow the event to give plenty of time for informal networking. Do let us know if you have any suggestions for potential sessions or anyone you've seen speak or write on the subject who deserves an airing! We'll have the final programme ready in May. **More info from:** [graham.farrant@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:graham.farrant@the-sra.org.uk)

### Cathie Marsh Lecture:

**13 November, RSS, London**

The Royal Statistical Society is planning the programme for this year's joint event which will be on aspects of transparency. With last years' event standing room only, be ready to book your free place

early! Look out for details on the SRA website and bulletins.

### SRA annual conference:

**10 December, British Library, London**

This will follow the same format as last year's popular event, with many consecutive sessions for SRA members and other researchers to present their best research from the previous year. Watch this space for the call for papers and further details. In the meantime, get thinking on how you could use this opportunity to let others know about your work and gain informal feedback. You can be sure of an attentive audience!

### Evening seminars in London

Since the autumn, the SRA has been running monthly evening seminars in London hosted at the DFE. The seminars are intended to allow social researchers to hear about new developments in social research such as new studies and recent findings and to discuss methodological or research and policy issues in the relaxed setting of an informal seminar. They are also good opportunities for social researchers across all sectors to meet one another and network.

So far, we have heard about the

Longitudinal Study of Young People in England from Nick Howat, head of social and political attitudes, TNS-BMRB, who offered a fascinating account of the methods employed in this important and large-scale survey of young people's transition from school. In November, Dr Gemma Harper and Dr Simon Maxwell of DEFRA discussed how to understand and measure the social impact of policy and their effects on wellbeing, making SRA members think about how to make their work have greater impact. In January, Stephen Webster, who leads the Crime and Justice Team at NatCen, discussed the European Online Grooming Project. This lively presentation, with some graphic material, challenged many widespread assumptions, with powerful evidence showing how useful social science inquiry can be in revealing hidden realities. Professor Steven Barnett of Westminster University presented his audience with information about public attitudes to the media in March and looked at how to tease out complex views from survey question. The seminar participants, who clearly enjoyed this interactive approach, gave him lots of advice.

Do come along to these lively free seminars. The next meeting is on 26

April when David Fell and Ruth Townend of Brook Lyndhurst talk on 'Lies, damned lies and food behaviours'. This seminar will hear reflections from Brook Lyndhurst on the series of mixed-method studies which they have used to investigate some of the hard-to-reach aspects of the UK's food culture methods and how findings have influenced policy.

If you would like to offer a presentation we would love to hear from you. Do contact the SRA office and watch out on the website and in SRA newsletters for details of future events.

### New members needed

The SRA Events Group always welcomes new members. We share the joys of thinking through new ideas for events, planning programmes and seeking speakers. We usually meet every couple of months and keep in contact by email in between. The role is stimulating and not too demanding as we share it between us and the SRA office. Please contact Graham Farrant [graham.farrant@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:graham.farrant@the-sra.org.uk) if you are interested. We are especially keen for members from the academic and independent sectors to join us in order to widen the group's experience.



## The Sage Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences



Editors: Ian C Jarvie and Jesus Zamora-Bonilla, Sage, 2011

Reviewed by *Lorraine Simpson*, consultant, Blake Stevenson Ltd

At 772 pages, this handbook is a weighty tome to carry about and more suited to library study or use as a heavy weapon than a read on the bus home. However, a quick glance at the contents page explains the size: over four parts (37 chapters), the reader is promised coverage of the development and history of social sciences, as well as paradigms, assessment and use of social theories. I'm sure many readers will approach the book with curiosity, eager to see how the issues raised chime with their own experiences and thoughts on social sciences in a 21st century context.

Unfortunately, the contents page is the only straightforward section in the first half of the book and it took me three attempts at the introductory chapter before I could steel myself to read on. The problem? Substance over style. While the content is undoubtedly rich, informative and rewarding, the writing left me cold. Despite the fact that each of the chapters is written by a different

academic(s) - 48 authors in total contributed to the book - there appears to be a consistency in approach in many sections; an elaborate, rambling and obtuse use of language which left me frustrated. Simple and interesting ideas are often buried within unnecessarily complicated sentences. One can only assume that the authors envisage this handbook to be used as an academic reference book, which readers will dip in and out of, rather than a text that is designed to be read from start to finish.

Style issues aside, the book has many strengths, and the writing is far clearer in some of the later chapters. I applaud the authors who made the section on game theory interesting and easy to follow. There are also some gems - the debates on the strengths and weaknesses of social sciences are particularly interesting, and the chapter on institutions is rewarding. Throughout, there are references to key thinkers and theories which provide a helpful refresher on social science history. In addition, the section summaries are clear and the notes and reference sections at the end of each chapter are useful.

