

How will the social research landscape change in the next decade?



Three experts from different sectors comment on future developments in social research.

Desiree Lopez, managing director at TNS BMRB, anticipates wide-ranging technological and methodological advances and hopes they can be used to enhance the public impact of social research.



Imagining the next decade brings feelings of both excitement and uncertainty. Excitement for continued methodological innovation; for strengthening the role of social research in shaping public life; and for mapping how society changes. Uncertainty, because ten years, at the pace of change we are currently experiencing, is a very long time.

I imagine we will continue to advance various developments which are changing the social research landscape. These are the increased collection and use of bio, wearable and other forms of digital data; the increased reliability of social and open data; the continued growth of behavioural techniques; the continued move to online research; the return to observational methods and the focus on the effective impact of our work and the work of our clients. In fact, I suspect we will continue to spend much of our time and thinking on how we collect and analyse data more effectively – taking lessons from consumer research, as well as new players in data analytics. We will also continue to focus on the impact of our work and how we communicate this effectively, as we should. Much of our thinking will continue to be around innovation and how technology brings us closer to understanding society, households and individuals. Changes to government and public services will undoubtedly affect our designs and how the general public experiences and relates to social research more widely.

As technology and methodology continue to advance, our work will necessarily involve exploring the dynamic between new and traditional methods. A core part of our skills as social researchers will be to ensure an effective balance between the old and new. Undoubtedly, the speed of technological change will bring new challenges to the value placed on social research, as well as new users of our work.

Technology and methodology aside, what I hope will underpin all major developments in social research is a continuing desire to engage the public in developing, articulating and evaluating public policy. This should be done through social research methods which allow the public full participation in and understanding of social research. I hope we continue to work in partnership across academic, private and public institutions to obtain value for the public through innovation in social research. I hope the next decade will see a growth in investment in training and developing social researchers. As an industry, I hope our support for the SRA continues – as does its role in championing the value of social research within the Academy of Social Sciences, Whitehall and society.

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Professor Patrick Sturgis, director of ESRC National Centre for Research Methods reflects on the future of survey research in an era of 'big data'.



There is, currently, a great deal of interest in and excitement about the potential of new forms of data – administrative, transactional, social media and so on – to transform how social scientists and policy-makers come to understand attitudes and behaviours. While this enthusiasm for 'big data' is certainly justified, if not a little hubristic, there remain substantial barriers to the use of these kinds of data for making valid inferences about population characteristics. And despite what cheerleaders of the data revolution would sometimes have us believe, inference to general populations is still fundamental to most research questions.

The reasons that 'big data' solutions are unlikely to replace survey research as the primary method in the social sciences relate mainly to non-coverage of the full population but also to issues concerning data access and measurement quality. For these reasons, it seems likely that data collection based on the administration of questionnaires to random samples will remain the bedrock of empirical social science for the foreseeable future.

However, this should not be taken to imply that surveys will continue to be administered in exactly the ways we have become accustomed to for the past ten to twenty years – the 'survey landscape' will undoubtedly look very different in 2024. Perhaps the biggest change we are likely to witness will be a shift from face-to-face and telephone interviewing to online modes. To a large extent, this change has already taken place, with a great many surveys now being carried out using online panels. However, most online panels are based on self-selected samples and do not, therefore, meet quality thresholds for the conduct of government and academic research.

The key innovation that the field of survey research must make in the years ahead will, therefore, be to implement affordable probability sample designs online. Until this breakthrough takes place, the future health of survey research rests primarily on the lack of available alternatives, rather than its own intrinsic merits. Watch this space.

Dr Sarah Earle, associate dean of research, The Open University, emphasises the growing importance of an interdisciplinary approach.



The complex global problems faced by society – an ageing demographic, climate change and security, to name just three – present a striking moment for the social sciences to make a collective difference.

Compartmentalisation has driven social science research, and the social sciences in general, in disciplinary and methodological terms. Addressing today's global challenges requires a different approach, which is solutions-driven rather than driven purely by theoretical and intellectual concerns. A much needed process of de-compartmentalisation is needed to ensure that social research can focus on the pressing social concerns of our time in a way that is at least cross-disciplinary if not trans-disciplinary. Closer relationships between social research and research in the natural sciences are more likely. There is already evidence of this in the neurosciences where sociologists and psychologists work with medics and biologists, and in the study of climate change, for example in the collaboration between ecologists and economists.

Advances in information and communications technology have also hugely affected social research, and are likely to continue to do so well into the future. Technological change affects how social researchers do research, as well as what they can do social research with; both of these are making a significant difference to our ability to contribute to thinking about complex global social problems. In a digital culture that is 'always on' and mediated through global real-time communications, social researchers can be increasingly open and responsive; there is a genuine opportunity for increased dialogue beyond academia that is interactive and non-didactic. The existence of enormous amounts of digital data – and the ability to create, process and store it – also presents a significant methodological breakthrough for social researchers. Harnessing this technology, in the form of world-wide virtual laboratories and massive online global surveys, presents an opportunity never before afforded to social scientists. The existence of increasingly integrated sets of comparative data, and the means to manipulate it, also mean that complex problems can be interpreted more systematically and at a global level.

The major developments in social research will be driven by the need to work in ways that address a multiplicity of pressing global challenges cost-effectively and convincingly, and through necessity, across different sectors.



Thank you Ceridwen

SRA chair, *Patten Smith*, thanks a stalwart advocate for the SRA



At the end of 2014, Ceridwen Roberts will step down from the SRA board. Ceridwen was a founder member of the SRA in 1978, and served on the board in the 1980s. She took on the role of chair and then vice-chair between 2002 and 2007, and was again a board member from 2011 to the present. Although I knew Ceridwen professionally many years ago (as a client), I have only got to know her well since I joined the SRA board in 2011. Ceridwen is highly intelligent, scrupulously ethical, well connected, resolute, resourceful, immensely hard-working and a natural leader. She also believes passionately in the importance

of social research for public life, and has been a stalwart advocate for the SRA.

