Local policies for local people: what happens to national policy research?

Ian Simpson, researcher in crime and justice of NatCen Social Research, reports from the recent SRA summer event.

This year’s summer event offered participants an interesting mix of speakers and an after-event drink in the sun, as the weather bucked this summer’s trend!

Patten Smith opening the conference stressed how important the issues that were being raised by the Localism Act were for the social research community. The weakening of the analytical function in local government as a result of massive cutbacks coupled with increasing powers to small local groups raised the question of whether there would be an understanding of the need, as well as resources, for social research input into decision making and planning of services.

David Clark of the LGA, chaired, with Tom Tolfree, economic advisor at the Department for Communities and Local Government giving the first presentation (read about this inside on page 6). He defined terms which are often used interchangeably: localism, decentralisation and the ‘big society’. He described localism as the ethos of doing everything at the lowest appropriate level; decentralisation as the process of giving power away to local institutions, communities and individuals; and ‘big society’ as the vision of how things could work, if the ethos of localism and process of decentralisation are followed. A good insight into current thinking in government.

Nick Gallent, from University College London, discussed findings from a research project, based on ten parish councils in Kent, looking at their role in the community planning process. Key findings included the importance of diversity within a parish council in reaching out to the wider community; the leadership style of parish council leaders (autocratic or involving the wider community); and ‘big society’ as the vision of how things could work, if the ethos of localism and process of decentralisation are followed. A good insight into current thinking in government.

Barry Quirk, chief executive of the London Borough of Lewisham Council, suggested somewhat controversially, that beautiful theory is better than evidence-based policy, questioning the need for endless research. He also focused on what ‘local’ means in areas, like Lewisham, with a transient and changing population.

The Runneymede Trust’s, Omar Khan, described a research project his organisation is conducting along with several London borough councils. This aims to provide councils and their residents with a ‘report card’ on racial equality, focusing on various local indicators including education, employment, health, housing, criminal justice and civic participation.

Finally, Ben Marshall, Ipsos Mori, summarised public opinion research carried out with local people on house building in their area. This involved ‘deliberative quant’ research, that is presenting quota sampled survey respondents with stimulus material about housing development in order to find a more nuanced response than that offered by more traditional survey questions. This found that, rather than NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard), many people could be classed as YIMLAI (Yes In My Local Authority Area If) – (if it helps young families stay in and promotes economic growth in the area). Ben reprises the arguments in his article on page 7.

Book now for the SRA annual conference on 10 December (see page 16)

It also promises to challenge and inform!
Better procurement

SRA chair, Patten Smith, argues that fairness and accountability in procurement are in jeopardy

The SRA has taken a long-standing interest in how social research is commissioned: it published a good practice guide in 1994 (revised in 2002) (www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/) and, with the generous support of the Nuffield Foundation, published a review of government procurement practices in 2011 (www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/).

These reports focused on core procedural decisions about procurement which have direct or indirect impacts on the quality and cost effectiveness of the social research that gets commissioned. Examples of issues discussed included using framework agreements versus open competitions; how many organisations should be asked to bid; EOIs; communicating project scale (e.g. through indicative budgets, sample sizes, etc.); managing pre-tender clarifications; intellectual property of unsuccessful bidders and so on. These clear, balanced and thoughtful documents should be read by anybody involved in social research commissioning.

They are, however, strategic in their concerns and, unsurprisingly, implicitly assume a basic commitment to fairness and accountability by both commissioners and suppliers. Depressingly, recent examples experienced first-hand by me or by professional acquaintances suggest that these assumptions are overly optimistic. Below are two recent examples.

A recent contract for a very large and well-known survey let by a government department used a point-based method for assessing proposals: 60 points for quality and 40 for cost. In itself this was not remarkable, but the method used to allocate cost points was. I won’t present the details here but instead, highlight a couple of consequences of its use. One was that two bids differing by £1 would be separated by 10 points out of 100, which hardly sounds fair. But there is worse. Let’s suppose bidder A and bidder B were the two leading contenders, with A being cheaper but scoring lower on quality. The cost scoring system made it perfectly possible (and reasonably probable) for bid B to win if there were five bidders and Bid A to win if there were four – despite both organisations fielding identical proposals in both cases. In other words, the outcome of the tendering process in part depended on whether or not an organisation with no hope of winning decided to bid. I think most would agree that using this scoring system to allocate public funds to important social research might be regarded as sub-optimal!

Another example is of a government department letting a contract for a survey which was the latest of a series stretching back over many years. The survey had some unusual technical features which needed to be replicated in order to maintain trend continuity and which would be expected to impact heavily on costs. Because the brief was short and included no technical details, it would be necessary for bidders to consult recent technical reports if they were to deliver effective and realistic bids. However, when bidders asked to see these reports, they were refused on the grounds that the methods used were the intellectual property of the contractors. The net result of this was that full technical information was only available to recent contractors, which of course meant that the playing field was far from level. Frustratingly, it is clear that the intellectual property argument was specious, and the department had it within its power to release the requested information. The refusal to do so was based on false reasoning and led to a less fair competition and more likelihood of poorer quality bids.

These are far from being the only examples of poor/unfair procurement practices which I have recently encountered, and this suggests that something is awry. Are procurement practices becoming so process driven that their authors are losing sight of what they are supposed to achieve: ‘high quality useful and cost-effective research by fair and accountable means…’?

