Social Research Association

research:matters DEC:15

The evaluation journey is as important as the destination

*By **Tim Hobbs**, head of analytics, **Georgina Warner**, research fellow, **Sarah Heilmann**, associate, and **Nick Axford**, head of What Works, Dartington Social Research Unit*




Formative, 'real world' and low cost RCTs

The Dartington Social Research Unit (DSRU) has been undertaking randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of services for children for over a decade. There are three distinctive elements to our approach.

First, we consider a good RCT to be formative as well as summative: rather than working at distance from service-delivery organisations to solely and objectively judge impact, we also work to identify opportunities to improve a service prior to evaluation, and thus increase the likelihood of positive impact on child outcomes.

Second, we undertake trials in 'real world' delivery contexts rather than overly controlled 'laboratory conditions'. This, alongside our formative as well as summative approach, requires us to carefully balance the rigour and objectivity demanded by experimental trial with the pragmatism necessary to get them underway and completed.

Third, we do RCTs at a relatively low cost. There is a tendency amongst evaluators to measure and control everything under the sun. This, in turn, pushes the cost of evaluation up to levels that are often unreachable (not to mention the burden on participants). As a research charity, we work hard to strip trials down to just the necessary and sufficient elements so that they are more affordable to funders, commissioners and service-delivery organisations.

Lessons from pragmatic trials as part of Realising Ambition

Over the last few years, DSRU has been working with partners – Catch22, Substance and the Young Foundation – to support a £25m investment by the Big Lottery Fund called Realising Ambition. This five-year strategic investment by the fund is supporting the wider replication of 25 evidence-based and promising services across the UK to prevent or divert children and young people aged 8-14 away from pathways into crime.

One element of DSRU's role in this investment is to undertake three RCTs with three of the 25 projects in the Realising Ambition portfolio: Chance UK, Malachi Community Trust and the Ariel Trust. These RCTs are currently underway; you can read more about each project and the trials using the links at the end of this article.

Working in partnership with Chance UK, Malachi and the Ariel Trust, we are building our experience about how to effectively undertake such trials in real-world conditions, and reflecting on the associated benefits for service-delivery organisations undergoing an experimental trial. In this article, we highlight three key learning points.

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A first is the value of developing a strong programme logic model – one that is rooted in the best scientific evidence but also easy to explain in plain English. This is critical for an RCT for identifying which outcomes and programme elements need to be measured. Each of the three RCT projects started with a reasonably well-defined logic model, but preparing for the trials helped test the research foundations of these, refine the model and, in turn, inform intervention refinement. This approach, for example, helped Malachi put its logic model at the heart of all its training and implementation guidance. It helped the Ariel Trust not only strengthen the lesson plans, the programme manual and training for *Face Up*, but also contributed to refinements across its broader suite of services which are not part of the RCT.

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A second lesson and benefit of undertaking an RCT is the importance of attending to implementation fidelity. For the purposes of the RCT, it is necessary not only to measure outcomes, but also to be confident that the intervention is delivered as it was intended (because this can help explain the results). But a focus on fidelity also requires the developer to be realistic about what can be delivered, to identify core and flexible elements, and to tailor training and technical assistance to support delivery with fidelity. All three projects, as a result of preparing their RCTs, now have structured training and fidelity monitoring tools and checklists. These are valuable for the trial, as well as for ongoing quality improvement.

A third lesson concerns the need to accurately predict the number of people who will be eligible for, and want to receive the intervention. Every RCT requires a specified number of participants in order to have sufficient statistical power to stand a reasonable chance of detecting effects (if they exist). Equally, services need to be filled with suitable people if they are to be efficient and have maximum impact: it makes no sense to run half-empty groups or to serve families who neither need nor stand to benefit from the intervention.

The research team, for example, has worked closely with both Malachi and Chance UK to improve referrals. Part of this involved conducting an analysis of need and demand to estimate how many eligible children or parents there are in a specified population, and how likely they are to participate. Since recruitment was taking place in the context of a trial, it was important to also consider willingness to participate in research.

In the case of Chance UK, this analysis of need and demand showed that, of the five boroughs analysed, more schools were needed in three as the pool of children targeted in those locations was simply too small to meet project targets. Chance UK stepped up its school-engagement work in the identified boroughs, and referrals began to flow more readily. Moreover, with the analysis clarifying the demand for the programme, Chance UK saw the potential to use it as a tool for attracting investors for new boroughs. With a few tweaks, the demand analysis sits well in a funding application (and has since been included in a successful bid).

Next steps

Each of the three RCTs is well underway. We will be reporting results in the summer of 2017. In the meantime, we will be further reflecting on these lessons, and others, in a forthcoming publication as part of the Realising Ambition Programme Insight series. You can read more about the programme and find associated resources at: **www.catch-22.org.uk/programmes-services/realising-ambition/** and **http://dartington.org.uk/projects**

See also:

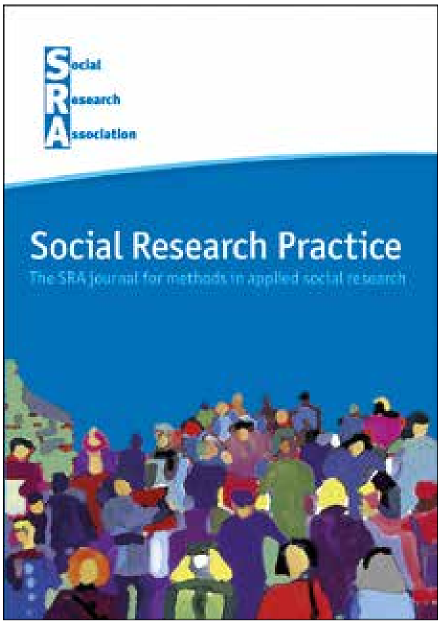
Axford, N., Berry, V., Little, M. (2006) Enhancing Service Evaluability: lessons from a programme for disaffected young people. Children and society. 20(4), 287–298.