I am especially grateful to her for a host of things. First, when I joined the SRA board it contained a good few greenhorn members (including me), and we all benefited hugely from Ceridwen's experience and sound judgement. Shortly after this, the SRA plunged into a financial – and indeed, existential – crisis and was only saved by a combination of extensive unpaid work and generous financial contributions by a small group of members. Nobody made a greater all-round contribution to the survival of the SRA than Ceridwen at this time. Without

her efforts and refusal to accept defeat, I doubt we would still have an SRA.

As if this wasn't enough, over recent years Ceridwen has edited the SRA Research Matters magazine; has been integral to the SRA website refurbishment; has chaired the events group; and has set up and run the SRA strategy group.

I want to finish with a big thank you to Ceridwen, on behalf of the SRA and the board, and also personally. We wish her well in everything to which she applies her prodigious talents.

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SRA honours Ceridwen Roberts and Janet Lewis as patrons



Ceridwen Roberts



Janet Lewis

It may not be quite the new year honours list, but we are very pleased and proud to announce that Ceridwen Roberts and Janet Lewis have both agreed to be patrons of the SRA. Ceridwen and Janet have been hugely important to the SRA ever since the very early years,

and they have continued to serve the SRA and the wider social research profession at the highest level. Their work has often taken place 'behind the scenes' but it has been fundamentally important. They have both led numerous initiatives to improve social research – perhaps most notably on

developing good practice guidelines for research commissioning.

Neither Jane nor Ceridwen would wish to take the credit or the limelight, but we hope that this honorary role is some small recognition of their unstinting and vital contributions.

SRA Scotland update

Report by Sophie Ellison

Over the past couple of months we have hosted two well-received seminar and networking events. The first of these was with Sheena Fletcher from Glasgow Centre for Population Health and explored hints, tips and tools for using social media to improve research impact. The second was with Annie Wild and Anna Marcinkiewicz from Scotcen, who shared learning from their experience of using cognitive testing to improve survey design, with Scottish Social Attitudes Survey as a case study. We'd like to thank all speakers for their thought-provoking presentations which generated some really interesting discussions – it was great to see a mix of new and familiar faces at both events.



As 2014 comes to a close, the committee is already starting to think about how to further benefit and support members and the wider social research community in 2015, and we will be meeting early in the new year to start developing our programme. We'd love to hear from you if there are particular SRA training courses you'd like to see running in Scotland, or if you have ideas for a seminar, or would like to speak at one.

Join us on LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/groups/SRA-Scotlands-network-Social-Researchers-4973959

Or follow us on Twitter to stay in touch! [@SRA_Scotland](https://twitter.com/SRA_Scotland)

SRA Cymru update

Report by Jennifer Evans

We're rounding the year of in style again, with our ever popular festive event – this time with an opportunity for PhD students to share their research, as well as hear about research careers from the local social researchers in the area. The event provides an informal networking opportunity over a mince pie or two, and profiles the range of social research careers across different sectors.



Our very own Faye Gracey hosted an evening seminar this quarter on evaluation frameworks and the development of an impact model, used in WRAP (www.wrapcymru.org.uk). The session was well attended, giving useful insights into how WRAP has demonstrated the value of its work – something we are all expected to do and can struggle with at times.

Our breakfast socials have continued although with fewer attending. However, we use it as an opportunity to catch up and will continue to welcome anyone who wishes to drop in to talk about their work or hear about what we are doing locally.

Finally, we have a change in branch chair due: Faye Gracey has been nominated and is hoped to take up the role for 2015. So, this is the last update from me! I'll still see you at events, on Twitter and on Linked In, so I won't disappear entirely! Thanks for all your support over the years – it couldn't be done without you all.

SRA north and central England update

Report by Helen Kara

Following the inaugural meeting of this new SRA group in June in Manchester, a few dedicated volunteers have taken over coordinating the group. They have had a couple of setbacks – some of the eight people who originally volunteered to help pulled out, and an event initially arranged for October had to be cancelled because speakers became unavailable. Nevertheless, they are working hard to get the group off the ground.



To this end, the coordinators have set up an email address for the group at srnorth@gmail.com and a Twitter account [@srnorth](https://twitter.com/sranorth). They are aiming to rotate events between Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds, perhaps including other locations such as Liverpool and Newcastle in due course, and to hold events quarterly through 2015 and beyond. Please email the group if you would like to be kept informed about events and training courses in the region.

The SRA is also running training courses in Manchester, with the next one planned for 8 December on 'Research Using Social Media'. The group is helping to publicise these courses.

The group's coordinators would welcome new volunteers. There are many ways you can get involved and no minimum time commitment. So, if you are in the north and central England region and can spare a little time, please do make contact.

SRA Ireland update

Report by Noelle Cotter

SRA (Ireland) was pleased to host two excellent seminars this quarter. In October, we co-hosted a seminar with Ipsos MRBI in Dublin, with particular assistance from committee members Kieran O'Leary and Naomi Feely. Kieran arranged for Sam Clemens, an Ipsos Mori colleague and SRA board member, to speak about her involvement in the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) rolling programme while visiting Ireland on business with Patten Smith, chair of the SRA board. Sam spoke about establishing this study and the ethical considerations around collecting non-traditional data.