The SRA Working Group on Commissioning, chaired by John Wicks, is looking at these key concerns so please send your comments to Patten.Smith@ ipsos.com and john.wicks1@virginmedia.com
New SRA website launched

We’re pleased to announce the launch of our new website, now up and running, at the same address: www.the-sra.org.uk

We hope you like the new design and layout. New features include an option for online registration and payment for London training courses and events using a credit or debit card, or PayPal account if you have one. We’re hoping this feature will make life easier for everyone. You don’t have to use a card – you can request an invoice instead. Online registration and payment for the annual conference should be available in the Autumn. It will still be possible to book and pay for training courses by completing a booking form and sending it to Lindsay Adams (lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk).

SRA members need to enter a discount/promotional code to get their reduced rate for London courses and events. If you are not sure of your discount code contact: admin@the-sra.org.uk

Coming soon is an area for members with a facility for membership renewal.

We are very grateful to the Nuffield Foundation whose grant enabled us to build the new site. Thanks to Ian Henghes at Diditon.com for creating and implementing it, and to Nick Ockenden and Graham Farrant for overseeing development.

The site looks best using Firefox as your browser, or the most recent version of Internet Explorer.

SRA Public Affairs Forum: calling all experienced social researchers interested in social research and policy

We are setting up a forum to manage public affairs work. We plan to run this as a virtual group working through email with an accessible website page so all SRA members can see the issues the group is dealing with. The forum will be responsible to the board for giving advice on policy matters, advising on which government and other consultations the SRA should respond to and formulating the response.

The forum will be co-ordinated by Barbara Doig, a recent SRA chair and former chief social researcher in the Scottish Government. The current SRA chair will be an ex-officio member. We are looking for up to ten SRA members to be part of the forum. The work will not be onerous but is important. We need to make sure that the voice of social research is heard on key issues of interest to the community and also that social research contributes more broadly to public issues.

So, if you are an experienced/senior social researcher with an interest in the public policy aspects of social research and applied social science do please nominate yourself to join the forum by sending us a brief CV and telling us why you are interested (or, indeed, suggest others for us to approach). If you wish to know more please contact ceridwen.roberts@btopenworld.com

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

If you are a member of the SRA, you can subscribe online to our email bulletin.
New training on research and evaluation with children and young people

25 September, London, course tutors: Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham

In recent years there have been theoretical and methodological shifts amongst many social researchers from seeing children and young people solely as objects of enquiry, towards a view that children and young people are social actors with a unique perspective and insight into their own reality. This new SRA course will provide an overview of key issues in research and evaluation with children and young people and enable researchers to reflect on their own work and plans. The course will include presentations and practical examples and opportunities for participants to share ideas, explore different approaches through various activities, case examples and group discussions.

The main focus of the training will be on providing a general introduction to research in which children and young people are research subjects (i.e. participants), but will also include a brief introduction to methodological approaches for different groups (e.g. young children and disabled children and young people) and involving children and young people in the research process.

Other upcoming courses from the SRA include:

26 & 27 September: Quality in social research (advanced course) with Pamela Campanelli and Li Spencer

Full details of all courses are on the SRA website at www.the-sra.org.uk/training/ or from Lindsay Adams: lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk

SRA Scotland

By Sophie Ellison

We are sorry to see Alastair Bowden step down as co-chair, but would like to thank him for his excellent work over the past couple of years and wish him all the best in his new policy role. We are keen to recruit a small number of extra members to the branch to help us take forward our future work programme. If you’re interested in getting involved, please get in touch with us.

Courses and events

Between April and August this year, we ran another successful round of foundation level modular courses in qualitative and quantitative research.

What’s on in 2012 for SRA Scotland?

Capacity issues have meant a need to focus on our training delivery for most of the year so far, however, we’re keen to re-establish an active programme of networking and seminars. We’re hoping to get this started with a ‘social media in social research’ event later in the year but we’re also looking for more ideas as to how we can best meet the needs of members. 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!

Dates for the diary

We have more of our very popular qualitative and quantitative research courses scheduled for Autumn/Winter. Details are:

24 October – Designing a qualitative study
25 October – The art of qualitative interviewing
26 October – Running effective focus groups
29 October – Introduction to qualitative data analysis
30 October – Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings
27 November – Mastering the art of questionnaire design
28 November – Implementing your survey effectively
29 November – Getting to grips with sampling
30 November – Understanding the basics of statistical analysis

SRA Scotland looks forward to welcoming you at future training and events. For more information, please contact: Lindsay Adams (lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk), Sophie Ellison (sophie.ellison@gmail.com) or visit: www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_scotland/
SRA Cymru

By Jennifer Evans

SRA Cymru continues to build on the success of the evening seminar series. Six events have taken place so far in 2012, with an emphasis on exploring methods. Presentations have included data linking, critical discourse analysis and have also presented government guidelines on evaluation and appraisal to members beyond Welsh Government.

SRA Cymru brings together not only SRA members, but also a wider network of researchers and policy makers in the hope of growing the SRA membership. As the activities of SRA Cymru build up, so does interest in what we do and how we do it. Over the last few months, where we have had interest from members, we have tried to include them and their interests in our development. It’s great to know that people want to be part of what we are doing.

With a wider network membership of over 300, SRA Cymru has a fantastic opportunity to share information locally between members. We hope to be able to develop better ways to share news and information around the network, offering to promote publications, procurements, vacancies and also to encourage networking opportunities that will help to develop new and stronger local relationships and support across the social science community. Let us know if this opportunity appeals to you or if you would like to get involved in this.

