Social Research Association

research:matters DEC:17

Understanding interviewer challenges for random probability surveys



*By **Jeremy May**, senior director, Ipsos MORI; **Sophie Ainsby**, director of field, NatCen; and **Mark McLaughlin**, data collection director, GFK*

As four of the largest suppliers of high-quality random probability fieldwork in the UK[1], we have partnered with the Market Research Society (MRS) to assess the current landscape of the industry and commit to ensuring the future of face-to-face interviewing is a long and healthy one. The partnership was formed in response to delivery challenges experienced across the industry in recent years, primarily driven by falling participation rates and a shortage of skilled interviewers.

Alongside an overall reduction in the number of available interviewers, as fieldwork suppliers, we now see an increased polarisation in interviewers' length of service. There remains a core of very experienced interviewers but newer interviewers are leaving the industry a lot quicker. Ten years ago, 17% of interviewers had less than one year's experience; that figure has now risen to 25%. At the same time, the proportion of interviewers with up to two years' experience has dropped from 15% to 10%. This is likely a consequence of the interviewer role becoming more difficult, and more options for casual/part-time work which offer guaranteed income. We need clear strategies to counter this trend and to develop interviewers' experience so that they become proficient interviewers for the future.

Interviewer 'retention' now sits equally alongside interviewer 'recruitment' and 'achieving response rate targets' as the major operational challenges facing surveys. Less trust in government, brands and professions, along with societal changes and decreasing accessibility/availability of participants has made the interviewer role harder than it's ever been. Call-pattern data collated across some of the country's largest random probability surveys shows that interviewers have to make more visits and work more re-issued samples year-on-year to try and uphold response rates to past levels. The changing landscape of when interviewers are required to work to maximise contact rates is also having a negative impact on retention, with an increased requirement to work evenings and weekends.

As a response, agencies have made a heavy and sustained investment in recruitment and retention strategies, plus increased training and in-field support for interviewers. In addition, we have invested in a joint interviewer survey to understand better how interviewers work, what motivates them, and the challenges they face day-to-day. The survey, fielded in 2016 and 2017, asked a mix of closed and open questions.

What came through overwhelmingly was that the increasing challenge of gaining participant co-operation is a key influencer of interviewer turnover. Co-operation has a direct impact on earnings, as interviewers are paid by results, hence concerns over pay levels and their potential volatility.

Specifically, when asked about the reasons why interviewers stop working, 'pay' was the reason most often rated as 'very/fairly important' alongside 'being hard to get people to say yes' (see over).

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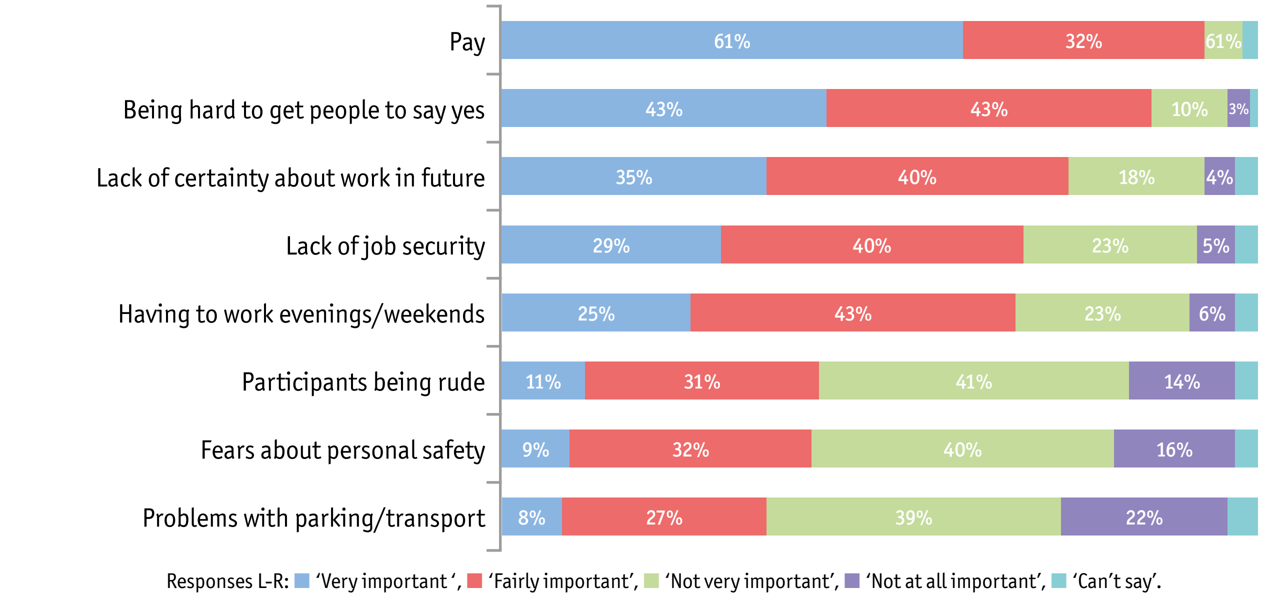
[1] Ipsos MORI, Natcen Social Research, GFK and Kantar Public.

The survey also looked at how interviewers rate different aspects of the job from 0 (very poor) to 10 (very good). The responses (see below) indicate the factors which might encourage interviewers to stay. Flexibility was the highest rated aspect of the job. We can also see that the relationship with their agency, and the quality of communication with their agency, are key influencers of interviewers' job satisfaction.

Jane Frost CBE, CEO of MRS, commented after the 2016 survey, 'Reports like this provide essential insight into the current state of random probability interviewing. Face-to-face market and social research remains central to government and media research studies, so it is vital that the industry understands the hopes and concerns of those who know the field best: the interviewers themselves. We intend to use this research to discuss the future of the approach with commissioners and users of random probability interviewing to establish how random probability can be best adapted to the changing needs of society, government and business.'