In November, we hosted a practical seminar on accessing and using existing large-scale data resources. Dr Mark Ward from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin tailored the seminar to attendees' own work, providing a practical overview of what is available; how to access data; and what to do with it; including information on initial analysis. Mark has previously worked on the 'Growing-Up in Ireland'

longitudinal survey, with particular focus on the socio-economic variation in the predictors of childhood overweight and obesity. This dataset is available for general use, and is a wonderful resource that all attendees were encouraged to use.

Also in October, I was invited to give a guest lecture to the 2014-2015 MSc Applied Social Research class in Trinity College Dublin at which I was able to highlight the work of the SRA and, I hope, encourage new members.

The September issue of Research Matters featured committee member, Dr Kathy Walsh, writing about her experiences of working as a freelance consultant. We hope to encourage more contributions from Ireland. So, if you have any proposals, or any other queries, please get in touch by email: sra.ireland@gmail.com. We are also on Twitter: follow us for information about new research, funding opportunities, international vacancies and events across the UK and Ireland: [@SRAIreland](https://twitter.com/SRAIreland)



2015: International Year of Evaluation

The International Organization for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), UNICEF and several other major organisations have declared 2015 International Year of Evaluation with the aim of advocating and promoting evaluation and evidence-based policy making at international, regional, national and local levels. The initiative hopes to bring together diverse stakeholders into a movement designed to mobilise the energies and enhance the synergy of existing and new monitoring and evaluation initiatives at international and national levels. SRA will endeavour to mark this important year in its publications and events.

For more information about the International Year of Evaluation see: http://mymande.org/evalyear/Declaring_2015_as_the_International_Year_of_Evaluation

New directory of members



In October the SRA set up a new directory of members' research services on the website. Every member can have an entry in the directory – however if your employer pays for your membership please check first that they are ok with this. And if you're an employee and your employer pays for your SRA subscription, we can also offer a separate entry in the directory for them, as an organisation offering research services.

Your entry can contain as much or as little information as you like and can include a logo or even a photo. There is a list of research methods and substantive research areas for you to choose from, as many as apply. This allows visitors to the directory to filter their searches, and they can also search by name, location etc. There is space for your biography and contact details.

We hope the directory will benefit members who can provide research services / consultancy – both self-employed researchers, and employees – to commissioners, or to people and organisations who are looking for collaborators. It's a 'soft launch' now, but with critical mass of entries we'll give the directory plenty of publicity, on social media and elsewhere.

Contribute to SRA Research Matters

We are always pleased to discuss contributions to Research Matters. We consider articles on any topic as long as they are about research findings or research practice, and we particularly welcome contributions that show how research can make a difference. Whether you would be interested in writing a short piece (330 words) or a full page article (670 words), do email us at admin@the-sra.org.uk

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A new journal to showcase the work of researchers

By *Richard Bartholomew*, independent researcher



The SRA is delighted to announce the launch of its new journal, 'Social Research Practice'. It aims to provide both an outlet and a resource for researchers working in applied social research across all sectors and disciplines. It will be a practical publication with a focus on:

- Qualitative and quantitative methods rather than findings
- Accounts of applications and case studies of practical value for research colleagues, rather than discussion of philosophical principles and theory
- New and innovative research methods, without excluding useful research based on more traditional methods
- The impact of research on practice and policy and how this is achieved

The journal will encourage and promote high standards of social research for public benefit.

It will provide the opportunity to present and discuss new methodologies; give people ideas for applying these methodologies; and describe how they have (or under what circumstances they have not) led to gathering different or richer data. But we will also encourage contributions drawing on work which is based on more traditional methods.

To start with, there will be two issues of the journal a year. They will be freely available from the SRA website. Articles will be fairly short, 2,400 to 4,000 words. It will not include book reviews as these are already well covered by the SRA's quarterly 'Research Matters' magazine.

The first editor and board

I have been asked to be the first editor of the journal. I am an independent researcher having retired after 34 years working in government social

research, mainly with the Department for Education and the former Department of Employment.

In recent weeks, we have been inviting a wide range of researchers to join the editorial board. They are from different sectors (agency, voluntary, government, academic and independent) and experts in different methods and aspects of social research. We are grateful that so many have already agreed to join.

Benefit to members

The SRA is funding and publishing the journal, but we are not limiting circulation as an exclusive membership benefit. We reasoned that if members, as we hope, write many of the articles, they will want to reach as wide a readership as possible.

However, the journal would not exist without the support that members give to the SRA. As a general principle, therefore, in the event of a 'tie' between two articles of equal quality, we will prefer those by SRA members.

Style

We are asking authors to write in a clear, accessible, jargon-free style. This is important. 'Social Research Practice' will not be an academic journal in the traditional sense, and although much academic writing is, of course, a model of clarity, some of it can lapse into unnecessary verbiage and complexity. Articles will be much shorter than those in academic journals, with background and contextual information kept brief.

Literature reviews will not be required, but we will expect some context-setting and justification of the paper's importance, including relevant background information such as the policy context; why the research is important; and how it came about.

Starting soon

This is an exciting venture. As many members know, we considered other options, including a fully-commercial academic journal. But we thought that such a model would not serve our intention – a journal that practising researchers could write for and read.

I would encourage all of you to contribute articles, and the SRA office will be writing to members in due course with more information about how to take part.



Ethics, ethics everywhere

By *Helen Kara*, SRA trustee



I was lucky enough to go to the research methods festival in Oxford in July. It was a wonderful event over three sunny days, with hundreds of fascinating workshops and presentations. One morning was devoted to workshops on ethics, so of course I went along. The workshops were of very high quality, but I was dismayed that they all focused on data collection. When I mentioned this to one of the conference organisers, she sighed, and said that was because data collection is the only part of research which is of interest to ethics review committees.