We have been establishing a LinkedIn group, as well as a Twitter feed, which we are using to continue discussions from the evening seminar debates, and promote work and events of our members respectively. A regular summary publication has developed from the co-chairs to the organising committee, which we hope will be extended more widely to members in Wales.

With a breather planned for the summer, don’t think we aren’t beavering away behind the scenes! Look out for a planning event on 26 October in Cardiff which will review activities so far, and encourage involvement from across the network as we start thinking about events for 2013. We also have 5 December in the diary for our first festive event – we hope you will join us!

If you would like to hear from the branch as well as from the centre, please email us at sracymru@gmail.com

SRA Ireland

By David Silke

SRA Ireland is back in action and looking for volunteers to help organise events. It has plans to hold a half-day workshop on media training for researchers to take place in late September (date and details to be confirmed soon) and also to hold an event on secondary data sources later in the autumn. But it is also open to hearing from anyone interested in hosting an event or with ideas of what members would find useful or interesting. If you would like to get involved, please contact sra.ireland@gmail.com

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SRA news and updates

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Delivering localism: evidence and the role of analysts

At the recent SRA summer event, Tom Tolfree, economic adviser, Department for Communities and Local Government, argued that government analysts and policy makers need to consider various factors to implement localism effectively.

Localism is central to the UK Government’s reform programme, driven by the belief that society, the economy and public services could be improved through decentralisation. But, what does ‘localism’ actually mean? And how does it fit with ‘big society’ and ‘decentralisation’?

- **Localism is the ethos**: doing everything at the lowest appropriate level and only involving central government if absolutely necessary. Depending on the activity, the lowest appropriate level may mean individual citizens, local neighbourhoods or local institutions, such as local authorities. However, for other services and functions the lowest appropriate level may be national government, because of the strategic nature of the service.

- **‘Big society’ is the vision**: a society where people, neighbourhoods and communities have more power and responsibility and use it to create better services and outcomes.

- **Decentralisation is the process**: giving away power to individuals, professionals, communities and local institutions. Decisions about how to decentralise involve balancing the spill-over effects of costs and benefits across areas, against advantages of local proximity and accountability. This may vary for different public goods and services at different spatial scales and communities. There are both benefits and risks associated with the process and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

To implement localism effectively, so as to maximise the benefits and minimise the risks, government analysts and policy makers need to consider a number of factors including:

- Determining carefully the lowest appropriate level at which decisions can or should be taken and services provided
- Maintaining accountability for public spending under localism by ensuring power and responsibility are aligned and sufficient pressures exist to deliver value for money
- Identifying and putting in place the incentives needed under localism to ensure growth and the delivery of efficient and effective public services
- Ensuring local decisions are taken with due regard to the evidence base

The need for evidence-based decisions remains just as important under localism. There are various reasons to believe localism could have advantages and encourage better use of evidence, as:

- Local organisations are likely to have better data and understanding of local needs and the resource costs of local activity
- Where close links exist between agencies, local areas are best placed to consider the overall system effects of decisions
- Where budgets are shared (e.g. through community budgets) there are better incentives to make decisions which maximise overall benefits

However, there are issues with evidence-based decision making at a local level, such as a lack of capacity or capability to interpret or develop the evidence base, small sample sizes and so on. These issues open up a number of potential channels for government to help local areas in the future by:

- Designing incentives so they reward decision making based on strong evidence
- Providing capacity (and raising capacity by reducing reporting to Whitehall), expertise and insight to local areas trying to tackle difficult decisions
- Helping co-ordinate evidence and facilitate effective and efficient sharing at local level to avoid ‘free-rider’ issues
- Helping local areas harness economies of scale in collecting evidence, as, for example, in-depth evaluations are often less affordable at a local level
- Helping ensure consistency, as purely localised data collection might not provide the comparability required for high quality evaluation

Creating the right conditions which stimulate investment in good analysis and being clear on where the centre can add value is, therefore, essential. The role of central government analysts will also become clearer once the nature of government intervention under localism is better understood.

The next steps are to determine how and where the centre can add value and create the conditions under localism to stimulate investment in good analysis. Using networks, sharing research and collaborative models of working are all likely to become much more important under localism, and several government departments are starting to adopt such roles.
Housing and bananas mean a role for social research

Ben Marshall, Ipsos MORI, makes the links

David Cameron recently said, ‘All roads lead back to housing’, echoing Sir Bob Kerslake’s remark, ‘Whichever way you look at the [UK government’s] agenda, housing is a key part’. The ‘housing crisis’ matters economically and socially, and has growing traction at both national and local levels. Under localism, tackling it is now down to local authorities and communities.

One objective of the Localism Act is to kick-start house building by handing power to local communities, and this has been reinforced by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Top-down Regional Development Agency regional spatial strategies and targets are to be replaced with local plans. According to the NPPF, local authorities should ‘proactively drive and support substantial development to deliver the homes, business and industrial units, infrastructure and thriving local places that the country needs’.

Localism puts people at the heart of decision-making and the Minister’s foreword to the NPPF says ‘we are allowing people and communities back into planning’. Part of the rationale is that the old planning regime and its top-down system created a democratic deficit, encouraging local opposition. This is the biggest barrier to home building according to the Local Government Association, and it is unsurprising that NIMBY and BANANA caricatures have taken hold in recent years.