The Social Research Unit at Dartington (2014) Design and Refine: developing effective interventions for children and young people. [pdf] Available at: **http://dartington.org.uk/inc/uploads/Design-and-Refine-guide.pdf** [Last accessed 5/11/15]

The new SRA journal

***Patten Smith**, SRA chair, introduces our new journal for applied social researchers*

I am extremely pleased to announce that the SRA has published the first issue of its new online journal, Social Research Practice. This has only been possible through the considerable efforts of a great many people, but special thanks are due to Graham Farrant, the SRA's general manager, and Richard Bartholomew who has enthusiastically taken on the role of editor. But, a journal needs content, and we are also very grateful to all of you who have already submitted articles, and to our editorial board members who have refereed articles for us.



The journal fulfils a hitherto unmet need for social researchers in the UK: for a regular publication we can use to inform one another about developments in our field, and which focuses especially upon what matters most to us as applied social researchers rather than on what matters to more theoretically-oriented academics. The journal is primarily concerned with the dissemination of high quality methods directly applicable to *applied social research*. It is less concerned with theory testing (although useful theories will feature) and will, as far as possible, avoid unnecessary and time-consuming requirements which can deter applied researchers from making submissions to academic journals. For example, we will only require extensive literature reviews in papers where they serve a clear purpose; we will use a very streamlined peer-review process; and so on.

It also represents something special for SRA members. We will select articles for publication on the basis of quality, but if several articles of similar quality are in competition for acceptance, we will prioritise SRA members' submissions.

We will publish Social Research Practice twice a year in the first instance, with each edition containing four papers. However, if demand warrants it, we may increase the publication frequency and/or number of articles per issue. But this will be largely down to you, our members, and your colleagues. We are looking for you to submit practical, useful articles which will benefit both researchers and research users.

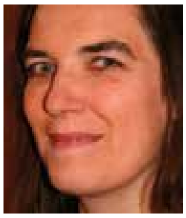
The journal considers mainly, but not exclusively, research methods but we interpret these broadly. We want to hear about innovative methods – qualitative as much as quantitative – which you have worked with even if they didn't work as you hoped. We are also very interested in receiving review articles which describe and assess recent developments in an area of research methods; in hearing about substantive findings which have a wider interest; and in descriptions of the ways in which research has influenced practice and/or policy.

Do remember that, if the journal is to be useful to you, we need a steady flow of articles, and that is down to you! Even if your thinking is at an early stage please come to us – the editor is more than happy to discuss with you how you might work your initial ideas up into an article.

And lest you accuse me of hypocrisy, you will see that my colleagues and I have a paper in the first issue, and we are proposing to submit a paper for the second!

Issue 1 and more information about the journal at: http://the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice

The ethics of evidence



*By **Helen Kara**, SRA trustee*

Like so many of the terms used in research, 'evidence' has no single agreed meaning. Nor does there seem to be much consensus about what constitutes good or reliable evidence. The differing approaches of other professions may confuse the picture. For example, evidence that would convince a judge to hand down a life sentence would be dismissed by many researchers as anecdote.

Given that evidence is such a slippery, contentious topic, how can researchers begin to address its ethical aspects? A working definition might help: evidence is 'information or data that people select to help them answer questions'[1]. Using that definition, we can look at the ethical aspects of our relationship with evidence: how we choose, use, and apply the evidence we gather and construct.

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Evidence is often talked and written about as though it is something neutral that simply exists, like a brick or a table, to be used by researchers at will. Knight's definition is helpful because it highlights the fact that researchers select the evidence they use. Evidence, in the form of facts or artefacts, is neither ethical nor unethical. But in the process of selection, there is always room for bias, and that is where ethical considerations come into play.

To choose evidence ethically, I would argue that first you need to recognise the role of choice in the process, and the associated potential for bias. Then you need to consider some key questions, such as:

- What is the question you want to answer?
- What are your existing thoughts and feelings about that topic?
- How might they affect your choices about evidence?
- What can you do to make those choices open and defensible?

The aim is to be able to demonstrate that you have chosen the information or data you intend to define as 'evidence' in as ethical a way as possible.

Once you have chosen your evidence, you need to use it ethically within the research process. This means subjecting all your evidence to rigorous analysis, interpreting your findings accurately, and reporting in ways that will communicate effectively with your audiences. These are some of the key responsibilities of ethical researchers.

Research is a process that converts evidence into research evidence. It starts with the information or data that researchers choose to use as evidence, which may be anything from statistics to artworks. Then, through the process of (one would hope) diligent research, that evidence becomes research evidence. Whether and how research evidence is applied in the wider world is the third ethical aspect.

Sadly, there is a great deal of evidence that evidence is not applied well, or not applied at all. Most professional researchers have tales to tell of evidence being buried by research funders or commissioners. This seems particularly likely where findings conflict with political or money-making ambitions. In some sectors, such as the voluntary sector, this is widespread[2]. How can anyone make an evidence-based decision if the evidence collected by researchers has not been converted into evidence they can use?

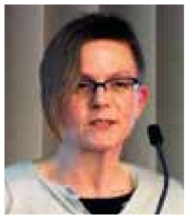
The use of research evidence is often beyond the control of researchers. One practical action a researcher can take is to suggest a dissemination plan at the outset. This can be regarded as ethical, because such a plan should increase the likelihood of research evidence being used. But it could also be regarded as manipulative: using the initial excitement around a new project to persuade people to sign up to a plan they might later regret.

It seems that ethics and evidence are uneasy bedfellows. Again, Knight can help us here. He suggests that research evidence should be used by people with expertise. I would say that, to be ethical, all evidence should be used with expertise: evidence needs the researcher's expertise, and research evidence needs the expertise of practitioners and policy-makers.

[1] Knight, P. (2004) 'Reducing uncertainty' in N. Jackson (ed.) An Evidence-based Approach in Higher Education – How Far Can We Take It? York:Higher Education Academy.

[2] Fiennes, C. (2014). 'We don't all need to throw wellingtons'. Third Sector 23 December 36-39.

My vision for GSR



*By **Jenny Dibden**, head of Government Social Research Service*

In September, the Government Social Research (GSR) Service launched a new five-year strategy to 2020. GSR comprises over 800 social researchers building the empirical evidence base and providing:

- Social research for policy development and evaluation
- Social research to support operational decisions
- Behavioural insights and trials
- Integrated working with policy teams, other analysts, contractors and academics

Over a third of our membership is in Wales, and we also have significant clusters in the north of England and Scotland. Government social researchers are looking at complex, long-term cross-cutting challenges such as the increasing population and the increasing proportion of elderly people. We are working with policymakers and other analysts to maximise the potential from existing and emerging datasets, taking part in strategic debates about data linkage and sharing.