Together with MRS, as fieldwork suppliers, we are fully committed to the future sustainability of random probability surveys. We will repeat the survey again in 2018 to identify areas in which more can be done to help interviewers in their day-to-day work. This data is helping us to shape client conversations about the challenges interviewers face, and to develop our support structures and initiatives for interviewers, pay structure reviews and training strategies for new starters at an agency level. To ensure a long and healthy future for face-to-face surveys, those at the coalface, the interviewers, must have a voice.

HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK EACH OF THESE ARE AS REASONS WHY INTERVIEWERS STOP WORKING?

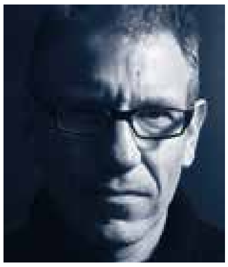


Base 687: Interviewers working for Ipsos, NatCen, GFK, Kantar

MEAN RATING OF DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF INTERVIEWING ROLE (SCALE 0-10)

Base 687: Interviewers working for Ipsos, NatCen, GFK, Kantar

Flourishing and in excellent hands



*SRA chair, **Patten Smith**, reflects on his six years in office*

My six-year-term as chair of the SRA ends in December, and this will be my last Research Matters editorial. This seems a good moment to reflect upon the SRA's last six years.

When I started as chair, although this was unknown to me, the SRA was in a financially precarious position. Soon after, the estimable Graham Hughes joined me on the board as treasurer, and rapidly uncovered the extent to which our outgoings were no longer commensurate with our reduced membership base and income. These were generally difficult times, and we also suffered considerable churn at board level.

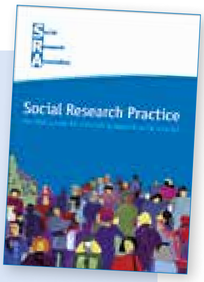
The fact that the SRA did not end up bankrupt was completely down to the exceptional generosity of certain individuals with both time and money. The SRA owes very special thanks to Ceridwen Roberts, Graham Hughes and other trustees of the time, for many voluntary hours working keeping the boat afloat, and to Janet Lewis and Ceridwen (again!) for extremely generous financial donations. We also owe a great deal to our chief executive, the hugely effective Graham Farrant, who generously volunteered to join us as general manager, on a shoestring salary, early in this difficult period.

After this crisis, our finances gradually became secure and, with this, board membership stabilised and we began to be in a position to take new initiatives. Examples of our progress over the past six years include:

- Our annual membership has increased each year, from 550 in 2012 to 1,030 now
- The SRA has shown a financial surplus in each of the past six years and now has a healthy reserve fund
- Annual conference attendance has steadily increased, doubling from 110 in 2011 to 220 in 2016
- Since 2013 (the first year training courses were booked online) the number of SRA courses has more than tripled (from 32 to around 100 a year)
- The number of people following the SRA on Twitter has grown steadily to over 6,200 followers
- We have launched a new journal, Social Research Practice, for social researchers outside and inside the association
- We now offer SRA members free access to 5,500 academic journals
- Over the past few years, we have run several highly successful events exploring the use of social media in social research
- We have recently introduced a separate SRA website for social research job vacancies
- The 'SRA Shorts' book series has successfully launched

In contrast to the situation six years ago, the SRA now has a very stable (and recently refreshed) board that is both active and creative. It will be rolling out several new initiatives in the months to come, including a modernised digital strategy, a new SRA website, an SRA blog, a new approach to advocacy, and new ethical guidelines.

The SRA is flourishing, is in excellent hands and the future looks bright. A good time for me to step down!



Social Research Practice

The fourth issue of Social Research Practice, the SRA's methods journal, was published in August. Articles include using corpus linguistics to interpret large amounts of qualitative feedback data; investigating ways of reducing non-response bias in face-to-face surveys; and action research on improving transitional care for young people moving from child and adolescent to adult mental health services.

We are planning for issues five and six in 2018. We welcome further offers of articles. More information at: **http://the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice/**. Read the guidelines for authors, and download the template for an article. If you have an idea for an article but are not sure if it's suitable, please email Richard Bartholomew, the editor: **rabartholomew@btinternet.com**

Social Research Practice is a new, free journal for short articles, maximum 4,000 words, of interest to applied practitioners and research users.

Journal articles cover:

- All methods: qualitative, quantitative, mixed
- Mainly methodological issues
- Practical issues rather than theoretical debates
- Research impact on policy and practice
- Innovative and traditional techniques

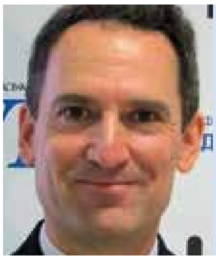
The overall aim of the journal is to encourage and promote high standards of social research for public benefit. It promotes openness and discussion of problems.

It is available on the SRA website free for everyone at: **www.the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice**

Three longstanding SRA members made Fellows of the Academy of Social Sciences

Pam Campanelli runs The Survey Coach, a survey research training consultancy

Wendy Sykes is founding director of Independent Social Research



Peter Lynn is professor of survey methodology, University of Essex

Many congratulations to Dr Pam Campanelli, Dr Wendy Sykes and Professor Peter Lynn who have all been made Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS). The SRA is delighted that their significant contribution to social research over many years has been recognised in this way.

Nominations to AcSS may be made by individual fellows or by learned societies and, after a gap of a few years, the SRA has revived its nominations committee. It now aims to nominate more SRA members each year. The nominations committee comprises eight SRA members all of whom are AcSS Fellows and drawn from the different sectors of the social research community.

Most nominations will fall into the practitioner category of 'Fellow'. These are people who have research experience in social science beyond academia. People may self–nominate but all proposed nominees have to be approved by the nominations committee which is responsible for overseeing the applications and recommending nominees to the SRA board.

Nominations are due in June each year. The process takes several months so the nominations committee will be seeking new nominations from early 2018 through the SRA website. Do think about nominating someone!