In summary, this is an extremely interesting book although large sections are written in an obtuse style. Not recommended for the casual browser but a valuable reference book for anyone studying the history or philosophy of social sciences.

## An Introduction to Social Entrepreneurship: voices, preconditions, contexts

Rafael Ziegler (ed.) Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009

Reviewed by *Nick Axford*, senior researcher, The Social Research Unit, Dartington UK

'Social entrepreneurship has become a source of hope, but we are like water-tap users who know little about the origin of the source.' So starts this self-proclaimed 'anthology', which then sets out to promote such knowledge.

Ziegler, suggests that social entrepreneurship is about developing innovative solutions to pressing social problems. It usually involves ambitious and persistent people who seek wide-scale systemic change, without relying on government or business to realise their ideas.

In recent years, some social entrepreneurs have become well known. But how has this happened, and to what impact? The book explores such questions, with contributions by academics and social entrepreneurs.

The latter, representing social and environmental projects in western and eastern Europe, describe their initiatives. Close collaboration with universities or

research institutes is a recurring theme.

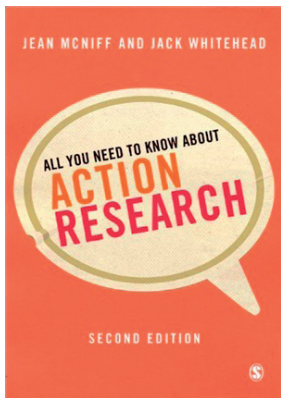
Some academics offer an historical perspective. There is discussion of the contribution to social entrepreneurship of the 20th century economist, Joseph Schumpeter, and case studies of characters including the British industrialist, Robert Owen, and American tycoon-philanthropist, Henry Ford. These are informative, demonstrating that 'a mere attributing of "ethical" motives and justifications to these past actors conceals the variety of religious, utilitarian, authoritarian and communitarian motives and values that inspired these actors'.

Other chapters examine social entrepreneurship in developed and developing countries. These highlight its contribution to the Millennium development goals, and how in the UK, its inspiration in neo-liberal Thatcherite ideas belies its current practice, which is small-scale and communitarian. A perennial challenge is measuring 'success', which extends beyond growing an organisation to achieving social goals.

This is very much a text aimed at academics and students, reflected in its somewhat dense and dry form. It is not, and nor does it claim to be, a guide to becoming a social entrepreneur. It does, however, go a long way towards reconnecting readers with the intellectual and ideological sources of social entrepreneurship.

## All you need to know about action research 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead  
Sage, 2011



Reviewed by **Annika Coughlin**, research assistant, Faculty of Education, Sport and Tourism, University of Bedfordshire

This book is written with the underlying philosophy that knowledge is power - that practitioners have something important to say; can create their own theories about their daily lives; and can influence policy. The aim of the book is to 'help you take your rightful place as a publicly acknowledged competent professional and as a brilliant knower' (p.2).

A critique of a previous book of McNiff and Whitehead was that they did not

provide a context for their particular type of action research so a reader would be unaware of any other action research perspectives (Ennals 2009). However, in the first chapter, McNiff and Whitehead explain the history of action research and its different forms; who the founders of each type are; and where they fit in to the developments. So, the reader does get a sense of other forms out there and can investigate further via the references. It is not the intention of the book to offer an overview of all the different types of action research internationally and historically, but rather how to go about doing action research as an individual who wants to improve their practice from their stance of educational action research. And this, they do very well.

The book is organised in seven parts taking the reader from a definition of action research, its history and theoretical underpinnings, through to why researching your own practice is important to how to plan and carry out your project, how to test the validity of your claims, how to present your research, how to disseminate and finally how to influence policy with the research findings.

The writing style is simple and easy to read, but not simplistic. It covers all the important aspects of research to ensure quality, for example, validity, triangulation, ethics, development of

conceptual frameworks, analysis and so on but with examples which mean you really grasp and understand deeper methodological issues and the politics of knowledge.

There are many examples of real-life projects as well as references to online resources and annotated bibliographies for further reading. Of particular interest to me were the examples of a successful abstract sent to a conference, PhD proposals, students' dissertation structures, a validation meeting, an ethics statement and a consent form. So, it helps to demystify academic and research practices.

I would recommend this book to students, practitioner-researchers who may be novice or experienced researchers as well as to staff who have to undertake an action research project as part of their higher education teaching qualification and may not come from a social science background. It is an enjoyable read as well as a practical guide, so I would also recommend it to those who want to add to their general knowledge of research methodologies.