The NPPF also emphasises the importance of local plans having ‘adequate and proportionate’ evidence (and plans need to be defensible at public inquiry). The result is that the onus of evidence-gathering responsibility is on local authorities. But these are very ‘hot’ political, place-shaping issues and there is a danger that a ‘wrong’ reading of local opinion could jeopardise political will, local and national progress. This means that there is a clear role for robust social representative research alongside the more typical staple of consultation. It would allow authorities to draw conclusions about the views and priorities of an entire population by speaking to a sub-sample who mirror its make-up. It will require investment but that is surely important given the stakes?

This was recognised by Canterbury City Council which commissioned social research to capture the aspirations of the whole community, not just articulate ‘local vocals’ and seldom heard non-activists (whose housing needs are usually more acute). This was to sit alongside a project delivered by planning consultants modelling demographic and economic data, generating alternative scenarios for different levels of growth and change based on different economic assumptions and policy preferences.

The challenge facing Ipsos MORI was to present these complex, interrelated issues to respondents in a meaningful, robust way (the link between building and jobs is far from clear-cut and the consultants had developed ten specific development scenarios). We used two-stage random location quota sampling, a ‘deliberative’ cognitively-tested questionnaire moving respondents from in-principle views to more practical perspectives on three broad options (edited scenarios), and used showcards and ‘infocard’ mini-briefings of respondents on the key topics.

The research has enabled Canterbury to build an evidence base combining ‘hard’ demography and ‘softer’ sentiment, and to engage councillors and stakeholders in decision-making. This offers a model for others, but also perhaps, an opportunity for the centre – e.g. government and the Planning Advisory Service – to facilitate localism, offering guidance and support on how to gather good evidence.

Our research for Canterbury, the British Property Federation and others underlines that the UK is not a nation of NIMBYs. Nor is it BANANAs. While there are undoubtedly strong ‘enough already’ sentiments, there are also signs of support for new local development if it leads to more jobs or affordable housing. Opinion is fluid, not fixed, and there is considerable local variation. This means that there is all to play for.

Consequently, the case for development and building must be made compellingly and based on evidence. There is a lot to do. Social research can, and should, contribute. Watch this very local space…

Follow @BenM_IM
Mapping the ‘big society’

John Mohan, deputy director, Third Sector Research Centre asks how we assess the outcome of ‘big society’ policies

What do we need to know about the outcomes of David Cameron’s ‘big society’ policies, and what evidence is available to measure them? There are a number of challenges.

The first is simply deciding what we’re interested in. There has been a strong emphasis on getting people to do more for their communities, especially by giving money to charity and volunteering. The Giving White Paper stressed the headline rates — the proportion of the population carrying out such behaviours. However, that can mask important variations. For example, Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) shows how small subsets of the population contributed the bulk of voluntary effort and donation of money. Some commentators picked up on this and suggested that we needed to ‘double’ the size of the civic core. This could actually be counter-productive, because the measure we use is a relative one which is heavily influenced by the contribution of a small number of very active individuals. Hence, you could double the size of the core by removing those individuals or by getting them to reduce their contributions! More seriously, people contribute to their communities in a number of ways and asking citizens to do more volunteering may well be challenging for those who contribute very substantial amounts of unpaid care to relatives and neighbours. We need a rounded perspective on all the contributions that people make, rather than prioritising certain forms of social action.

Secondly, geography. There appear to be many more voluntary organisations in rural areas which perhaps contributes to a perception that there are ‘charity deserts’ — places with fewer organisations relative to population — mainly in poorer, former industrial areas. But it is obvious that economies of scale are not feasible in sparsely populated rural areas in a way that is possible in larger towns, so the distribution of organisations is certainly not an unproblematic index of relative altruistic propensities. The same is also true of measures of voluntary action — there are contrasts among communities in the proportion of the population who volunteer, but most of the variation is due to the mix of people who live in particular places. However, where we can relate the distribution of voluntary resources to socioeconomic statistics — as in work on organisations which say they operate at the ‘neighbourhood’ scale — there are very strong contrasts between communities in the capacities and resources of voluntary organisations. This is certainly a challenge for the ‘big society’ — in the sense that the emphasis on new localism, and on every citizen being part of a neighbourhood group, is likely to make considerable demands on the organisational base of communities. Qualitative work, on the idea of charity hotspots and deserts, suggests that disadvantaged communities are likely to have considerable difficulties in responding to the opportunities offered by new policies.

Perhaps a bigger challenge is tracking change over time. Government spokespeople would clearly like to see a change in citizen engagement and pro-social behaviours — indeed, who wouldn’t? But measuring change requires a sustained investment in large-scale datasets and we need the capability for longitudinal research. In TSRC, we put considerable work into establishing a panel dataset from old versions of the register of charities, which allows us to track many thousands of organisations from the mid-1990s. This has been, and will continue to be, used as a baseline for studying registered charities, and for analysing differential growth of organisations. The major household panel survey, Understanding Society, will be vital, and we will also need to draw on other sources of data released through the open government provisions (for example on public procurement from voluntary organisations).