Ceridwen Roberts OBE FAcSS FLSW
Chair, SRA nominations committee

New SRA member benefit

FREE ACCESS TO OVER 5,500 SOCIAL SCIENCE JOURNALS FOR SRA MEMBERS

We're pleased to announce that, following the recent six-month trial for SRA members of the EBSCO social science journals database, the trustees have decided to take out an annual subscription. It starts now. More information: **admin@the-sra.org.uk**

The SRA thanks...

SRA chief executive, Graham Farrant, writes: some key SRA trustees are leaving the board this December. They include four who were here when I started at the SRA, and I tend to think of them as the 'founding fathers': Patten Smith (chair), Graham Hughes (hon. treasurer), Simon Haslam (training) and Nick Ockenden (communications). Their steady guidance, wise oversight and sheer hard work over six years made all the difference in turning the SRA around from a rather wobbly ship back in 2011 to a thriving and growing organisation. We are very sorry to say goodbye to them as trustees, although we will certainly stay in touch. We also say goodbye and a hearty thank you to trustees Ivana La Valle, who expertly ran the 'Research Matters' magazine for several years, and Susannah Browne, who brought a wealth of insight and experience to the board.

Despite these departures the board continues in good health under our new chair, David Johnson, and recent joiners: Mark Carrigan, Bob Erens, Nigel Meager (new treasurer), Keiran O'Leary and Isabella Pereira, who are already making strong contributions.

The ethics of working with literature

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

Researchers often use existing literature to set their research in context. 'Literature' is the academic term, referring to peer-reviewed scholarly work such as journal articles. Practice-based researchers may also contextualise their research, though more often with policy and project documents, in part because they are openly available. However, these distinctions are not so hard and fast these days. Academics increasingly recognise the value of 'grey literature', as they call relevant information that has not been through the peer-review process. Practice-based researchers can read more and more academic literature, with the growth of open access, and through schemes such as the SRA's member benefit of access to around 5,500 social science journals through EBSCO [**https://www.ebsco.com/**] (see page 4). Also, the definition of 'literature' has grown to include written phenomena and artefacts such as ephemera (leaflets, zines and so on), creative writing (such as novels and poems), and online writings (such as blog posts and tweets).

When I ask people about the ethical issues of working with literature, they tend to look blank. So here are some pointers. First, define what you are using as literature, or background documents, and why you have chosen those types of material. This is important now that there is such a range of available literature: as with all decisions about research, you should be making well-informed choices for good reasons. Then make sure you know how well you can search that body of literature. For example, if you are searching online – as many people do – you need to understand the scope and limitations of the electronic tools you use. Google Scholar is many people's go-to website for academic literature, but it doesn't index everything. The Directory of Open Access Journals indexes work from developing countries that does not find its way into Google Scholar. Even more work from developing countries can be found through the Journals Online project [**http://www.inasp.info/en/work/journals-online/current-jols/**] run by international research development charity INASP [**http://www.inasp.info/en/**], which currently covers work from Africa, Latin America, the Philippines, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Even if your work focuses on a single country or locality, you may find relevant literature from far afield. You are not obliged to search everything: you simply need a clear rationale for your search.

You should record your search strategy – where you searched, terms you used to search on, dates of searches – so your readers can assess the effectiveness of your approach. Sadly, these days you will also need to check whether material you plan to cite is bona fide, as directories and repositories may still index and hold literature that has been retracted, or is a spoof that may not be instantly recognisable as such. This means researchers need to be on their guard, and make use of services such as Retraction Watch [**http://retractionwatch.com/**] where possible.

Many search strategies will yield far more literature than any researcher or team can read. There are ethical dimensions to choosing what to focus on. Bias can creep in: it is important to read literature representing a good spread of views and opinions, not only those you agree with. Then, when you have chosen what to read, it is ethically necessary to read that work carefully. Take the time to understand the arguments being presented and what they are based on. If you skim-read or cherry-pick, you risk misunderstanding the author's argument, because you won't understand their reasoning. Also, superficial reading doesn't enable you to assess the quality of someone else's work, so you won't know how much weight to give it within your own research.

Then of course you need to cite others' work correctly and not plagiarise or self-plagiarise. Having said that, self-plagiarism isn't so much of a problem if you plan to self-publish, whether as an online pdf, e-book, or zine. However, if you plan to publish formally, self-plagiarism is unethical as publishers expect to publish original material.

Taking this kind of ethical approach to working with literature shows respect to authors of the work on which our own work is based. Also, it helps to avoid replicating errors, which in turn, helps to raise standards in research.

Got an ethical dilemma? Ask the forum

The SRA operates an Ethics Advisory Forum for members. It's a virtual group, chaired by Ron Iphofen, consisting of nine researchers with expertise in ethics across a range of sectors and settings. You can raise a question or concern about an issue you face, and Ron will circulate it to the group members (anonymously if you wish), who will offer their considered opinions. Ron will then consolidate these and reply to you – all in a matter of days. It's a free service for the benefit of members. Find out more at: **www.the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy-forum**

A new tool for commissioning government research?

*By **Graham Farrant**, chief executive, SRA*

When a government department has a new research project to put out to tender, how do they alert potential suppliers? The answer is 'it varies' of course, but a common method is to 'go to the framework'. A framework is essentially a list of research suppliers (commercial agencies, institutes, academic units, individuals and so on), pre-approved as suitably qualified and experienced, with details of each supplier's specialisms. There are multiple frameworks in government, typically owned by one department, although they can be shared with others.

These frameworks, while very useful for commissioners and for (approved) suppliers also have drawbacks. New suppliers have to wait a considerable time to apply to join, and the rules and requirements are often different for each framework, which can be frustrating for those suppliers who are on several of them.

This year the expiry of two major frameworks used for social research, together with the likely end of the market research framework next year, has led Crown Commercial Services (CCS) to pick up the challenge of creating a single shortlisting tool for use by all government departments – and covering social, market and economic research projects.