I wanted us to make our strategy a public document to give stakeholders the opportunity to engage and to encourage a sense of ownership and involvement in social research generally. I hope SRA members will read it at: **www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-social-research-profession-strategy-2015-to-2020**

For the strategy to succeed, we need to be more involved with the social research network outside government. We also need to continue to develop relationships with external partners, so we can learn from them in order to advise government more effectively. We can also positively influence academic and commercial research agendas to help achieve departmental and government objectives.

Social research can provide vital information on the public and businesses we serve and answer important policy questions. In government, it helps with decisions about where best to spend limited money, and how to improve customer service. More information about a career in government social research: **www.gov.uk/government/organisations/civil-service-government-social-research-profession**

A special research library

*By **Mary Dunne**, information officer, Health Research Board*

Librarians in the Health Research Board's National Drugs Library support researchers, policymakers, educators, and practitioners working to develop the knowledge base around drug, alcohol and tobacco use in Ireland. We provide access to a special collection of Irish and international research, and related resources, through our website **www.drugsandalcohol.ie**

Drug-related research is a complex area, primarily rooted in physical and mental health, but also incorporating other aspects such as criminal and social justice, social science, and education.

Those who work with marginalised groups, such as drug users, are increasingly required to base their decisions on the best available research evidence. In 2011, we conducted a study examining the barriers and facilitators to research use among allied health practitioners and found that communication-related issues were the top barriers to use in practice[1]. We therefore focused on new ways of presenting research:

- In summarised form –factsheets and newsletter
- In special collated webpages –key Irish data page, policy page, practitioner resource
- In quick updates – Twitter, RSS feeds, electronic newsletter

We also provide other supports designed to facilitate research use such as:

- Commissioned research on community-selected issues
- Glossary of research terms and concepts

In our 2012 value and impact study, we found that these supports were useful to the majority of library patrons, and helped bring about positive change in practice[2].

As librarians, we have a significant role to play in facilitating knowledge transfer and exchange. Throughout the research process we can provide relevant resources and services, culminating in the effective dissemination and use of findings. We will continue to engage with researchers to achieve this.

1 Dunne, M. (2011) 'Barriers and facilitators to research use among allied health practitioners: a mixed-method approach to assessment'. Evidence Based Library and Information Practice 6(4). [online] Available at: **http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/11750** [Last accessed 5/11/15]

2 Dunne, M., Nelson, M., Dillon, L. and Galvin, B. (2013). 'Library value and impact: taking the step from knowing it to showing it'. Library and Information Research 37(116). [online] Available at: **www.lirgjournal.org.uk/lir/ojs/index.php/lir/article/view/577** [Last accessed: 11/5/15]

Ask a researcher...

***David Johnson**, SRA trustee and head of research and evaluation, Home Energy Programme, Department of Energy and Climate Change, answers our questions about the challenges in his research area.*

WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY?

I lead on the evaluation of the Green Deal programme in the Department of Energy and Climate Change. It's an ambitious area of government policy – finding new ways to encourage people to increase the energy efficiency of their homes. My team's work so far has concentrated on a wide-ranging process evaluation, and developing plans for the impact evaluation, which will be our focus for next year. As you might expect at this point in the electoral cycle, I have also been involved in feeding evidence from what we've learned so far into policy teams' work as they endeavour to meet the new challenges set by ministers.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES FACING GOVERNMENT RESEARCH TODAY?

It seems to me that, in many ways, the challenge is in synthesising and understanding the evidence we hold in ways that resonate for the policy and delivery teams with which we work. The world in which we live is complex, dynamic and impossible to reduce to a single number. And yet, the need for simplicity in policy design, driven by the pressures of time and feasibility, mean that researchers need to find ways to bridge that gap and 'translate' the research evidence in ways that balance relevance and rigour so that we as a research community have influence.

HOW CAN WE MAINTAIN HIGH STANDARDS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH WITH REDUCED RESEARCH BUDGETS?

I think this is always a difficult challenge, and one of which the SRA's members will be very conscious. Implicit in the question is, perhaps, a view that less money will mean having to compromise standards because projects will not be able to afford higher quality research. That may be true if you assume that the research community will need to continue to produce the same volume of research but, for me, part of the answer will be how we best use what we already have in new ways and prioritise our research effort to focus on mitigating the biggest risks to policy development and delivery.

However, I also think part of the answer depends on what you see your role as a researcher to be. My sense is that, increasingly, we (in government) need to find new ways to help policy teams think through their issues and challenges, deploying the skills we have as researchers to best effect. We've started this in DECC, and have been developing tools and techniques for policy mapping. These are helping to set out visually what policies hope to achieve, how and the 'necessary and sufficient' drivers of change that need to be in place. They also include new ways to use theory-based evaluation approaches to help people think systematically about what they are trying to achieve; and how to best learn about success and areas for improvement, for example, through applying realist evaluation techniques to our evaluation activity.

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS OF SOCIAL RESEARCH IN THE PAST TEN YEARS?

I think this is about integrating social research thinking and evidence with the decision-making about the world which we are collectively seeking to understand and influence. By that, I mean there is much more of a shared culture in research and policymaking which wants to draw on and learn from the research evidence. When I started in research, the policy and research worlds (in government at least) seemed in quite separate places, and that is certainly not the case now. Bringing researchers into policy teams, and the increasingly complex problems which need to be addressed, have increased the demand for evidence and analysis. Research is now integral to all aspects of the policy process.

This has also been seen in the work highlighted by the excellent Campaign for Social Science, and also in the impact focus of the recent UK Universities Research Excellence Framework Exercise. I sat on the panel for social policy and social work, and the quality of many impact submissions highlighting the excellent work of the social sciences in the UK was really exciting to see.

Commissioning evaluations of policy pilots


*By **Stefanie Ettelt**, lecturer in health policy, and **Nicholas Mays**, professor of health policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine*

Evaluations of national policy pilots are often embarked on with high expectations, and end with a sense of frustration on all sides. Policymakers often expect clearer, and more positive, verdicts from evaluation than researchers are able to provide; researchers hope for their findings to be more relevant; and implementers in pilot sites struggle to put in place what they think they are being expected to deliver within the limited timescale of the pilot, while wondering what they have gained from either the pilot programme or the national evaluation.