This will require a great deal of effort and investment, but this is essential. A defensible answer to a question about whether we can detect changes arising from the ‘big society’ agenda may be that it is too early to tell, as Chairman Mao remarked. Less defensible is the recent suggestion from ResPublica that we can’t narrowly quantify healthy communities by volunteering statistics, public service delivery or economic activity alone. If we are serious about assessing change over time then we need an appropriate baseline, and large-scale datasets are crucial to that. Even less defensible would be the view that we can’t tell what’s changed because we haven’t invested in the evidence base.
Putting social research into regulatory practice

By Pippa Brockington, HM principal specialist inspector in the Human Factors, Ergonomics and Psychology Team, Health and Safety Executive

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) works to prevent people being killed, injured or made ill at work. We are a regulatory body, so whilst we like to work collaboratively with industry, we also have enforcement powers. HSE commissions a substantial amount of social sciences research as well as learning from research carried out by other groups. The Human Factors, Ergonomics and Psychology (HFEP) team works on the ‘front-line’, mostly investigating accidents or intervening with companies that are not performing well in health and safety. We provide specialist advice to regulatory inspectors and, occasionally, expert evidence for courts.

A large proportion of my work is about explaining and applying the findings of social sciences research. Given how much we have learned from social sciences research about human behaviour, you might be surprised (or not) how little industry has taken on board even relatively basic concepts – outside marketing departments, that is. Despite everything we have learned about human information processing over the last century, it is still not unusual to find organisations that expect operatives to respond when an alarm does not go off. Many companies still believe that the best way to shape behaviour is to criticise, bully and threaten – that does change behaviour but rarely in the desired direction. And psychosocial health problems – stress-related illness and musculoskeletal disorders – still account for two-thirds of work-related sickness absence in this country.

Recently, I became involved in a detailed examination of management systems at a large employer. The company has had several fatal accidents and an increasing number of very serious adverse events. They decided to fundamentally reshape their approach to health and safety. I was asked by the regulatory inspector to determine whether the changes implemented by the company would actually achieve the stated aim of preventing further accidents. Amongst other programmes, the company had decided to implement a behavioural safety programme – these aim to change the culture of an organisation through focusing on front-line workers’ behaviour. My evaluation compared their initiative favourably with success factors reported in the research literature. Unfortunately, I also found that they had a number of obstacles to overcome: a very lucrative, production-oriented bonus scheme; an ageing workforce in an environment that could not be adapted to compensate; and working in temperatures well in excess of those known to be associated with unsafe acts. My role is to help the company understand the research evidence, what they can do to manage these factors, and hopefully, make improvements.

I also apply social sciences research to accident investigations. Because of individual differences, there are very few circumstances in which you can predict with absolute certainty how an individual will behave. You can say, however, that certain features of the workplace make it more likely that a person will behave in a particular way. The classic example of this is the positioning of isolation points for machinery. Generally, they are put somewhere that requires effort, time and sometimes physical discomfort to reach. We know from the research that people do not like expending effort unless they perceive some reward; likewise, people generally avoid physical discomfort. People under time pressure also take shortcuts. So, if a company does not inform people of the risks in a meaningful way, and the isolation point is hard to reach, it is probable that some people will choose not to follow the isolation procedure. Every year, people are killed carrying out maintenance without first isolating the machine, often under pressure to restore it to production. Investigators generally seek my advice when the company says that the individual, who can no longer speak for themselves, broke the rules. My role is to advise the inspector, and perhaps a criminal court, that although we cannot say for certain why the individual did not isolate the machine, these factors greatly increased the probability that someone would make that decision.
Open data: problems and promise

By Professor David J. Hand, Imperial College, London

The open data initiative is a move towards making data publicly available, so encouraging reanalysis and exploration by others. The data ranges from administrative data describing financial transactions of government departments, to that describing how bumblebees respond to different flower mixtures, to statistics on accident and emergency attendances in hospitals. In short, data of all types is being released. At the time of writing, over 8,000 such data sets are available through www.data.gov.uk.

There are many potential gains from the open data initiative. It enables accountability: it is difficult to conceal something if the facts are there for all to see. It empowers communities: the truth about crime rates, educational achievement, and social services is laid bare. It drives economic growth: more and more small companies are springing up which extract hitherto unsuspected information from data which is now freely available. It may even lead to more accurate conclusions and better decisions, as a wider variety of interested parties have the opportunity to examine the facts. It also alleviates the force of Goodhart’s Law, which says that if attention is focused on a particular outcome then that outcome becomes useless as a measure of performance – as people game to optimise it. It is easy to think of examples of this, from schools inflating pass rates by preventing less able pupils from taking GCSEs, to hospitals manipulating waiting times. With open data, people can explore the impact of policies on a far wider range of indicators.

One widely known example of the initiative is the UK crime mapping exercise. Publicly-released data about crimes is taken and displayed on maps available on the web. From the perspective of the police, such maps show where their resources should be concentrated and permit improved tactics. From the public perspective, they enable people to identify risky areas to avoid, and to demand more police action if necessary. They provide clear public benefit. Other releases promise similar benefits.

However, little in life is an unqualified good. And the open data initiative has raised some concerns.

Foremost is the potential threat to privacy. Reducing this risk is difficult. Francis Maude said, ‘It is my intention that no personal data will be shared with any third party as part of this initiative.’ However, it is questionable whether this can be achieved: the technical challenges are considerable. For example, the jigsaw effect is the use of multiple sources of data, each well-protected in its own right, which can be combined to yield information about individuals. It is surprising how little information is needed to be able to identify individuals uniquely: for example, if you know the sex, date and year of birth, and the city of someone in the US, then 53% of the US population can be uniquely identified.

Sometimes it is said that people who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear. That is arguable and assumes that the data is correct. But no large data set which refers to human beings is perfect. This may not matter when one is talking en masse, because, as E.J. Kahn put it, ‘minor mistakes in all directions … when they are averaged up … [mostly] cancel each other out’, but it certainly matters to an individual whose credit record is damaged because an address error meant that bills were unpaid, having been misdirected. Moreover, small mistakes can occur in a consistent direction, leading to biased and incorrect conclusions.