The SRA gets involved

The longstanding SRA and Market Research Society (MRS) research commissioning group is fully involved in this new development, working constructively with Jo Rozsich, the CCS lead. The commissioning group is led by SRA patron, Janet Lewis, with Debrah Harding of MRS in a key role, and representatives from a range of suppliers (large and small) and from Government Social Research.

It's a fast-developing picture. At the time of writing, the plan has moved on from a single, pan-government framework based on existing models, to a type of 'dynamic purchasing system' in which suppliers (who can apply to join at any time) are categorised by criteria including their capability in research topic/policy areas, methods and so on. This allows government commissioners ('customers' in CCS parlance) to specify a project's scope and needs in terms of these criteria, and generate a supplier shortlist to invite to tender for each project.

If the new system can be made to work effectively for government customers and for suppliers it seems to have several advantages

To date our group's involvement has included:

- Attending initial seminars, and raising several practical concerns about the first CCS proposal for a pan-government framework
- Discussing these concerns with CCS, raising awareness of social research and its suppliers
- Commenting on the dynamic purchasing system concept, and on the categorisations of research expertise and policy areas it will use, with examples from social research
- Attending a webinar and a lengthy planning meeting to develop search criteria and review customer and supplier journeys

We look forward to working with CCS on the questionnaire, which suppliers will use to get onto the system, and other areas. We expect that documents setting out the plans in some detail will soon be available for sharing with members. While MRS is responding separately from SRA, we are co-ordinating closely.

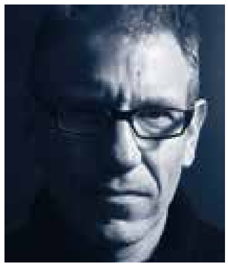
Tricky issues still to solve

If the new system can be made to work effectively for government customers and for suppliers it seems to have several advantages. Suppliers can apply to join the system at any time, and there is no limit on the numbers who can join. This gives customers access to new entrants, and seems obviously good for suppliers. But how can we prevent less-honourable entrants claiming 'we can do that' to every possible skill and area of expertise in the supplier questionnaire? What quality control measures can be used?

Another issue is administrative burden. Suppliers will need to provide detailed information when applying to go onto the new system. Then, when their bid for a department's invitation to tender (ITT) is successful, they will need to provide a range of information to that department's procurement team – much of it likely to cover the same ground. This is more irksome than when a department had its own framework, with just one batch of information required. We have taken up this issue with CCS, and it aims to work with procurement teams to minimise duplication – but we will continue to press this point.

The creation of a new system for commissioning research in government is important to many SRA members so we'll keep you informed of developments. The plan is to go live in February 2018.

The future of push-to-web surveys in the UK



*By **Patten Smith**, SRA chair*

When I started working for a survey agency in the 1980s, there was a clear consensus about how best to conduct a high-quality survey among the general population in the UK: collect data from a probability sample using face-to-face interviewing. Furthermore, the method posited as ideal was readily achievable. Several agencies maintained large, relatively stable, national interviewing field forces, and although the method was never cheap, it was affordable. Most government and academic surveys defaulted to this method. In 2017, this ideal probably still holds for surveys for which quality is paramount. However, as Jeremy May and others document in the lead article, the method is embattled. Agencies are finding it harder to recruit and retain interviewers; response rates are declining inexorably despite increasing fieldwork efforts; and survey budgets are level-pegging or reducing. Not only is the method proving harder to implement, but there is also now a common belief amongst budget controllers that, with current high levels of internet access, new technology should allow us to get more for less money.

AND FROM THESE FACTORS THE PUSH-TO-WEB SURVEY WAS BORN!

The push-to-web survey is a method, largely developed in the USA by Don Dillman and colleagues, in which general population probability samples are approached (usually) by post and asked to complete web questionnaires. Generally, web non-responders are followed up by another mode (often a mail questionnaire, but sometimes face-to-face interview). The method is designed for situations where (as in the UK) good general population sample frames of email addresses are unavailable. Major examples of surveys using the method in this country are the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport England's Active Lives Survey. ONS is also conducting large-scale feasibility trials of push-to-web methods with a view ultimately to introducing them on major surveys such as the Labour Force Survey. Push-to-web has been used on a good many other UK surveys too, and use of the method will surely continue to increase, sometimes replacing existing face-to-face surveys.

SHOULD THIS WORRY US?

We should only worry if our ability to draw valid and reliable conclusions from our data declines. Relevant to this are two factors: whether data quality from push-to-web surveys is inferior to that from the methods they replace; and how exactly we use the data. On the first, we know that general population push-to-web methods in the UK seem to deliver samples demographically less well aligned to population figures than face-to-face methods, and that, for a range of survey variables, the different types of survey produce different estimates. But showing the methods give different results is not the same as demonstrating why this happens, or that one method produces better quality estimates than the other. To date, we have little UK statistical evidence to go on, and what we do have, provides a muddy picture and relates only to a small number of specific variable sets. In short, if push-to-web surveys do come to replace face-to-face surveys, we should expect to see changes in our data, but the jury is out on both the causes of these differences and on how much (if at all) they represent a decline in quality.

Even if the quality of data *does* decline, it is important to ask whether this matters. Often surveys seek to measure *change*, and good measures of change are compatible with relatively inaccurate single-point estimates so long as biases hold constant over time. *If* we are willing to assume bias is time-invariant in push-to-web surveys, the method may be considered suitable for surveys intended solely to measure change. However, our knowledge of estimate quality in push-to-web surveys is currently sparse, and we cannot yet make this assumption with confidence.

Overall, I am confident that, like it or not, push-to-web methods will increase in use and, at times, will come to replace face-to-face surveys. To my mind, it is incumbent on us as an industry to investigate urgently, and in detail, the impact this shift will have on both survey estimate quality and survey fitness for purpose.