I find this really worrying because ethics should underpin every aspect of the research process. Of course, data collection is the phase in which researchers are most likely to cause direct harm to participants. But researchers can cause harm at any stage, and it is essential to think this through. From the very genesis of a research idea, there are ethical questions to consider. Why is that idea a good one? Whose purposes would the research serve? Could the findings be misused by people with harmful agendas?

A literature review is only paper and words; what harm could possibly be caused? Well, if a researcher doesn't read carefully, they risk citing someone's work inaccurately. We all have ethical responsibilities to people whose work we read and use. Those people have put months or years, maybe even decades, of work into their writing. If a researcher does not take the time to read thoroughly and think until they gain a full understanding of meaning and purpose, they risk misrepresenting other people's work. This is unethical.

And what about data analysis? For a start, it is unethical to collect data and then not analyse it, because that wastes participants' time and researchers' resources. Preparing data for analysis is often laborious and repetitive, yet data entry, transcription, coding and so on must be done with the utmost care if findings are to be accurate. It is unethical to invent or distort data, or to misuse statistical techniques. And accident or ignorance is no defence. As researchers analyse data, they are responsible to many people: participants, funders, commissioners, supervisors, and so on. In ethical research, those responsibilities should be discharged in a competent way.

At the reporting stage, researchers develop a new set of responsibilities: to their potential readers. Ethical writing uses clear language and structures to help people read the work as easily as

possible. It is also important to do justice to participants by representing data accurately and interpreting it fairly. And this is where researchers need to ensure that they cite the work of others accurately and avoid plagiarism.

Research findings should be presented so that the audience can readily grasp the key points. Visual aids may be

helpful here, but they must be clear and comprehensible. It is unethical to bore an audience into a stupor through 'death by PowerPoint' or by reading a presentation line by line from the page. Overall, research presentation is truly ethical when it gives the audience the best chance of understanding and remembering the information that the research conveys.

Dissemination is an ethical act in itself, as all research findings should be disseminated, particularly when the research is publicly funded. Ethical social research will be firmly linked with theory and practice, and dissemination enables these links to be forged. Ideally, research should be disseminated to anyone who could be affected by its findings – although in practice this can be difficult to achieve. But every effort should be made to do so. Simply uploading a research report to a website is not enough. There are many ways to disseminate research, using social or mainstream media, videos or podcasts, posters or stories.

One aspect of ethical research which is often overlooked is the need for researcher self-care. Research has the potential to endanger researchers physically, emotionally, and/or politically. Researchers have many ethical responsibilities to others, but they and to some extent, if relevant, their employers also have an ethical responsibility for their well-being and safety.

The workshops were of very high quality, but I was dismayed that they all focused on data collection



So how well did the polls do?

By *John Curtice*, professor of politics, Strathclyde University



Clearly the most important features of the Scottish referendum result are which side won and which lost, and how politicians react and respond to the outcome. But there is also another question to be asked of the result – how well did the polls do and which was closest to the result? (Ed note: 55% ‘No’)

Here is a table of what might be considered the each company’s final poll. For this purpose a final poll is defined as one that was the last that the company conducted and was one for which the fieldwork was completed no later than two days before polling day. Five polls fit that definition.

undertook an ‘on the day’ poll in which it re-interviewed on polling day itself a sample of those whom it had previously interviewed during the latter stages of the campaign, and this exercise put the No vote on 54%, a higher estimate than obtained by any of the polls in the table.

Doubtless, while the polling industry will be a little disappointed at apparently having underestimated No support somewhat, it will probably feel that it has emerged relatively unscathed from its attempt to estimate voting preferences in a novel context. For most of the campaign, the systematic differences between the polls suggested there was a risk that at least some of them (we were just not sure which ones) would suffer reputational damage for having been seen to have got the referendum result wrong. The convergence in their estimates towards the end of the campaign reduced that risk but created another – that they would all be found to have got it wrong. In the end, they have probably just done well enough to have avoided that fate too, while recognising that if there were ever to be a second time they would want to do better.

This article first appeared on <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/09/well-polls/> and the SRA is reproducing it here with permission.

TABLE: Accuracy of Final Polls

Company and Fieldwork Dates	% No	Error
ICM 12-16.9.14	52	-3
Panelbase 15-17.9.14	52	-3
YouGov 15-17.9.14	52	-3
Survation 16-17.9.14	53	-2
Ipsos MORI 16-17.9.14	53	-2

Each of them correctly identified that No would win. Moreover, each of the companies can legitimately argue that the error in its final poll is no greater than the margin of error of +/-3 points to which all polls are subject. However, the error was not random, but all in one direction, that is underestimating No strength. That is suggestive of some kind of systematic error rather than just the misfortune of random chance. Steve Fisher’s warning on the What Scotland Thinks website (<http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/09/accurate-will-scottish-independence-referendum-polls>) earlier in the week that polls have a tendency to overestimate Yes support in referendums on constitutional change appears to have been prescient.

One possible source of such error is ‘late swing’, that is people changing their minds at the last minute. For that there is

some evidence. It will be noted that those final polls whose fieldwork was confined to the last two days of the campaign had a slightly higher estimate of the No vote than did those whose fieldwork was at least in part conducted before then. Meanwhile, three of the companies actually conducted two separate polling exercises and in each case their second reading obtained a lower Yes vote than did their first one. In the case of Ipsos MORI, a poll conducted using the same (phone) methodology 24 hours earlier than that shown in the table put No a point lower on 52% (<http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/09/last-lap-ipsos-moris-final-poll>). The Survation poll) shown in the table was conducted by phone, but an internet poll conducted by the company (the method it used most often during the campaign) between 12 and 16 September also put No a point lower. Meanwhile, YouGov



What is a theory of change?