To ease some of these frustrations, we have developed guidance aimed primarily at national level staff involved in policymaking and in initiating policy-relevant pilots and their evaluations. We think the guidance will also be helpful to evaluators. Our advice stems from both experience and analysis[1] of the fate of policy pilots. Two observations, in particular, from evaluating policy pilots in health and social care have shaped our thinking.

The first observation is that many times it is not clear what an evaluation is intended to contribute to policy development. This lack of clarity is often a symptom of a deeper problem which has more to do with confusion and conflicts over the reasons for piloting than with the evaluation. Indeed, the objectives of the evaluation can be perfectly clearly expressed, and yet can entirely 'miss the point' if the purpose of piloting is not sufficiently taken into consideration. Different groups involved in a policy pilot can have different ideas about the purpose of piloting. These purposes also often change over time, for example, as a consequence of a ministerial decision to roll out the policy irrespective of whether the evaluation has been completed or not. We think it is important that the goals of such programmes are stated explicitly, and that their implications are thought through at the beginning of a pilot programme when it is still possible to make adjustments. This is also the time to identify the target audience for the evaluation. Whose knowledge is the evaluation aiming to contribute to? There are likely to be important differences in the information needs and preferences of national policymakers and local implementers which require some forethought if they are to be addressed adequately.

The second observation is that, under the influence of the mantra of 'evidence-based policy', policymakers in some quarters increasingly feel that they should require specific research designs for the evaluations of policy pilots, especially experimental designs. This consideration often comes too early in the discussion about pilot evaluations, and is introduced for reasons that have more to do with the reputation of the design as producing particularly 'valid' evidence of policy effectiveness than with its appropriateness to generate insights given the objectives of the specific pilot programme. Perhaps there is magical thinking at work, since the choice of research design does not make a programme more or less effective. Conducting a randomised control trial (RCT) is pointless if the purpose of a pilot is to find out whether or not, and if so, how a policy can be implemented in the first place. In such a situation, the 'active ingredients' of the intervention have not yet been determined, and thus cannot be easily experimented with.

In addition, the question of 'evaluability', which is relevant to all policy evaluation, is particularly pertinent for RCTs. RCTs require a substantial degree of researcher control over both the implementation of the pilots (for example a degree of uniformity to ensure comparability) and the implementation of the evaluation (for example compliance with a research protocol). This level of control is not a given, and the influence of researchers on pilot sites is much more likely to be based on negotiation and goodwill than compliance. Pilot evaluation of this type requires a significant and sustained commitment from pilot sites and policymakers for the duration of the pilot programme to stick with the research protocol, and manage the added risk and complexity.

We have developed a guidance document to help policymakers to plan (national) pilot programmes and their evaluations. 'Advice on commissioning external academic evaluations of policy pilots in health and social care' is available on the Policy Innovation Research Unit's website at **www.piru.ac.uk**. Comments are welcome, addressed to **Stefanie.Ettelt@lshtm.ac.uk**

[1] Ettelt, S., Mays, N. and Allen, P. (2015a). 'The multiple purposes of policy piloting and their consequences: three examples from national health and social care policy in England'. Journal of Social Policy 44(2): 319-337.

Ettelt, S., Mays, N. and P. Allen (2015b). 'Policy experiments: investigating effectiveness or confirming direction?' Evaluation 21 3): 292-307

The English Indices of Deprivation 2015

*By **Baljit Gill**, lead statistician, indices of deprivation, Department for Communities and Local Government*

In September, the Department for Communities and Local Government published the much anticipated English Indices of Deprivation 2015. This is the fifth release in a series of statistics measuring deprivation at neighbourhood level, and follows the 2000, 2004, 2007 and 2010 indices.

What are the indices of deprivation?

The indices provide a unique measure of relative deprivation at neighbourhood level. They reflect multiple dimensions, or domains of deprivation: income, employment, health, education and skills, crime, housing and other local services, and the living environment. Every neighbourhood in England (that is each of the 32,844 lower-layer super output areas) is ranked according to its level of deprivation relative to that of other areas.

The indices are seen as an authoritative tool for identifying the most deprived areas in England, and are widely used by central and local government, in public health, by local councillors, the voluntary, community and private sectors. They are mainly used to target resources and initiatives effectively; as evidence for strategies and policies; in funding bids; and in analysis, for example as a predictor of health outcomes or in exploring inequalities.

The indices have been constructed by Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, and are based on 37 indicators across the seven domains. The domain indices are combined, using appropriate weights, into the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). The majority of the indicators are sourced from administrative data such as benefit records from the Department for Work and Pensions, with a minority based on census data or modelled estimates. Most indicators in the 2015 indices relate to the tax year 2012/13.

What does this update show?

There are concentrations of deprivation in large urban conurbations, areas that historically had large heavy industry, manufacturing and/or mining sectors, coastal towns, and large parts of east London. This spatial distribution was also found in previous versions of the indices. Indeed, the majority (83%) of the most deprived 10% of all neighbourhoods according to the 2015 IMD were also the most deprived according to the 2010 IMD. This is not to say that the investment that many organisations make in deprived areas is not paying off; the IMD is a relative measure and it may be the case that deprived areas have improved but not as much as other areas did, and the indices are not a time series. There is more on how to interpret changes between versions of the indices in our research report (see below).

Three in five local authority districts (61%) contain at least one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England. In Middlesbrough, Knowsley, Kingston upon Hull, Liverpool and Manchester, over 40% of neighbourhoods are among the most deprived 10% nationally. There are also concentrations of more extreme neighbourhood deprivation: one in five local authorities (22%) contains a neighbourhood which is in the *one percent* most deprived nationally. One fifth of neighbourhoods in Blackpool are among the most deprived one percent nationally.

London Boroughs (notably Hackney, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich, Haringey and Waltham Forest) have become relatively less deprived according to the IMD. But they still feature prominently among the most deprived local authorities for income deprivation among older people, and to a lesser extent, among children.