Keeping a research diary

*By **Michelle Lawrie**, PhD candidate, School of Creative and Cultural Business, Robert Gordon University*

It is said that we are living in a post-truth age in which academics are being accused of falsifying findings and being out of touch with the real world; fake news, fake research. Coupled with the ongoing perceived issue of bias in qualitative research, or the 'interpretive crisis'[1], this presents a case for shaking up how researchers document, position and acknowledge themselves within their research. Of course, there is the argument that no research is free of bias[2], with which I concur. Nevertheless, this is an opportunity for qualitative researchers to present themselves in a more open way to demonstrate how they reached their conclusions. One way of doing so is to incorporate, methodologically, a research diary into any project.

Missing character

During the second year of my PhD project I decided to start a research diary to document my engagement with the data, literature, theory and my personal stances towards these. I have implemented it within my methodology to demonstrate the sometimes missing 'character' in a piece of research: the researcher. At the time, I didn't realise how much it would assist my project. However, now that I am writing my research up, the benefits are clear and significant. Taking time every week to write about aspects of my research has provided an overall picture of my own process in developing and reaching my conclusions'.

Art of reflection

Like any fine art, the process of keeping and reflecting in a research diary takes dedication and practice. However, it is neither difficult nor tedious. A research diary can provide a creative outlet for the researcher and a means to dedicate a 'space' to reflectively relay the engagement with theory, research methods, research participants and data. It also provides the opportunity for self-reflexivity, allowing the researcher to view their assumptions and position and, perhaps even challenge them! This reflective process is essential for demonstrating that conclusions reached have been considered throughout the research project, but also to prevent important thoughts, which occur during the different stages of the research, from being forgotten[3].

Getting started

Much like any piece of work, how you go about keeping a research diary will be unique to you. However, the following may help:

1. Start slowly – aim for one entry a week and build on this if you want to
2. The first entry may be the hardest – start by writing down your beliefs/ opinions of the research project
3. Be as reflective as possible – this will allow readers of your work to 'see' the research process in depth

Pieces of the puzzle

Before the end of the project you should examine your research diary and include entry excerpts in your final write-up to show how your thinking developed. This can help with fitting together pieces of the puzzle or with providing an overview of how a researcher developed ideas or conclusions. It is hugely beneficial to be open with your reader. The research diary can function as an intimate connector between researcher and reader, and also between research and researcher.

Michelle is a stage 3 full-time PhD student researching 'National identity and immigrant representation in the British and Danish press, 2005-2015'. Her research uses qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. With thanks to supervisors: Dr Fiona Smith and Dr Nicola Furrie Murphy.

[1] Denzin, N.K., (1994). Interpretive ethnography: ethnographic practices for the 21st Century. USA: Sage.

[2] Fairclough, N. (2003). Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research. London: Routledge.

[3] Gerstl-Pepin, C. and Patrizio, K. (2009). 'Learning from Dumbledore's Pensieve: metaphor as an aid in teaching reflexivity in qualitative research'. Qualitative Research, 9(3): 299-308.

Up close and personal: using technology for better insight


*By **Iain Carruthers**, director, and **Dominique Peters**, account director, FreshMinds*

Introduction

In this article we make the case that qualitative social research can be substantially improved by the selective use of technology to get closer to people.

Learning from Mass-Observation

Qualitative social research has a rich history in helping us to understand people's attitudes and behaviours. In the UK it was pioneered by Mass-Observation, a research organisation founded in the 1930s.

When Mass-Observation started, it gave out notebooks and pens and asked 480 people to record the world around them: to observe and make sense of their own lives, as they lived them.

Fast forward to the research industry of the present day and qualitative research (both commercial and social) typically engages people on its terms and sets very narrow parameters. We ask people to squeeze their whole life into a single interview, or share it in a focus group with a set of strangers.

Research rarely engages people or consumers on their terms. If we fail to capture people's actions and thinking on their terms, in their time, we do them (and research) a disservice.

The good news is that the opportunity to do this is now upon us. Over time, and aided by technology, people have changed the way they communicate, record and share what matters in their lives. Research can harness these changes to get closer, to see more and, crucially, to understand more.

Foundations: digital communities

A digital research community is typically a short-term project where people (around 20 to 50) take part in a conversation online over a series of days or weeks. The set up allows people to capture images, send links and use their mobiles for instant feedback. They typically participate in tasks and discussions for 20 to 30 minutes a day. These communities are replacing conventional focus groups and depth interviews in many areas of commercial insight.

Why? Digital communities allow people to participate on their own terms. Typically, people log in to a community a couple of times a day at a time that's convenient to them. Use of smartphones – increasingly constant companions in people's lives – allows people to respond in the moment avoiding both recall and projection bias. People can also use the real world as stimulus: to photograph a meal; to record the level of traffic noise; or to capture their feelings immediately after an event or an appointment.

Of course, there are restrictions. Some groups of people, such as the very disadvantaged, elderly or those distrustful of digital media, are unlikely to participate. Depending on the target group, face-to-face interviewing may still be required. However, digital communities can also be inclusive: there is no limit on geography, those with disabilities or who are housebound can participate, and introverts who would typically not volunteer for a focus group can be part of the conversation.

Perhaps most importantly, voices are not restricted. On average, someone in a focus group of eight people speaks for up to ten minutes. Over seven days, someone in a community could contribute around three hours of personal content.

And as communities increasingly move away from text-based responses and towards photos and videos, people are able to become reporters on their own lives, capturing life as it's lived through mobile ethnography missions. The resulting 'data' helps us to create exceptional material to tell human stories and engage stakeholders.

Going further

It doesn't just stop with mobile ethnography. There are other ways of harnessing people's digital lives to uncover deeper insights.

People are already creating photo and video 'diaries' through their Snapchat or Instagram feeds. Examining these alongside web searches is a rich vein of insight about current and emergent behaviour.

Or looking to more emergent technologies, you can twin depth-interviews with a 360-degree panorama of someone's home, street or workplace to allow clients or policymakers to enter the world of the individual. There are, of course, important issues about privacy and informed consent. But we should not ignore the possibilities.