By **Matt Barnard**, head of evaluation, NSPCC

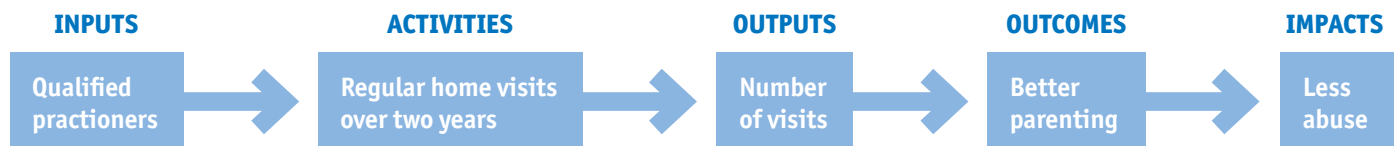


Developing a theory of change is one of the most challenging and exciting parts of designing an evaluation. Poised on the interface between programme development and research, a theory of change enables a project team to identify the right outcomes and judge what difference an intervention should make. It also allows an evaluation to look inside the 'black box' and potentially get

an indication of what elements of the intervention should be measured.

Clearly, a theory of change has a lot of weight resting on its shoulders. So, getting it right can be crucial. Ideally, setting out a theory of change should be done right at the conception of the programme. However, it is a stage that often gets missed out in the pressure cooker environment of project initiation,

and part of the reason is a sense of mystery around what it is. There are at least three kinds of theories of change. The first operates at a **strategic level**: a 'big picture' description of the intervention and based on 'inputs', 'activities', 'outputs', 'outcomes' and 'impacts'. Using the NSPCC's Minding the Baby intervention as an example, it might look something like the diagram below:



This type of theory of change is good for evaluating the fundamentals of a programme or policy as it prompts questions such as 'were there enough qualified practitioners?', 'did the home visits take place?', 'how many parents were seen?'. It is also good for distinguishing between 'outputs' and 'outcomes', and making sure the expected outcomes and impacts are realistic. It

is possible for regular home visits to improve parenting – are we in the right ball park?

The second type of theory of change is at the **process level**, and focuses attention on the 'activities' box. It prompts the question, 'how is this actually going to work on the ground?' A highly simplified example is shown below; often this type of theory of change will

look the most complex, because it is important to capture all the various steps to explore what helped and what hindered the operation of the model. How are midwives passing on contact details?; what do practitioners say when arranging visits? However, it is also relatively straightforward to develop because it is what programme developers will have spent a lot of time considering.



The final level of theory of change describes the mechanism of the intervention. This can be a very simple representation, but can also be the most difficult for programme developers to

articulate. This is because it requires them to identify what will actually make a difference. In other words, it is about what is going on inside the 'black box'.



This type of theory of change enables programme developers and researchers to be precise about what should be measured in an evaluation and is also crucial in checking that the intervention is plausible – can what we are doing improve parents' ability to play with their

infants and could that improve reflective functioning? It also highlights the 'how much' question – how much do you need to improve reflective functioning to improve attachment, therefore how big does our sample size need to be?

All three types of theory of change are

MORE INFORMATION

The Magenta Book
<http://tinyurl.com/mbu3l6t>

Making connections
<http://tinyurl.com/kmdv1b4>

Logic mapping: hints and tips
<http://tinyurl.com/kafk5wk>

useful and highlight important questions that an evaluation will need to answer. The most powerful thing about them, though, is probably also what can make them frightening – sometimes they imply you should not evaluate an intervention at all, you should re-design it.

Building research capacity around the world



Joe Bonnell is founder of OpenQuestions and provides training and mentoring to qualitative researchers, mainly in developing countries. Here he reflects on his experiences.

As a qualitative researcher, I know firsthand how important good training, mentoring and support can be both for researchers' professional development and for the quality and impact of the research they produce.

Qualitative researchers in the UK, the USA and Europe have all the benefits of an established research sector, with strong networks and professional bodies, a host of courses, informal learning opportunities, and mentorship schemes to support them in conducting high-quality research and developing their careers.

A common need

Those living and working in less developed countries have far less support available to them. However, the demand is there. From Port Au Prince in Haiti to Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea, there are people conducting qualitative research hungry for training, mentoring and support.

Clients commissioning research in developing countries also have an appetite for training and capacity building. Multi-national companies, international development agencies, NGOs with small research teams and specialist research firms all want to use skilled local teams to conduct their research, and are willing to invest to support such teams achieve high quality studies.

Over the past three years, I have worked in developing countries to train, mentor and support local research teams on qualitative research projects. Most recently, I have helped teams of financial inclusion specialists in India and Indonesia prepare for their first qualitative study; supported an experienced team in Nigeria to sharpen

their skills; and helped an NGO in Pakistan design a study into economic activity in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This is what I have learned:

Laying the foundations

Of all of the things qualitative training *could* cover, there is one thing it *must* cover, regardless of the skills and experience of the team. And it is something that is often lacking when commissioning or employing local, on-the-ground research teams. Researchers need support, training and permission to move beyond 'facilitation' and contribute to and take ownership of every stage of a research project including:

- Contributing to developing research questions
- Sharing hypotheses and assumptions about the research questions
- Creating conceptual frameworks
- Informing sample design and choice of methodology
- Conducting fieldwork
- Analysis and reporting

Many researchers and skilled moderators working in developing countries remain stuck at the 'conducting fieldwork' stage of research. They have not been given opportunities to engage critically and participate in the research design and analysis of projects they work on.

Thinking analytically

Training and support needs often manifest as researchers wanting 'help with analysis'. But 'analysis' is too often treated as a process that only happens when fieldwork is complete (and by consultants who did not conduct the fieldwork). Good research requires

someone who can provide culturally appropriate, insightful input throughout the research process and contribute findings relevant to the overarching questions and organisational needs underpinning the research.