To find out more

See **www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015** to:

- Access the datasets
- Read the findings – see the statistical release and research report
- Learn how to use and interpret the indices – see the guidance note and the research report, particularly chapter 3 which covers: interpreting changes in relative deprivation since the previous update (section 3.4); and understanding the range of summary measures published for higher-level geographies such as local authorities (section 3.3)

We have also produced a frequently asked questions note, which includes links to useful tools and some fascinating mappers (see question 5). One such mapper is the indices of deprivation explorer, designed to help researchers, policymakers, councillors, the public and others view the data for their areas. Although the data are not produced for wards, the map shows ward and local authority boundaries. **http://dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/idmap.html**

More information: **indices.deprivation@communities.gsi.gov.uk**

Fresh research opportunities which benefit society

*By **Judith Knight**, communications and public engagement team, Administrative Data Service*

Have you ever wanted to carry out research using the data which government departments routinely collect?

The Administrative Data Research Network (ADRN) provides a free bespoke service set up exclusively for social and economic researchers across the UK to access administrative data.

Through secure linkage of admin data sets, researchers have the opportunity to analyse de-identified records covering the breadth of the population.

In the short time we have been operational, more than 20 projects have been approved and over 30 research proposals are currently in development. You can see the approved projects on our website: **www.adrn.ac.uk**

What ADRN offers researchers

- Dedicated support in developing researchers' proposals
- Project-specific negotiations for data linkage and access
- Safe and secure access to de-identified data
- Final statistical disclosure control provided by experts enabling safe outputs
- A proactive data engagement programme paving the way for access to different categories of administrative data
- The opportunity to produce research that has public benefit and an impact on policymaking

The power of linked administrative data

Consultations with the general public have shown they are generally in agreement with using admin data for research purposes. A proviso of use is that proposals must demonstrate a potential benefit to society through intelligent research. A dramatic example of the benefits of linking administrative data can be found in Scotland; one which powerfully illustrates the potential benefits of linking data sources. With rapidly rising cases of diabetes, a condition which can cause amputations from infected ulcers or damage to a sufferer's retina resulting in blindness, Scotland used NHS and GP data to great effect. Every hospital and all 1,200 general practices across Scotland linked their health data on patients with diabetes, and used it to make sure the different parts of the health service were connected and intervening at the same time. This combined knowledge enabled a 43% reduction in laser treatments for retinopathy and a 40% reduction in amputations. These results translated into tangible benefits to individuals and an improved medical care programme for diabetics. More examples of the benefits to society are on our website.

Consultations with the general public have shown they are generally in agreement with using admin data for research purposes

More about the network

There are four Administrative Data Research Centres, one in each country of the UK. These are coordinated by the Administrative Data Service, the 'front door' for all researcher applications. Each of the network's centres has a unique partnership led by a university in partnership with their country's national statistics authority, government departments and agencies.

The Economic and Social Research Council, the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues, funds the ADRN. It is governed by a board, chaired by the UK Statistics Authority and reports directly to Parliament.

Our mission and vision are to benefit society and quality of life through intelligent social research; and to place the UK at the forefront of innovative social and economic research.

More information

A visual guide to using the network is at **www.adrn.ac.uk** You can also contact us on 01206 87 3435 or email **help@adrn.ac.uk** and we will provide help, support and advice.

Why bother with CAQDAS?

*By **Christina Silver**, research fellow, QDA Services, CAQDAS Networking Project*

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data AnalysiS (CAQDAS) packages have been around for more than 25 years but many researchers still undertake qualitative data analysis manually, using highlighter pens and scissors or non-bespoke software, such as MS Word, Excel, Onenote and so on. Critics of CAQDAS rightly stress that top-quality analysis can be done manually, and that using CAQDAS does not guarantee robust results. So what are the benefits of using bespoke CAQDAS? For me, they fall into three categories: project management; analytic affordance; and illustrating quality.

Managing everything in one place

Many researchers first engage with CAQDAS once they realise that they cannot easily handle the growing piles of data surrounding them. A key practical benefit of CAQDAS is, therefore, managing everything related to a project in a single place – data, processes and analysis. Everything is readily accessible – background information (project brief, ethical approval, interview guides); contextual information (literature, websites, other projects); and reflections (analytic writing, procedural notes, team-discussions); as well as primary data. Using CAQDAS in this way right from the start, and all the way through a project, maximises the software's potential, leading to *powerful* use[1]. In collaborative projects, the benefits of having everything in one place are particularly marked, such as tracking 'who did what', or calculating intercoder reliability. With ever-increasing emphasis on large-scale multi-disciplinary, multi-national consortia, many researchers work on bigger projects in larger teams. In such situations CAQDAS is invaluable.

Some analytic tasks just aren't possible manually

All analytic tasks which can be done manually can be accomplished in CAQDAS packages in a manner that replicates established ways of working. But CAQDAS packages also enable interrogations of data which are impractical or impossible manually. Large datasets can be systematically analysed and multiple analytic approaches integrated and evaluated. CAQDAS tools facilitate *qualitative* approaches to qualitative data, but increasingly provide tools for taking *quantitative* approaches to qualitative data; mixed approaches to qualitative data; and mixed approaches to mixed data. In particular, the text-mining, querying and visualisation tools increasingly available in CAQDAS packages offer the potential to stretch the boundaries of analytic possibility.

A mechanism for illustrating quality

Whatever the criteria used to assess quality[2], using CAQDAS enables analytic processes to be made visible, and the source of interpretations and conclusions to be verified. Of particular benefit, are the ability to link interpretations to the data which prompted them; the various spaces for writing; and the ability to visually conceptualise and display the connections among elements of the analysis to enable progress to be documented. Providing evidence about interpretations and conclusions is all about access, and CAQDAS allows previous phases of work to be retrieved reliably, repeatedly and quickly to show how researchers built on their work incrementally. CAQDAS offers powerful opportunities to share research processes and make them transparent, demonstrating that the use of CAQDAS tools is systematic; an area some qualitative research has rightly been criticised for in the past.

I am often asked which package best supports a particular approach, but there simply is no 'one best' package[3]. There are pros and cons in each package which are specific to the project at hand. Financial resources and time to learn are important considerations in deciding to invest in CAQDAS and in choosing among products, as is choosing the product that best enables the way you need to work and the type of analysis you typically conduct. However, if your business is qualitative or uses mixed methods analysis, these investments will be rewarded many times over as CAQDAS becomes embedded in professional practice and its benefits are illustrated to clients.