There are many options available to us now. We encourage you to move out of your comfort zone and try them out. They can only help you get closer to your subject.

CESSDA ERIC: distributed data infrastructure for the social sciences

*By **Ron Dekker**, director, and **Ivana Ilijasic Versic**, chief operations officer, CESSDA ERIC*

Datasets in the social science domain are multiple and varied. They may be big or small, cover different disciplines, and be multi-level or longitudinal. Data can come from research, national statistics, government and other sources. They are sometimes internationally comparable, but mostly dispersed and uncoordinated. In addition, new data types are emerging, such as internet panels, registries, social media data and traditional survey data combined with other datasets including geo-data, health data and environment data.

Moneywise, we are talking about annual multi-million investments in data collections. In terms of research, we must decide what data should be curated and archived. Providing access to social science data also has policy implications, as it is vital to our understanding of society, its major challenges, ongoing societal processes, the problems involved and the solutions available.

For these reasons, most countries have national social data archives. However, big societal problems require multidisciplinary approaches, and science is a global activity. Issues experienced in one country do not stop at national borders and can easily apply to others. This is where the Consortium for European Social Science Data Archives – CESSDA – comes in. The consortium, which was recently recognised as a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC), currently has 15 members with four more countries in the final stage of becoming members. This includes the UK, which is represented by the UK Data Archive.

CESSDA ERIC's mission is to provide a distributed and sustainable research infrastructure and to facilitate teaching and learning in the social sciences. By doing so, it enables the research community to conduct high-quality research in the social sciences and contributes to producing effective solutions to the major challenges facing society today.

By forming a consortium, social science data infrastructures have become more coordinated. They operate at a European scale to facilitate developing and setting standards for metadata and to provide a single data catalogue for researchers. The service providers bundle their expertise and assets to the benefit of research, and together, they develop quality standards for both the data archives and the data.

We are also engaged in training activities for data producers and data users, and developing the expertise within data archives

Currently, most of our activities deal with setting up the technical framework to allow for a single European data catalogue as a 'shop window' and for online tools which will ensure our data collections comply with the FAIR principles – making data findable, reusable, interoperable and retrievable for users. We are also engaged in training activities for data producers and data users, and developing the expertise within data archives. A final area focuses on building trust in data – developing transparency in processes and quality seals for processing data. Future actions will focus on developing and providing tools for researchers to deposit and describe their data more easily; for users to get access to data in a safe and secure way; and to contribute to realising a social science data cloud as part of the European Open Science Cloud.

In preparation for this, CESSDA is strengthening its relationships with other social sciences and humanities research infrastructures as well as data archives across Europe. The cluster project SERISS [**www.seriss.eu**] is one example of excellent cooperation and communication with other social sciences research infrastructures at a European level. This involves CESSDA working with large-scale social surveys such as the European Social Survey, Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, Generations and Gender Programme and the European Values Study. In the Big Data Europe project [**www.big-data-europe.eu**], we are experimenting with making big data accessible and understandable for new users. Here 'big' relates not to size or velocity, but refers to the complexity of the data and how to combine and compare different data sources.

CESSDA is ready and able to be a key player in the social sciences domain. It is providing researchers with tools and services to curate and publish research data; safe and secure access to data following the FAIR principles, and training to the research community throughout the research cycle.

Find out more at **www.cessda.eu**

Better analysis, better delivery

*By **John Pullinger**, National Statistician (UK Statistics Authority) and Chair of the Analysis Function Board*

Analysis has become ever more crucial to decision-making in government, as shown by the enormous demand for analytical work and staff in the civil service. From the size of our armed forces to the provision of our healthcare, policymakers need strong evidence for the right decisions to be made.

In this context, it is important that government analysts have a collective voice. The leaders of the analytical professions in government have taken a major step towards achieving this by forming a new analysis function in the civil service. This means that statisticians, economists, social researchers, operational researchers, actuaries, digital, data and technology specialists, scientists and engineers, will now be working much more closely with each other to ensure that decisions are taken with the best possible analysis, delivered by the best possible analysts.

What makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts? The aim here isn't to dilute or supplant our professional identities, but instead recognise that analysts have common aims in government, and share a core set of common analytical skills. By pooling our resources and coordinating our efforts, we can strengthen the quality and impact of analysis within the civil service, embedding analysis at the heart of decision-making.

Five objectives

At the outset, we have set five objectives:

1. Maximise the use of analysis and its impact in policy and operational decisions
2. Extend learning and development within and outside the function to strengthen analytical skills development, including training the policy profession about the role of analysis
3. Ensure the analytical professions are more closely linked up with digital, data and technology specialists, to radically improve civil service capability in data science
4. Develop management models and career pathways for analysts (for example experts vs leaders), identifying the pros and cons of each
5. Consider the talent supply for analysts, for all grades including senior civil service analysts

Developing stronger links and sharing knowledge with the wider analytical community, in academia and in industry, is an important part of making this a reality. We already run programmes such as the Government Economic Service (GES) and Indian Economic Service exchange, and the Government Statistical Service (GSS) support to African countries. Similarly, we are building capability through better use of academic experts and by steering master's and PhD projects, working with the Cabinet Office open innovation team. This complements the work being led by the Data Science Campus [**https://datasciencecampus.ons.gov.uk**] and Economic Statistics Centre of Excellence [**https://www.escoe.ac.uk/**]

Collective efforts

We are also keen to talk to organisations outside government about how to work together. One example of where a collective effort is needed is getting more women into economics. Currently only 34% of economists in government are women, and this proportion is even lower, at about 30%, among the undergraduate economics cadre. We need to collectively do much more outreach with schools and the general population. We are already working with organisations such as the Royal Economic Society and the Bank of England, but the more we can join up with others, the better.

New opportunities

The new analytical apprenticeship schemes are another example of where working together is achieving better outcomes. With support from academia and the public and private sectors, the GSS is leading on a data analytics apprenticeship, while the GES is leading on an economics apprenticeship. As these come to fruition, new routes into analytical careers will be available for talented people from a broader range of backgrounds than previously.