The crime maps example illustrates the sort of problems that can arise. At a simple level, in December 2011, Surrey Street in Portsmouth was reported as having 136 crimes, when in fact it had just two. (In fact, that reveals a particular strength of the web as vehicle for data release – once a problem has been identified it can be rectified very rapidly.) At a more subtle level, a survey by Direct Line Insurance found that 11% of respondents claim to have seen but not reported an incident ‘because they were scared it would drive away potential [house] purchasers’. In general, the open data initiative ignores such feedback effects – that the very act of publishing the data will influence the quality of future data. The law of unintended consequences strikes in many unexpected ways.

Finally, the ability to extract meaningful information from data requires considerable skill. Without this, there is a real danger that incorrect conclusions may be drawn. We must recognise that no technology – nuclear, chemical, data, or otherwise – is without concomitant risks. Providing we tread carefully, with an awareness and understanding of what we are treading in, the open data initiative holds immense promise for a better society.

This article was originally published in the NCRM Methods News Summer 2012 issue. It has been edited slightly to fit.
Evaluating behaviour change: Welsh bags

Self-confessed bag-fan, Jennifer Evans, considers the evaluation of the single-use carrier bag charge in Wales

Not long before Christmas, in 2011, shoppers in Wales found themselves being asked if they needed a bag for their shopping. This may be a phrase we are getting used to across the UK, but in Wales, the implication is a 5p charge for any single-use carrier bag. As a regular shopper in Cardiff, it promptly enhanced my own willingness to carry empty bags around with me, on the off-chance that a shopping opportunity presented itself. Recent research from Cardiff University suggests that it isn’t just this kind of behaviour that the 5p charge has affected.

An evaluation of the charge, published in July 2012, has examined both the behavioural change and the attitudinal changes in Wales and England between September 2011 and May 2012. 1,000 telephone interviews were conducted in Wales and England, with England acting as the control group where the 5p carrier bag charge was not introduced. The questionnaire comprised 32 questions which explored issues such as own bag use, attitudes towards a carrier bag charge and environmental identity and concern. The report compared absolute values, as well as undertaking regression analysis and two-way analysis of variance, using ‘measurements occasion’ (before or after) and ‘country’ (Wales or England) as the fixed factors.

Own bag use in Wales increased from 61% before the introduction of the single-use carrier bag charge to 82% afterwards. While own bag use increased in both Wales and England, the increase was greater in Wales.

This research is great news in many ways. The Welsh Government undertook a significant amount of consultation in developing this policy as well as a high-profile awareness-raising campaign. Clearly, a policy which expects to significantly change people’s behaviour, and thus reduce the waste going to landfill sites, requires significant investment in demonstrating whether or not it has worked. It is encouraging that the evaluation was planned well in advance of the charge being enforced.

It is also heartening that the Welsh public is responding positively to the change. Immediately after the charge’s introduction, there were news reports of shoppers’ frustration. Indeed, one implication is that Tesco ‘green’ clubcard points are no longer awarded in Wales: the company justified the change because the incentive to re-use bags is now provided by the Government, rather than the clubcard scheme. This issue even made it on to a consumer affairs programme highlighting the perceived injustice in Wales.

The report concludes, disappointingly, that whilst ‘environmental identity’ has strengthened in Wales, this does not seem to be reflected in people’s other environmental behaviours. However, the evaluation is based on just eight months of the policy so longer-term behaviour change may still yet become apparent.

The full report is available at: http://wales.gov.uk/topics/environmentcountryside/epq/waste_recycling/substance/carrierbags/attituderesearch/?lang=en

The carrier bag charge appears to have encouraged people to bring their own bags to the supermarket and other shops. The number of people in Wales who ‘always’ bring their own bag to other shops (not supermarkets) increased from 27% before the introduction of the carrier bag charge to 43% afterwards. In England, this habit decreased.
The Peter Townsend Reader
Reviewed by Robert Willis, senior research officer, Welsh Government

Peter Townsend is described in the introduction as one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century. This book presents a selection of his key writings on poverty, global poverty, inequality and social exclusion, health inequalities, older people, and disability. The aim is to make his work available to a wider audience. Although the book is 678 pages long, each of the sections is introduced by an expert in the topic, and could be read as a stand-alone volume.

He writes well, not to say eloquently. For example, he makes a link between the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 ‘which reflected the view of ruling elites that poverty was necessary to motivate the poor to work’, and current underclass theories which blame the poor for their poverty.

The writings cover the period from the 1950s into the first decade of the 21st century. Some may ask if work that covers such a long period is of interest or value today. My answer is yes, for the following reasons. Firstly, he developed some of the key concepts we use today, such as relative poverty, and structured dependency of older people. Secondly, he didn’t just describe social phenomena, he explained them. For example, in the social model of disability, the exclusion of disabled people is not determined by their impairment, it is due to stigmatisation, and the failure to make adaptations so they can live full lives. Thirdly, he was an exemplary social researcher, in his single-minded determination and ability to argue on the basis of the evidence. The Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth (1976) claimed that the rich had become relatively poorer. Townsend carried out his own analysis of the data, and showed that this was not the case if benefits in kind, a form of tax avoidance, were included. He ‘told truth to power’, something particularly important for government social researchers.