More information:

QDA Services:
www.qdaservices.co.uk

CAQDAS Networking Project:
www.surrey.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchcentres/caqdas

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[1] Silver, C. and Woolf, N.H. (2015) 'From guided-instruction to facilitation of learning: the development of Five-level QDA as a CAQDAS pedagogy that explicates the practices of expert users.' International Journal of Social Research Methodology 18(5).

[2] See Seale, C. (1999) 'Quality in qualitative research'. Qualitative inquiry 5(4) 465-478. , Spencer et al. 2003 and Hammersley, M. (2007). 'The issue of quality in qualitative research'. International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 30(3), 287-305. for discussions of quality in qualitative research, known as the 'criteriology debate'.

[3] See the CAQDAS Networking Project website for reviews of leading CAQDAS packages **www.surrey.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchcentres/caqdas/support/choosing/index.htm**

A web-based probability panel in the UK?

*By **Lisa Calderwood**, senior survey manager, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL Institute of Education*

Along with Joel Williams from TNS BMRB, I recently led an exploratory study for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to consider the case for establishing a web-based probability panel in the UK. The core idea is that individuals are recruited to be part of a panel, and then asked to complete relatively short online surveys at frequent intervals, allowing data to be collected relatively quickly and cheaply. This is similar to commercial online panels, with the key difference being that probability methods are used to select panel members. Such a panel would be a major new research resource for collecting high-quality survey data, stimulating new and innovative research opportunities as well as allowing more research ideas to be financially viable. The scientific case and the overall feasibility of a web-based probability panel in the UK has been established by previous studies[1], and other countries, including the USA, Netherlands, France and Germany, already have similar panels. Our task was to explore who would use the panel, how the panel should be designed and how much it would cost.

We consulted widely among stakeholders, including survey methodologists, academics and representatives of government and the voluntary sector, civil servants responsible for specific surveys, key funders and ESRC strategic advisers. We also carried out secondary research to explore potential demand.

We found that there was interest in using the panel among academics as well as government and voluntary sector researchers. The overall size of the panel and of key population sub-groups was an important consideration for whether they would use the panel. Researchers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, in particular, stressed the importance of adequate sample sizes in these countries. The content of the core questionnaire was also significant; researchers wanted this to be sufficiently broad for it to provide key contextual and background variables for their research. Government researchers were attracted by the ability of the panel to provide rapid information, and for ad-hoc or emerging research needs. Overall, the panel was viewed as complementary and distinct from existing government and ESRC research resources. There was also a strong sense that the panel would advance research opportunities in the area of online data collection, and generate demand for new forms of data using innovative methods.

There was also a strong sense that the panel would advance research opportunities in the area of online data collection, and generate demand for new forms of data using innovative methods

For design, we recommend aiming for a panel of 10,000+ active panellists from a target population of all adults aged 16+ in private households in the UK, with a minimum of 1,000 per country. Whole households would be sampled, and the offline population should be included by offering a tablet and appropriate data subscription. We also recommend aiming for high recruitment, retention and study-specific co-operation rates, in part as many saw this as important for bringing credibility to the panel. We propose starting with 30-minute questionnaires per month, but broken into separate modules which can be completed at any time during the month. Some modules should be more tightly date-bound to facilitate 'rapid response' research. A maximum of 25% of available data collection time should be ring-fenced for a cross-disciplinary core study. Given the radical nature of some of the possibilities for new data collection, we recommend establishing a specialist group to consider this further.

ESRC is now considering our full report and recommendations, as well as the cost estimates we provided. We anticipate that the report will be published soon.

Acknowledgments

The Centre for Longitudinal Studies research team comprised Lisa Calderwood (PI), Emily Gilbert and Marie Thornby. The TNS BMRB research team comprised Joel Williams (Co-I), Carli Lessof, Tim Hanson and Luke Taylor. The project team also included Marcel Das (Tilburg University), Arie Kapteyn (University of Southern California), Rory Fitzgerald (City University) and Ana Villar (City University).

[1] Nicolaas, G., Calderwood, L., Lynn, P. and Roberts, C. (2014) 'Web surveys for the general population: how, why and when?' National Centre for Research Methods. [online] Available at: http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/3309/ [Last accessed 5/11/15]

Blom, A. (2014) A Web-based Probability Panel for the UK: a scoping study. ESRC.

A socio-technical approach to energy research

*By **Gareth Morrell**, head of research, Madano, and **Dr Adam Cooper**, lecturer, University College London*

Tackling the threat of climate warming is arguably the defining challenge of our age. Central to this is improving the energy efficiency of industries and organisations, and changing people's home energy consumption. This is both a technical and a social challenge. Social researchers and engineers need to find a common language and new, integrated methods to diagnose the issues and define effective interventions.

Recent research in the field has involved combined social and technical methods. For example, understanding the energy use of a company by surveying the occupants and digitally monitoring physical and technical properties of a building. This approach demonstrates that technical data without social data tells you too little that is useful for effective policy: technologies perform significantly differently in the wild compared with the lab – and the users are a core reason. Conversely, social data without technical data tells you next to nothing useful for policymaking, because, ultimately, we require actions that most effectively and rapidly reduce the physical units of tCO_{2e}/KWh (tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per kilowatt hour).

Limitations of the orthodoxy

Research using social and technical methods typically comprises parallel social and technical sub-designs, with data collected separately but analysed collectively (without concerns for threats to validity). This approach has significant limitations:

- **Philosophical:** technical research typically adopts a more positivist/empiricist view of the world familiar to natural science, while social research in energy draws more often on constructivism or interpretivism – exemplified by the multitude of qualitative research approaches used. This significantly effects how research is designed and the implications for what is considered useful and valid evidence
- **Balancing and integrating methods**: these different approaches and skills often pull in different directions, affecting project efficiency, particularly if practitioners from either discipline 'assume knowledge' in the other
- **Sampling and recruitment:** this is a particular challenge for energy research with industry – what is the sampling unit for a multi-site organisation? It is not always clear who 'represents' or makes decisions within an organisation or who has the technical knowledge to provide the evidence required
- **Data collection:** social research interviewers often lack general and specific technical knowledge to elicit the right kind of insight. Equally, technical data is not always collected in a way that allows the two data sets to be integrated

An interdisciplinary future

Overcoming these challenges requires a truly interdisciplinary **socio-technical approach**. Amongst other things, the following features are crucial:

- **Socio-technical mind-set**: to overcome divergent philosophical standpoints, researchers and commissioners need to be 'thinking socio-technical'. This means generating a socio-technical model of what is under investigation, testing hypotheses that emerge out of this model or framework via the generation of socio-technical variables[1]
- **Socio-technical design**: more than the independent collection of social and technical data, data needs to be collected as a co-ordinated activity supporting integrated data analysis and minimising threats to validity
- **Socio-technical team**: this requires more than experienced social researchers and proficient technical specialists. Social researchers need to have basic and sometimes specific technical knowledge; technical experts need to know the implication of their choices for understanding the social element of the evidence. Detailed briefings, co-interviewing and shadowing can help achieve the right blend of skills
- **Socio-technical outputs**: findings and conclusions, substantive and methodological, need to be communicated as a whole. Siphoning off the technical or social findings for a specialist audience only perpetuates the unhelpful distinction of social and technical. Understanding the interaction between people and technology and materials is what matters for effective policy

This hybrid approach is only in development, but we're not alone in thinking about it. It's a core element of the Centre for Energy Epidemiology at UCL, and social researchers at the Department for Energy and Climate Change recognise these challenges. Progress requires additional commitment to research and experimentation from government and research councils. If you have experience in this, do come to our workshop at the SRA conference in December.

[1] Love, J. and Cooper, A. (2015) 'From social and technical to socio-technical: designing integrated research on domestic energy use.' Indoor and Built Environment 24(7), 986-998 doi:10.1177/1420326X15601722

Remembering Professor Chris Stevenson, one year on

Professor Chris Stevenson (RMN, BA (Hons), MSc, PhD), academic, author, nurse, mentor and friend died on 13 November 2014 in Co Longford, Ireland. Chris trained as a psychiatric nurse, completed a BA (Hons) in psychology and sociology at Sunderland Polytechnic, UK, and an MSc in health and social research at the University of Northumbria. While lecturing at Newcastle University, Chris contributed research evidence to the Tidal Model of mental health nursing, which positions the person experiencing psychological distress as the expert in their own care. Chris embodied the values of compassion, respect and dignity for everyone she encountered during her life, and argued for those values to underpin mental health practice. Being a Foucault and Derrida reader, she also brought a critical enquiry to all aspects of life, and challenged all of us around her to do likewise.

Chris was appointed to Dublin City University (DCU) as the first chair in mental health nursing in 2005. There she established an innovative psychosocial research programme, which embedded meaningful care for people in psychological distress, including suicidality; developing and evaluating models empowering people who experience mental health problems; and methodological advances in mental health recovery research.

Chris' involvement in DCU programme development gave rise to the first doctorate in psychotherapy programme in Ireland. An appointment of an ex-service user and a PhD scholar as a lecturer in mental health nursing was another progressive step accomplished during Chris' tenure at DCU.

A champion of ground-breaking practice, teaching and research, Chris was an inspiration to those she nursed, taught and supervised. The DCU Health4Life psychosocial wellbeing research programme initiated by Chris is continuing. Chris' critical and innovative spirit remains alive in the work of others.

It is a great honour to have this opportunity to pay tribute to Chris and to remind others of her wisdom, warmth, generosity and free-spirited, yet grounded and humane capacity to connect with those around her in her work and in her life.

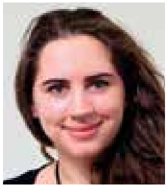
Dr Yulia Kartalova-O'Doherty, research analyst, National Health Information Systems, The Health Research Board, Dublin

Dr Evelyn Gordon, lecturer, Dublin City University

Professor Agnes Higgins, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Trinity College Dublin

SRA Scotland update

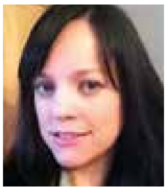
Report by Sophie Ellison



We've had a busy autumn including a workshop on creative research methods, three evening seminars (exploring Scotland's large-scale surveys) and an extended training programme. We are thinking about establishing a breakfast seminar series and would love to hear from you if you have views on this, or would be interested in getting involved. To get in touch, please visit the SRA website **http://the-sra.org.uk/home/sra-scotland** or use Linkedin (**http://tinyurl.com/oh9aoh4**) or Twitter (**@SRA_Scotland**).

SRA Cymru update

Report by Faye Gracey



SRA Wales had a great programme of events in the last quarter of 2015. Richard Self shared his experience of research ethics in October; we shone a light on evidence for the UN Year of Evaluation for a week in November; and held our fourth SRA Cymru annual festive network event.

Do keep an eye on our Twitter feed (**@sracymru**), web page and LinkedIn Group (SRA Cymru) for details of events in 2016. Look forward to seeing more of you and welcoming new faces too.

Twitter: **@sracymru**

LinkedIn group: **Social Research Association (SRA) Cymru**

Email: **Faye.Gracey@wales.gsi.gov.uk**

SRA Ireland update

Report by Noelle Cotter

SRA Ireland hosted three events this autumn. In September, Niall McCaffrey of Ipsos MRBI gave a seminar on qualitative research methods. In October, Sandra Roe gave a seminar on research with children and young people. In November, McGrath Barrett Consultants ran a full-day training event on social media for social researchers. All were well attended. We look forward to meeting our members over the Christmas period and in the New Year.

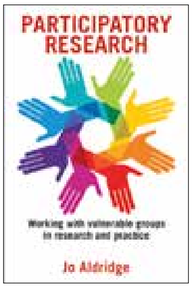
More information on the SRA website; through our mailing list; and Twitter: **@sraireland**. Email us at: **sra.ireland@gmail.com**

Participatory research: working with vulnerable groups in research and practice

Jo Aldridge

POLICY PRESS, 2015

Reviewed by Amy Edwards, research assistant, National Children's Bureau



Given Jo Aldridge's background in working with vulnerable and socially-excluded groups, it is no wonder that her book closely focuses on her own personal research interests and projects. Her pioneering participatory work with young carers, individuals with learning disabilities and women survivors of domestic abuse is presented in a coherent and useful way; not shying away from the barriers to working with these groups, both practically and ethically. Through these case studies, Aldridge takes the reader through participatory research; from passive to truly transformative participation. By proffering a model of participation alongside the case studies, she allows the reader to review where the studies described in the book sit within this model. Aldridge also offers the model as a tool to encourage readers to critically appraise their own research and that of others.