There is more we can and should be doing to learn from each other, to share our knowledge and experience, and to work together to maximise the impact of analysis. If you would like to get involved, please contact: **gesr.enquiries@hmtreasury.gsi.gov.uk**

Starting out as an independent researcher: a personal reflection

By ***Jane Evans****, social research consultant*

After nine years working for a major charity as a senior policy researcher, I decided to go freelance from January 2017. Nearly a year has passed, so it's a good time to take stock and reflect.

My decision to go independent

2015/16 was a time of major changes at work and personally. My employer no longer had the same requirement for social policy research as previously. Although together, we had produced some remarkable work over the years, a new government with pressing preoccupations led to a decline in the sort of social policy influencing which my evidence was designed to support. At the same time, my children had grown up and moved on. So, it seemed appropriate to make some life changes, downsize, relocate and try a different way of working.

The nuts and bolts

I approached the task with enthusiasm. My accountant advised me to go ahead as a sole trader. She explained what I could allow against tax, for example a new computer and software. Membership of professional associations like the SRA is allowed as well. Courses can be allowed, but not if they are to gain new skills, only to refresh existing skills. I set up a website, bought NVivo, joined the UCL Library, ordered business cards, and announced my change of employment on LinkedIn. As well as qualitative research tasks, I decided to offer some specialist copy-editing to other researchers and organisations producing complex reports.

Getting work

Initially I bid for a literature review on a topic I knew well. This was a lot of work to prepare, but that job went to an institution rather than an individual. I realised then that my competition includes universities and research centres as well as other more established independents. However, a month later I was contacted by a former colleague who was now heading up a major new centre of expertise and looking for support to analyse a large amount of data. The hourly rate was good and the work interesting. I am grateful that this centre has provided me with steady work ever since. I'm now using my experience in research ethics to contribute to its internal research ethics committee. A small amount of copy-editing at a lower rate of pay has kept me ticking over although, so far, I've not yet earned enough to pay any income tax. So, I have needed my savings and other sources of income to back me up financially. I've recently connected with a small, worthwhile charity in need of some discrete tasks. I'm not charging my usual fee but a nominal flat rate for the chance to be a small part of an innovative intervention and in recognition of its charitable status. With Christmas coming up, I've signed up with an agency which is putting me forward for interim research jobs.

Keeping in touch

It's essential to keep in touch with the world of social research. I attend relevant SRA events, especially if they are free, like the think tank for independent researchers. I keep an eye on Eventbrite for presentations. Academics and researchers frequently present their work at open seminars and events, and these are great for staying connected. I have also started volunteering with the SRA which keeps me in touch with research issues.

Key learning

- Use an accountant: my accountant's knowledge, skills and understanding are invaluable
- Have some savings and/or another source of income – getting known is a slow process
- Get a contract or use your own terms of business to cover issues like confidentiality and intellectual property
- Invoice carefully and keep good records
- Keep in personal touch with your contacts – I've only had work from people I already know
- Be flexible – vary your charges, be prepared to take lower paid work and contract work through agencies

My experience this year has been of a long game. It will take time to build up to a sustainable level of work. But the extra time has given me a welcome opportunity to participate in projects in my community, meet new people and make social contacts – always a potential issue for freelancers.

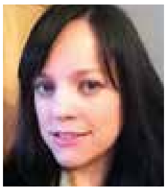
SRA Scotland update

By Sophie Ellison

The committee is busy planning activities for 2018 (including how we might celebrate the SRA's 40th anniversary). We may need to recruit a few more volunteers, so watch this space! Also, if you have suggestions for events or networking opportunities you'd like to see run in Scotland, please get in touch. Do keep an eye on the SRA website, follow us on Twitter (**@SRA_Scotland**) or join our **LinkedIn** group **'SRA Scotland's network for social researchers'** to find out about upcoming training and events in Scotland.

SRA Cymru update

By Faye Gracey



It's been a great year for SRA Cymru. We ran events and training covering a variety of research topics. You can look forward to the same variety of activity continuing. We are especially pleased to have launched Wales Social Research Awards this year, celebrating the value of social science research in and about Wales. We will continue to share information on our Twitter feed (**@sracymru**), web page and **LinkedIn** Group (**Social Research Association (SRA) Cymru**). Please do get in touch if you would like to become more involved: **faye.gracey@wales.gsi.gov.uk**

SRA Ireland update

By Kieran O'Leary

We recently held our AGM followed by a seminar on research ethics. We're always looking for people to get involved in helping the SRA in Ireland. Ideas and input always welcome. Please do get in touch! See the SRA website for further details of events. Email us on **SRAIreland@the-sra.org.uk** or follow us on Twitter **@SRAIreland**.

THE CONVERSATION

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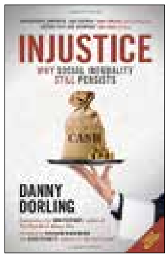
Injustice: why social inequality still persists



Danny Dorling POLICY PRESS, 2015 (REVISED EDITION)

Reviewed by Dr Anna Terje, researcher, ScotCen Social Research

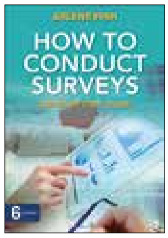
Danny Dorling's fully revised edition of 'Injustice' traces the causes underpinning and maintaining injustice in rich countries, and pointing towards possible solutions. Aimed at a broad readership, from activists to academics, it is ambitious in scope.

Dorling's argument centres around what he calls the five tenets of injustice which uphold inequalities: elitism is efficient; exclusion is necessary; prejudice is natural; greed is good; and despair is inevitable. The book is structured around these beliefs with Dorling arguing that we uphold injustice by wrongly maintaining these beliefs. Using compelling data and maps, Dorling shows us how these tenets fundamentally do not hold true, suggesting a new way of thinking for a more equal society.