To achieve this goal, capacity building should first and foremost focus on empowering researchers in developing countries to be more than just qualitative moderators who speak the local language. The foundation for training should be to encourage researchers to think analytically about the research from the outset, and contribute to the project at all stages. Qualitative research conducted in challenging environments can then be well designed by local teams with expert support and mentoring where needed.

Looking ahead

There are many exciting opportunities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing for researchers willing to work in difficult environments. Providing training and support to researchers working in developing countries should be part of an ongoing commitment to building research capacity where it is needed most. The first step should be giving full project ownership to local researchers combined with the expert and hands-on support they need to succeed. Over time, this should lead to the development of a mature and established countrywide research sector, giving people the opportunity to have sustainable and rewarding careers as researchers whilst delivering high quality studies.

Find out more: joe.bonnell@openquestions.co.uk and www.openquestions.co.uk/about

It's not (just) about the money, money, money...

By *Jane Perry*, freelance researcher



Being an independent researcher can be rewarding and difficult (often at the same time). The ebbs and flows of project work; the need to take on commitments not knowing if all the work will come in at once; the need for an occasional holiday – all research organisations struggle with these issues, but independents handle them alone. In the second of a series of articles from independent researchers, we asked Jane Perry to provide the freelance perspective on dealing with shifting workloads.

Intrigued former colleagues often inquire about life as an independent social researcher. A common assumption is that the biggest challenge in managing fluctuations in workload must be financial. Certainly the classic 'feast or famine' of freelance life is very unlikely to provide the sort of guaranteed cash flow which keeps bank managers happy. Mortgage companies are more likely to laugh at you than loan to you. However, just as most social researchers aren't solely 'in it for the money', few, if any, freelancers embark on an independent career for the financial security.

In the seven years or so that I've been independent, I've developed various techniques for managing peaks and troughs in income: arranging payment by milestone, rather than just on completion; staying on top of invoicing; being prepared to chase payment, promptly and often repeatedly; systematically saving to spread costs of tax and insurance, to name a few. The real challenges for me, however, are personal – how to answer the dreaded 'so have you got much work on?' question – and practical: how to plan my work to ensure that I deliver projects on time when the work itself and the timetables for delivery can be very uncertain?

First, I find it helps to remind myself that flexibility cuts both ways. I freelance predominantly because of the freedom it brings: freedom from the constraints and demands of working for an organisation; freedom to manage my own time, so 'work' fits as well as possible with, and around, the other things in life. The flipside is that a degree of uncertainty comes as part of the territory. Flexibility has advantages for me, but also for clients. 'Yes, I can manage that' goes a long way in establishing reputation and, hopefully, future work. So I've learned not only to try to roll with the uncertainty but to plan for it. It can be very tempting to offer all the hours you possibly have to a project, but that leaves little or no spare room for accommodation when things, predictably, don't go to plan.

Speaking of which, planning is key. It can be incredibly difficult to estimate how long work will take, in duration or elapsed time. Getting it wrong can be crippling, financially and in terms of scheduling work. I've learned the importance of carefully breaking down specifications into individually timed tasks, and of carefully monitoring how long those tasks

actually take. I prefer working to specified days per task, rather than a fixed price. Of course, appropriately pricing work can be a minefield – charging too little undersells you and risks looking 'cheap', too high will quickly price projects out of existence, especially in the third sector.

Reflecting on my work practices, it becomes obvious that the skills are much the same as those required of any research manager: planning, monitoring and, above all, clear communication about expectations, availability and progress. Few things are as important as good relationships with clients, which in my experience means being prepared to be both frank and honest. Flexibility, being able to prioritise, delivering what's expected, on time, and willingness to be both approachable and accommodating are all key things which clients are looking for and, up to a point, are prepared to pay for from freelancers. The tricky bit is managing that in order to ensure an income which works for you. It might not be just about the money, but it is about the price-tag.



Celebrating social science

By **Roses Leech-Wilkinson**, research and policy officer,
Campaign for Social Science



Demonstrating the urgency and value of support for the social sciences ought to be straightforward. After all, every major societal challenge concerns people – climate change, ageing, the UK's relationship with Europe, social cohesion following the economic recession – and people are inherently complex. None of these challenges, therefore, can be understood or addressed effectively without wide-ranging and good-quality social science. And that means nurturing social science with the infrastructure and resources it needs to do the job.

But making this case is not without its challenges. Policymakers ask for neat, timely solutions that are politically expedient, easy to implement and provide 'bangs for bucks'. By contrast, social science's methods are various;

its findings rarely neat and tidy, and are specific to particular contexts. But the same is true of the natural sciences, whose advocates have made great strides over the last three decades in raising their profile in government(s) and with the public. We now need an equally strong and positive voice for the social sciences, in which social scientists themselves play a vital role.

The Campaign for Social Science

Social researchers know better than most the importance and strength of UK social science. The Campaign for Social Science was founded to celebrate this success and make it known to policymakers and the wider public. Our aims are to:

- Inform and influence public policy with social science
- Promote social science in the media
- Gather evidence, build coalitions and engage in intelligent advocacy for social science

Although the campaign is young (it was launched in 2011 by the Academy of Social Sciences), it is already established as an authoritative voice at the interface between social science and public policy, and we are rapidly building momentum

In preparation for the 2015 general election and spending review we are working on a major new report, 'The Business of People'.

Information on our achievements so far and the first video in a series about the project at:

www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk

What has Full Fact been up to?

By **Phoebe Arnold**, communications officer, Full Fact



Just before the Scottish referendum, Ipsos Mori asked people in Scotland how easy or difficult it was to find trustworthy information that would help them to vote. 61% found it fairly or very difficult.