Through the research projects described in each chapter, Aldridge offers innovative and inspiring ways of engaging with vulnerable groups to benefit the individuals taking part, the research field and society in general. Aldridge encourages researchers, at any stage in their careers, to think outside of the box and work flexibly to adapt their research methods to facilitate the involvement of vulnerable and socially-excluded groups and ensure they have a 'voice'. A key strength of this book lies in the presentation of these innovative and inclusive methods which enable people who may not be able to contribute through traditional research methods, such as questionnaires or interviews, to tell their story and give their views.

However, Aldridge warns that their voice will only ever be heard if society is willing to listen. Thus, as well as researchers, this book is relevant to anyone working in media and policy, among others, to help them to understand the nature and value of participatory research, and encourage them to influence the context in which this research is presented.

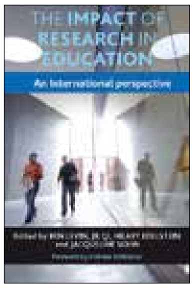
Clearly written, interesting and thought-provoking, I would recommend this book to anyone working with, or wanting to work with, vulnerable groups to ensure their 'voice' is projected into the research world and society in general.

The impact of research in education: an international perspective

Ben Levin, Jie Qi and Hilary Edelstein (Eds)

POLICY PRESS, 2013

Reviewed by Angus Smith, MSc candidate, London School of Economics and Political Science



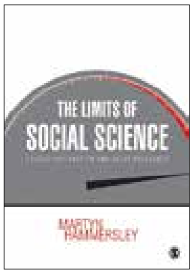
This book sets out its central thesis clearly. Educational research is underfunded, poorly disseminated and lacking relevance to everyday practice. The work offers a comparative, international approach to a global problem. The contributors, including educational researchers in universities and the public sector, unanimously declare that research must be rigorous, relevant, and understandable to teachers. By analysing policy interventions and organisations, the authors suggest various ways in which this might be achieved.

Given the solidarity the contributing authors show in prescribing similar solutions for similar shortcomings, the work can seem repetitive. The stronger chapters, however, offer original research, cover varied topics and use novel approaches. One such effort is Lynn Ilon's chapter on South Korean educational research mobilisation. Its vast appraisal of lifelong learning and vocational training is refreshing and engaging. Read, Cooper, Edelstein, Sohn and Levin's contribution offers original research into the 'knowledge mobilisation' (KM) practices of Canadian universities. KM is defined as 'moving knowledge into active service for the broadest possible common good'. The authors found that educational researchers in Canadian universities were 'divided' about whether KM was valuable at all. Only 3% used blogs to publicise their research, and 2% used social media.

The comprehensiveness of the work can come at the expense of clarity. The weaker chapters feature oblique, overlong sentences. Occasionally, the statistics used lack justification. Claus Holm's contribution tells us that 386 'person-years' have been spent on educational research in Denmark, but offers no comparison with other fields to help the reader understand the real significance of this figure.

The conclusion pulls together the salient points of all chapters, and argues for credible, context-sensitive research involving partnerships with teachers. This sober, reflective book would be valuable for new educational researchers concerned with the impact of their work.

The limits of social science. Causal explanation and value relevance



Martyn Hammersley

SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 2014

Reviewed by Paul Webb, research manager, Praxis Care, Belfast

In this short book, Hammersley argues for a social science which eschews grand theorising in favour of the explanation of social phenomena. Drawing inspiration from Max Weber and referring to a range of social theorists and philosophers, Hammersley encourages social scientists to re-think what they are actually doing as researchers in order to create a social science which generates knowledge which is both reliable and valid. Some readers might, of course, reply that there are no problems with social research as an intellectual endeavour, but Hammersley's purpose seems to be to awake us from our slumbers. This is a task in which he partially succeeds. Hammersley is not, for example, opposed to causal analysis in the social sciences, but argues that we should raise our game by adopting 'within-case and cross-case analysis'. He also prioritises explanation over theorising with the proviso that 'all purpose' explanations are not possible because explanations are 'always answers to particular questions'. He also argues that value conclusions cannot be derived from evidence, and offers convincing arguments why this might be the case. The consequence of Hammersley's position is that social research should be limited to making 'factual' statements rather than 'value' claims. Although much of the book is theoretical, the author grounds his views by referring to social mobility research and to work on the English riots of 2011.

What I most enjoyed about this book is that Hammersley encourages the reader to think hard about social research practice. He is, for example, unconvinced by the view that there is a direct relationship between research and policy outcomes. On the contrary, he says that the relationship is 'highly mediated and contingent'. Moreover, he recognises that different social science disciplines employ different methods of explanation. One has only to think of the very different approaches of the experimental psychologist and of the historian to appreciate that he has a point. But such explanatory pluralism in the social sciences has a disturbing consequence. If there is no agreed threshold which all social scientists have to meet in order to generate valid and reliable knowledge, then how do these disciplines differ from vocations like investigative or data journalism? In addition, Hammersley draws a sharp distinction between 'facts' which are of interest to the social scientist and 'value claims' which should be of interest to policymakers and think tanks. If true, it is very hard to see how social researchers can make the case for funding their work in a cultural environment which does not recognise that knowledge has value in itself. Hammersley recognises this point but does not offer any solutions.

This book is not a paean to social science as it is currently practised and will be, to use Hammersley's own word, a 'deflationary' read for some. If, however, you want to read something which may question your preconceptions, this book is a good place to begin.

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- *Social media in social research: blogs on blurring the boundaries* Kandy Woodfield, NatCen, 2014
- *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research* Richard A. Krueger & Mary Anne Casey, SAGE, 2015
- *Grounded theory: a practical guide* Melanie Birks & Jane Mills, SAGE 2015
- *Interpreting qualitative data* David Silverman, SAGE, 2015
- *Mixed methods in health sciences research: a practical primer* Leslie Curry & Marcella Nunez-Smith, SAGE 2015
- *Mixed methods for policy research and program evaluation* Patricia E. Burch & Carolyn Heinrich, SAGE 2015
- *Qualitative online interviews: strategies design and skills* Janet E. Salmons, SAGE 2015
- *Understanding narrative inquiry: the crafting and analysis of stories as research* Jeong-Hee Kim, SAGE 2015

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