The book would be of interest to those working or researching in the particular policy areas. It also speaks to those who think that rigorous social research has a role in helping to achieve social justice for disadvantaged groups.

Introducing research methodology: a beginner’s guide to doing a research project
Uwe Flick, Sage Publications, 2011
Reviewed by Chloe Sharp, PhD research student, Institute for Health Research, University of Bedfordshire

This book aims to help people who are about to start a social research project who are first-time researchers. It is a ‘go-to’ guide, with practical and theoretical information about project work. It is written in a way that explains the fundamentals of epistemology, qualitative and quantitative research.

It guides readers through the different stages of research, from the background of social research, planning and designing, gathering and analysing data and finally ethics and writing up research and using the outcomes from it. It does not promise to be comprehensive, but highlights the key points, and suggests further reading. The sub-headings, make it a useful ‘go-to’ resource, and there are tables and diagrams to illustrate key points (although sometimes the text boxes interrupt the flow).

Written clearly and concisely, it is accessible for those who do not read academic books. It could be used in various settings, for example academic and governmental, but it is really for first-time researchers and undergraduate students. It also highlights issues for those who are not familiar with academic research, such as validity and limitations of certain research methods, through examples.

Its main strength is the range of topics and issues. It updates the reader on research methods such as e-research, online interviewing and virtual ethnography. The real-life examples help to contextualise issues. Finally, there are good references to further resources.

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Developing research proposals

Pam Denicolo and Lucinda Becker, Sage Publications, 2012

Reviewed by Annika Coughlin, research assistant, University of Bedfordshire

This book is essential reading for those writing research proposals for a PhD application or proposals to funding bodies. It is intended for those who are writing proposals for the first time but also for those who may have written proposals before, but never succeeded in getting funding.

It offers practical advice, but also interrogates your thinking about the research design – the rationale, theoretical underpinnings and ethics

I was reading from two perspectives – as an administrator helping staff to submit research proposals and as a prospective PhD student, preparing to write a proposal. For me, this book is perfectly pitched. It is simple, but not simplistic. It offers practical advice, but also interrogates your thinking about the research design – the rationale, theoretical underpinnings and ethics for example.

There is also a section on financial considerations, essential to those with little or no understanding of concepts such as full economic costing.

The authors also include:
- Activities e.g. preparing a Gantt chart
- Reflection points at the end of each chapter
- Boxes containing facts, explaining terms and helpful tips
- Glossary (with the words in the glossary in bold throughout the text)

My sense from reading this is that the authors are true experts who genuinely want to support new and early academics in what is an increasingly competitive part of academia.

Doing feminist research in political and social science

Brooke Ackerley and Jacqui True, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

Reviewed by Jenny Smith, PhD candidate, registered at the University of Hull

‘Doing feminist research in political and social science’ has been written as a tool to both undertake and evaluate existing feminist research within the political and social sciences. This makes the book suitable for various professionals including researchers, academics at all stages of the scholastic process and related policy stakeholders.

The book ... creates a lens which encourages the perspectives of women to be viewed authentically

The book’s aims and objectives are comprehensively addressed in the introductory chapter and include conceptualising, undertaking and critiquing feminist research. It includes key concepts in feminist literature and personal reflections of research fieldwork by the authors. The reflective fieldwork examples are valuable and cover a broad sphere of activity. The book’s structure of the book engages the reader and creates a lens which encourages the perspectives of women to be viewed authentically. This is the main strength of the book.

Although firmly situated in feminist terrain, with an emphasis on applying feminist research ethics and perspectives to established disciplines, its content is relevant to any research involving women. The feminist orientation informs and yet still manages to convey the somewhat nebulous and fluid character of feminist research approaches, which in turn reflect the dynamic nature of feminist research itself.

This book would be useful to novice and experienced researchers. It is also valuable for academics and policy assessors as a source of primary guidance or as a supplement to existing projects. It is remarkably effective at stripping away differing views and situating the reader from the standpoint of women. This facilitates a feminist research ethic methodology which can only enhance the practice and appraisal of research about women.
The essential guide to using the web for research

Nigel Ford, Sage Publications, 2012

Reviewed by Berni Graham, independent research consultant

The author’s metaphor ‘panning for gold’ seems totally apt for the challenge commonly faced in finding those nuggets of pertinent reading and research using the internet within ‘the vastness of the mud that all too easily hides the gold from view’. This book provides guidance on avoiding (or at least minimising) what can be overwhelming, obfuscating and voluminous irrelevancies, tangents and blind alleys and shows us how to master the internet effectively to: ‘...pinpoint high quality information amongst the vast mass of mediocre, inaccurate and downright misleading information that can so easily hijack your search’ (p1).

Well-structured, thorough, accessibly-written and presented, Nigel Ford uses charts, diagrams and step-by-step guides to steer the reader through different styles and methods of searching, defining optimal search terms, to conduct a literature review or find the most reliable background reading on a subject. It is primarily targeted at undergraduate and postgraduate students who will definitely find it invaluable when setting out on their dissertations and theses, whatever their subject, and on the way, will also help students approach, refine and focus their topic and research questions. As such, it clearly draws on the author’s experience of teaching this subject, and benefits from and reflects the planning, insight and expertise built up over the years of doing so.

That said, this guide will prove equally useful for professional researchers in any field, especially those of us who were not weaned on a keyboard: practising researchers will find it invaluable in refining their searches and search terms as well as in choosing and using search engines.