We need to change this dismal situation, and we need your research expertise to create a treasure trove of free information to help voters feel confident about the choice they make at the general election on 7 May.

We are planning reusable recordings, videos, and graphics, digestible online briefings and an information election centre which the public and press can call on for answers to their questions.

Our experience of live 'fact-checking' the EU debates, Scottish referendum and

party conferences with LBC radio and Sky News has shown us that preparation is essential to rapid response.

We have been working with expert partners in our areas of focus: the Migration Observatory at Oxford University, the National Foundation for Education Research, the Health Foundation, the Institute of Criminal Policy Research and NatCen Social Research. With their help, we have been working out the biggest issues likely to come up in the election, and what we think they should be.

We cannot build this by ourselves: we need social researchers to write or contribute; to peer review; proofread; and edit. We want to be able to share the best available answers to the big

questions. For this we need your help.

But when this is in place, our work will not be over. We want to run an election centre from April through to the election to provide a rapid response service on a scale that can make a dent in the million-pound party campaigns which will be in full swing by then.

There are 155 days left to make this election one that is not something politicians do to the rest of us. Get involved and give your rights a workout!

Contact Rebecca Smith on election@fullfact.org

See also: <https://fullfact.org>

Full Fact is the UK's independent factchecking organisation

Looking ahead at the ESRC

Professor Jane Elliott took up her new post as ESRC chief executive in October. We asked her about the ESRC's support for non-academic research and qualitative research, and about improving politicians' and the media's use of social research.



Do you think the ESRC provides sufficient support for non-academic social science research?

Our priority is to ensure we fund excellent social science research. Our support is not restricted to academic researchers working in universities as we also accept proposals from independent research organisations provided that they meet criteria agreed by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the research councils. We also have a number of schemes to help researchers engage with business, the third sector and government. For example, the Secondary Data Analysis Initiative encourages partnerships between academics and potential users of research.

We also provide support and funding for PhD students. This ensures that we not only have future academic researchers, but also that we have highly educated social scientists who can contribute across society.

Do you think the ESRC has struck the right balance between quantitative and qualitative social science funding?

As the UK's largest funder of social science research we have a responsibility to provide a sound infrastructure. This includes resources both for those doing qualitative and quantitative research. For example, the UK Data Service (<http://ukdataservice.ac.uk>) provides access to a huge range of archived material from qualitative studies as well as large-scale structured data from studies such as Understanding Society and the British Election Study.

At the level of individual research proposals, large grants and research centres, we do not operate a quota system for qualitative and quantitative research; instead we fund research which is judged excellent by peer reviewers. Our current collaboration with the Department for International Development is a good example of qualitative research as quite a lot of the work done in this area is based on case studies.

What can we do to improve politicians' use of social science research?

When encouraging politicians and the media to make better use of social science research it is important to present engaging and robust evidence. People are often more persuaded by a vivid story about an individual's circumstances than by a table of coefficients. However, it is important to ensure that any narrative case studies we provide are backed up by sound empirical evidence and are not simply anecdotes. There is an increasing portfolio of techniques for communicating research findings including infographics, interactive websites and podcasts; we need to support researchers to make best use of these.

We work successfully in partnership with government and the public sector to improve the use of social science research by parliamentarians. Examples include a dedicated social science arm of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST); evidence briefings to senior government staff, select committees and all-party parliamentary groups on topics which highlight research findings and their relevance in key policy areas; support for the Global Uncertainties and Social Science and

Policy All-Party Parliamentary Groups; hosting Institute for Fiscal Studies pre-budget briefings for the main parties in the run-up to the Budget; and, supporting the 'What Works' initiatives which provide robust research evidence to guide decision making on public spending.

In recent years, we have been fortunate to have support from both the former Minister, David Willetts and the current Minister for Universities, Sciences and Cities, Greg Clark; both of whom have a social science background. However, we continue to look for ways in which we can raise the benefits of investing in social science research with politicians.

What can we do to improve the media's use of social science research?

The ESRC is committed to sharing the results of social science research with the public through the media. We provide our social scientists and large grant holders with support throughout their careers to help them communicate their findings, and we equip them with the skills to work with the media.

Social science appears in the news daily, and researchers are increasingly expected to provide expert comment and opinion. Social media is an important channel for us to reach the media, and journalists are increasingly engaging with us through Twitter.



Cognitive Interviewing Practice

Debbie Collins (editor)

SAGE, 2014

Reviewed by Dorothee Behr, cross-cultural survey methodologist at GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Germany

This book offers a hands-on guide to the ‘design, conduct, analysis and use of cognitive interviewing’ to both the newcomer to the method and to those who are more advanced or wish to get fresh insights into the method. The extensive experience of the authors in this field underlines the strength of the book: a book for practitioners, based on many years of actual practice at NatCen Social Research, with a multitude of real-life examples, checklists as well as top tips and recommendations that take into account practical constraints such as time or money.

The first part of the book introduces the theoretical underpinnings, the origins as well as the strengths and limitations of cognitive interviewing. Other pretesting methods, such as focus groups, debriefings or split ballot experiments are also presented, showing where cognitive interviewing best fits

in; how methods can be combined; and where their respective strengths lie.

The second part of the book provides a step-by-step guide to cognitive interviewing: planning, sampling and recruitment, interview protocol development, fieldwork, data management, analysis, and application of findings. An overview of the entire process is first provided with discussions of issues such as ethics or interviewing special population groups. This is followed by more detailed guidance through each step, including various issues which the uninitiated might think are pretty straightforward but, in fact, require much more thorough thinking (for instance, the nuts and bolts of sample designs or the writing of good probes). Especially useful, is the detailed description of how to get from the qualitative raw data to recommendations.