### References

Ennals, R. (2009). 'Book Review, Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead: doing and writing action research, ISBN 978-1-84787-175-6, 202 pp Sage: London 2009' *AI & Society*, Vol. 24 No. 4 pp. 415-416

## The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods

Eds: Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels  
Sage, 2011



Reviewed by **Sukey Tarr**, teaching fellow, Department of Social Work, Royal Holloway, University of London (and part-time PhD student at University of Sheffield)

As a reasonably seasoned qualitative researcher, I was very interested in using visual research methods for a current social research study but was rather a novice to the field. I thought this book would inspire me with a range of options providing sufficient detail and insight, enabling me to take forward practical ideas with confidence. When I received it, my initial impression was feeling aghast at the size and weight of it and somewhat overwhelmed by the 37 chapters listed. It is meaty!

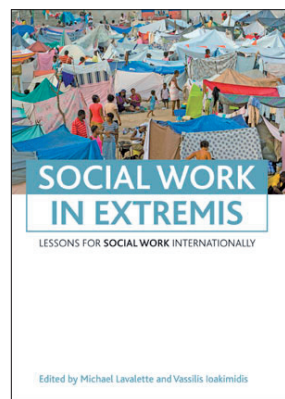
The book is intended for people like me (new to the field) as well as more experienced visual researchers from the widest range of disciplines. It aims to provide examples from practice of interest to those designing visual research projects. Described as a guide or a handbook, it also hopes to serve as a snapshot of the current state of visual research across the social research empire.

I found it a dense and somewhat inaccessible read, not ideal if you are hoping that a particular method might catch your eye and suit your study. The layout was unappealing and with two reference book-like columns on each page. A good deal of background is provided on each subject area by the chapter authors, useful for those wishing to understand the roots and development of the methods being explored. Many examples from studies should bring to life these innovative and rather fascinating methods, however I did not feel inspired and filled with enthusiasm but rather weighed down by what is an academic and technically written book.

I would suggest that those looking for ideas only steer clear. This book is better suited to those with a good level of experience in visual research methods who want to explore their genre further and delve deeper into the state of play and the roots of visual research methods.

## Social Work in Extremis - lessons for social work internationally

Edited by Michael Lavalette and Vasilios Loakimidis 2011, Policy Press



*Reviewed by: Crystal L. Minors, business development manager, registered social worker*

This book brings together case studies which consider the practice of social work within 'extreme' or crisis situations. Succinctly presented are individual case studies that examine the 'practice' of social work institutions, social workers and community activists in conditions which require creativity and ingenuity, collectivism and genuine empathy and motivation to help those who are the disadvantaged, vulnerable and victims of military occupation, environmental disaster, forced migration and political and economic restructuring.

As this book is a collection of case studies, it provides insight through reflective accounts of individual social worker practice; of state and welfare institution responses; of the extent to which social work students and educators can engage in advocacy movements following crises and of alternative forms of 'popular social work' that have developed based on the needs within these extreme situations.

Anyone who has humanitarian awareness, a keen interest in other cultures and who wants to know the realities of responses in such circumstances will find this an insightful

read. The implications of this book are far reaching, as it highlights not only the practical aspects of social work, but foreign and national policies; infrastructure implications within these countries; governmental and political agendas; the role of NGOs, charitable and community organisations; and also the reality of vulnerable communities.

The book encourages the reader to reconsider what 'social work' is, often a formalised and recognised 'institution', and thus a 'practice' that can only be performed by those with qualifications in the field (as offered by narrower models of the profession within the US and UK). It certainly inspires 'a broader discussion about the role, nature and direction of the profession'.

It is easy to read with digestible and gripping chapters. Each chapter provides insightful commentary on some aspect. I found that, after completing one chapter, I could not wait to get to the next.

I would highly recommend this book to social workers, in particular those who have been trained (as I have) in the UK or the US but also those from other countries as, as social workers, we share common aspirations. Anyone interested in sociology, politics and research would find this a good read, however, be warned that it may leave you with more questions than answers.

**SRA news and updates:** Find out the latest news from the SRA along with details of training and events at [www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk) If you are a member of the SRA, you can subscribe online to our email bulletin.



## SRA book reviews

Thanks to all who've reviewed books for the SRA.

The SRA is well supported by publishers which provide us with review copies across a range of social research issue. We give guidance to members reviewing books and reviewers get to keep the book. And we're now also publishing the SRA book reviews online on Amazon and Google Books. Keep your eyes on SRA newsletters for the list of books available for review.

If you're interested in reviewing for SRA, email [simon@researching.co.uk](mailto:simon@researching.co.uk)



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