The author reviews the quality, relative strengths and weakness and pros and cons of search engines and tools for different purposes, explaining common pitfalls and challenges on the way. In addition, he provides useful tips and advice on how to manage and record searches. Different learning styles and approaches are also encompassed. Each chapter is clearly introduced and well-structured with main points summarised at the end.

Overall I consider this a very useful and timely book. Indeed, I wish I’d seen it many years ago. Its key strengths are its pertinence to researchers’ current needs, thoroughness, detailed discussions, accessibility, step-by-step approach and handy techniques and tips.

Using narrative in research

Christine Bold, Sage Publications, 2012

Reviewed by William Solesbury, researcher and writer

My experience of getting politicians to heed research findings taught me the power of the killer statistic and the good anecdote. So a book that seemingly would explain the latter – albeit dressed up as ‘narrative’ – had an appeal. But Bold offers more than that. By narrative, she means a story – written, spoken, sketched or filmed – about people and events, taking place over time in a given context, from which we can infer causations.

Bold argues that narrative also provides tools for understanding and interpreting behaviour

Researchers often adopt such narratives to enliven their reporting of research findings – vignettes is the term frequently used – but Bold argues that narrative also provides tools for understanding and interpreting behaviour. The core of her book is a series of chapters on the familiar stages of research – definition of the issue to be researched, data collection, analysis, findings and conclusions. She argues that, at each stage, narrative approaches have something to offer. For example, in defining issues to be researched, why not get respondents to keep diaries? In analysing data from multiple interviews or observations, why not construct some typical but different narratives (for which she uses the term ‘representative constructions’) as a way of understanding themes or processes? She recognises that these approaches may not appeal to positivists or may raise ethical concerns, and she addresses these arguments head on. And it must be admitted that most of her own experience, and the examples she uses to support her argument, relate to research on professional practice and/or by practitioners. But that makes the book all the more relevant to social research.
Wealth and the wealthy: exploring and tackling inequalities between rich and poor
Reviewed by Sally McManus, research director, health and wellbeing team, NatCen Social Research

When considering inequality most people focus on the problems of poverty and the poor. Few have looked to the other end of the spectrum, to wealth and the wealthy. This engaging and readable book highlights this imbalance and explores how research practice and social policy could shift to redress it. A focus on issues of measurement makes the book particularly relevant to researchers. And the reframing of the inequalities debate will be of interest to both social policy practitioners and academics, as well as a general readership.

What I hadn’t appreciated before reading this book was the extent to which the massive growth in wealth inequality in the UK and the US since the 1980s has been driven by this tiny ‘richest’ group.

Rowlingson and McKay highlight the lack of information available on the ‘haves’. Survey and HMRC data on income, they argue, provide only a partial picture of wealth. The retired, for example, may have low income coupled with substantial accumulated assets.

People can be wealthy, therefore, because of longstanding housing, pension or financial investments. Rowlingson and McKay describe the problems there are with collecting data on wealth, but also highlight the need for more surveys to ask about assets as well as income.

The new, large Wealth and Assets Survey (WAS) presents opportunities for the distribution of wealth and the characteristics of the wealthy to be analysed. Rowlingson and McKay describe WAS as the most thorough attempt to measure wealth so far in the UK. In their analysis of the wave one dataset they operationalise different thresholds and ways of defining wealth and the wealthy. Or, as they put it, of ‘the rich’, ‘the richer’, and ‘the richest’. This last group – the most wealthy 0.05% of the population – are particularly ‘hard to reach’ and hidden from social research.

What I hadn’t appreciated before reading this book was the extent to which the massive growth in wealth inequality in the UK and the US since the 1980s has been driven by this tiny ‘richest’ group.

They cite Layard’s observation that beyond a certain threshold, the benefit of extra income on happiness declines with a person’s wealth. The implication is that if money is transferred from a richer to a poorer person, the poorer person gains more happiness than the richer person loses. With relevance for the UK government’s programme for measuring national wellbeing, Rowlingson and McKay agree with Layard that a country will tend to have a higher level of average happiness the more equally its income is distributed.

The two recent flagship policies of assets-based welfare – Child Trust Funds and the Savings Gateway – have both been abandoned by the current government. The number of people with a private pension has actually been falling in recent years. And housing no longer presents the investment potential it once did. Rowlingson and McKay argue that the shift away from state and towards individual responsibility for welfare has now ‘run out of steam’. They persuasively make the case for it being time for the state to step back in to ensure financial security for all.

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SRA annual conference 2012
Social research in the digital age
Monday 10 December, British Library

This year’s annual conference is all about the effect of the ‘digital revolution’ on social research. What is the implication for social research of new technologies and social media? And how does it affect the research cycle from collecting data to presenting results?

Speakers will address topics including:

- The impact of ‘digital’ on quantitative or qualitative research
- Related methodological developments and innovations
- The visualisation and presentation of research findings
- Data collection and data management
- The ethical issues raised by new forms of research enquiry
- Good practice examples of innovative research
- Dissemination strategies which present findings digitally

Confirmed panel speakers include Kandy Woodfield, head of learning and development, NatCen Social Research, Richard Bartholomew, chief social researcher, DFE, Alan Smith OBE, head of the Data Visualisation Centre at ONS and Nick Leon, ethnographic research specialist at Naked Eye. Check the website for latest news.

This is a key event for social researchers across all sectors. Put the date in your diary now and do tell your friends and colleagues. Further information will be available in mid-September on our website, www.the-sra.org.uk/events/ and our e-bulletin.

Grateful thanks to the British Library for support with the venue.

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