The third part of the book is dedicated

to more specific applications such as cognitive interviewing for specific (mixed) modes or for cross-cultural research.

The book is very well structured and broken down into concise and easy-to-read chunks.

Chapter goals presented in bullet point style, summaries and comprehensive bibliography lists complement each chapter. Furthermore, checklists or ‘pros and cons’ tables, for instance about a certain pretesting method, provide easy and quick access to the most important issues.

In summary, this is a highly valuable book for practitioners – whether new to the method or old hands. It equally serves those who need to have their questionnaires tested to understand the method and assess to what extent, how and when its application can be useful.



A Student's Guide to Methodology

Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown

SAGE, 2012 (3RD EDITION)

Reviewed by Wajihah Hamid, research assistant, Asia Research Institute, Singapore

This 288-page student guide is divided into three parts: ‘Research is methodology’; ‘The pervasive nature of methodology’; and ‘Making research public’. Each chapter has detailed learning objectives and a summary enabling readers to track their learning with additional references for unmet objectives.

A key point of this book is the distinction between research design, methods and methodology. The authors highlight the importance of constructing methods to tailor specific research needs rather than to ‘lift wholesale’ and ‘import uncritically’ someone else’s methods.

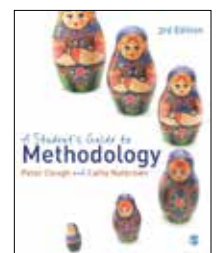
Drawing from experience, the authors offer useful tips and draw attention to potential pitfalls. They note the issues newcomers to research can find confusing

and have meticulously simplified steps serving as a guide for students. Each step includes several sample documents taken from past research. Students should also find the research-planning audit documents useful; these include a detailed explanation and a blank version for discussions between students and supervisors.

Clough and Nutbrown stress the imperative to first understand research methodology and then choose one suiting the discipline and purpose of the research. The importance of ‘developing a critical research approach’ is stressed, bearing in mind the ethical implications at all stages. To facilitate this, there is a section in each chapter for consideration of the ethical implication of the topics discussed.

The authors emphasise that it is essential to be able to justify research rationale, and by being clear about decisions from the beginning, researchers will be able to explain research motivations, and express them eloquently.

Written in clear language, this book contains figures and tables enabling readers to visualise key ideas. Activities throughout encourage students to reflect and engage with the ideas discussed, thereby making this guide highly interactive. Though aimed at students doing dissertations, it will be useful for any general practitioner/reader entering the field of research or undertaking qualitative social research.



SPSS Step by Step: essentials for social and political science

Cole Davis

POLICY PRESS, 2013

Reviewed by Nicola Singleton, independent researcher – analysis and research in substance misuse & mental health

SPSS Step by Step is for students and researchers who need to analyse and interpret data but have a limited knowledge of statistics. It takes a practical approach to explaining the rationale and procedures involved in different types of analyses using SPSS. The procedures described make it appropriate for beginners and those with intermediate levels of analysis skills who may be returning to analysis after a break or who face a new research problem.

The book starts by introducing simple statistical concepts in a non-statistical way, and explains how to enter data into SPSS and approach data analysis. The second section, which makes up the bulk of the book, covers the detail of when and how to conduct different statistical tests, working through practical examples within SPSS. A short final section covers reporting in applied research, and provides exercises and signposting to further statistical tests which might be useful.

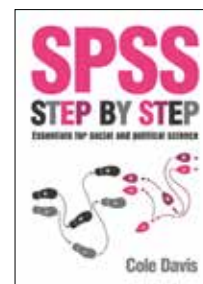
Many readers will appreciate the practical approach; the worked examples of tests in SPSS will help people understand the options they are offered within the programme and the detailed output they obtain. However, for most people, the book will be hard to follow if they are not working through the examples on their computer at the same time as reading the text. The determination to keep the text simple and avoid statistical detail limits what is covered, which will almost inevitably annoy specialists. However, the author discusses pitfalls and cautionary notes throughout the book and directs people to other books for more detail on some issues.

An unusual feature of this book is its strong focus on non-parametric statistics, and it has a whole chapter devoted to analysing categorical variables. This makes it suitable for researchers in the social and political sciences who often work with data of this

kind. In covering survival analysis, it also goes beyond most introductory texts.

The text is clear and well-illustrated with pictures of both input and output screens from SPSS. The style might be a bit 'jokey' for some, but will appeal to many. At the end of each chapter there is a 'talking point' which usually summarises the pros and cons of the tests in that chapter and some of the important issues to consider when using them.

So, this is a useful book for students and people who are fairly new to social research and who will be using SPSS for their work. It covers a range of non-parametric tests which are often overlooked. However, you need to be prepared and able to work through the examples on the computer as you read.



Books for review

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Ken Roberts, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd, 2011
- *The SAGE handbook of child research*
Gary B Melton, Asher Ben-Arieh, Judith Cashmore, Gail Goodman and Natalie Worley, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013
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If you are interested, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and we'll send you reviewing guidelines.



SRA training

LONDON

13 JANUARY – NVivo – advanced – Christina Silver

29 JANUARY – Cognitive interviewing – Pamela Campanelli

4 FEBRUARY – Analysis of qualitative data – Liz Spencer

5 FEBRUARY – Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings – Liz Spencer

12 FEBRUARY – Focus groups – Liz Spencer

CARDIFF

23 FEBRUARY – Questionnaire design and testing – Pamela Campanelli

24 FEBRUARY – Basic statistical analysis – Pamela Campanelli

The course fee per day is £260. SRA members receive a discount of 25% making the daily fee £195.

Full details and booking: www.the-sra.org.uk/training

For any queries please contact: Lindsay.Adams@the-sra.org.uk

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SRA Research Matters

EDITORIAL POLICY

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