The book is accessible: clearly written and eloquently argued, with up-to-date data from the UK and US used to back up claims. However, I would have liked more discussion of alternative theories (and why Dorling rejects these in favour of his five tenets). He does not always engage as fully as it could with the theoretical debates about (in)justice and (in) equality, focusing instead on presenting his argument clearly and powerfully.

This is both a strength and a weakness. In not being overtly theoretical or abstract, the book is a call to action, with practical steps towards eradicating inequality. In light of this, it would appeal to activists as well as those generally interested in inequalities in society, such those who enjoyed The Spirit Level: its co-authors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Picket have written the foreword for this edition.

How to conduct surveys: a step-by-step guide



Arlene Fink SAGE, 2017 (6TH EDITION)

Reviewed by Jo Lea, National Children's Bureau

How to conduct surveys: a step-by-step guide gives a useful overview of the research process. It guides the reader through each stage of the process including different types of research questions, designing a survey, developing a sampling strategy, analysing data and presenting survey findings.

The book is very readable with an easy-to-follow structure and lots of practical advice. For example, Fink provides a useful table on the pros and cons of using different survey types. Examples taken from real-life surveys are also used to good effect throughout, helping to make the text more engaging. The summing up section at the end of each chapter is also a helpful reference for readers to know where to find what they might need and to check their own understanding.

The book would be greatly enhanced by a glossary of research terms as these are not always explained in depth, and those new to research may not be fully conversant in research terminology.

The book provides a succinct overview but lacks detail in places, meaning that researchers would need to consult further literature to undertake research. For example, Fink provides a brief overview of different types of analysis methods, which is easy to understand, but there is not enough explanation of how to actually begin to analyse data.

This book would be useful for students as an introduction to survey research. However, experienced researchers may benefit less from it. For example, the section on designing survey questions describes the difference between closed and open questions, and provides a few examples of response scales. Someone new to research would find this very helpful but experienced researchers, likely to already be aware of the distinction between open and closed questions, may want a more in-depth discussion of different types of response scale than this book provides.

SRA RESEARCH MATTERS

Views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

The Social Research Association (SRA)

TEL: 0207 998 0304

EMAIL: admin@the-sra.org.uk

WEBSITE: www.the-sra.org.uk

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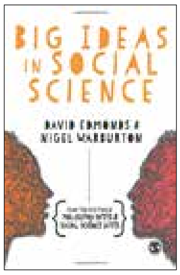
Copy deadlines: 5 February (March issue); 4 May (June issue); 23 July (September issue); and 5 October (December issue).

Big ideas in social sciences

David Edmonds and Nigel Warburton (eds) SAGE, 2016

Reviewed by Hannah Grene, Barncat Consulting



This short volume is a collection of lightly edited transcripts from the podcast series Social Science Bites [**http://www.socialsciencespace.com/about-socialsciencebites/**].

In each interview, a social scientist discusses their work, and as the list includes leading experts such as Robert J. Shiller, Kate Pickett and Danny Dorling (reviewed above), this is an excellent way to get an overview of the latest thinking in social science. It is aimed at a generalist audience, but would also be a good read for social science students looking for contemporary viewpoints, or for busy professionals who want to keep abreast of the latest developments. The interview format makes it particularly easy to read, and having the journalist probe and challenge the expert on certain aspects of their work gives it an interesting dynamic.

Missing, however, is an attempt to make the interviews more than the sum of their parts. The book is divided into sections which group interviews into broad themes, but there is no introduction to the book or to the sections. The brief foreword justifies this approach by explaining that since social science is so broad and diverse, discussions on the nature of social science are 'both interesting and inconclusive'. But, as they also point out: 'it is almost impossible simply to be a social scientist without reflecting on what you are doing'. Any social scientist reading this book will probably wonder how these particular interviews were chosen for publication and how the themes for the sections were chosen. In particular, a reflection on the gender balance of the interviewees would be welcome – the section on births, death and human population is predominantly female, while all other three sections are predominantly male.

Given this lack of added-value, those who love podcasts might be better off going straight to the website for podcasts, which includes not just those in the book but more recent ones as well. However, for those who absorb information better by reading, this is a useful and engaging collection.

Books for review

We are always looking for reviewers. Write a short review for us and you get to keep the book. All books up for review are listed online at **http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/bookreviews**. If you are interested, please email **admin@the-sra.org.uk** and we'll send you guidelines.

Here are some of the titles on offer:

- *Being a scholar in the digital era: transforming scholarly practice for the public good*, Jessie Daniels and Polly Thistlethwaite, Policy Press, 2016
- *Digital sociologies*, Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory and Tressie McMillan Cottom, Policy Press, 2016
- *Social policy in times of austerity: global economic crisis and the new politics of welfare*, Kevin Farnsworth and Zoë Irvin (Eds), Policy Press, 2015
- *Classic grounded theory: applications with qualitative and quantitative data*, Judith A. Holton and Isabelle Walsh, SAGE, 2016
- *Demystifying evaluation: practical approaches for researchers and users*, David Parsons, Policy Press, 2017
- *Communicating your research with social media: a practical guide to using blogs, podcasts, data visualisations and video*, Amy Mollett, Cheryl Brumley, Chris Gilson and Sierra Williams, SAGE, 2017
- *Transcribing for social research*, Alexa Hepburn and Galina B. Bolden, SAGE, 2017

SRA training

SRA member discount: make sure to use your promo code. More information: Lindsay Adams, training coordinator: **lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk**

Social Research Association

MANCHESTER

6 February	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney
1 March	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
2 March	Analysis of qualitative data: approaches and techniques	Professor Karen O'Reilly

EDINBURGH

14 February	Introduction to grounded theory	Professor Karen O'Reilly
15 February	Ethnographic methods	Professor Karen O'Reilly
21 February	Analysis of qualitative data	Liz Spencer
22 February	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Liz Spencer
19 April	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney
1 May	Designing a qualitative study	Professor Karen O'Reilly
2 May	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
3 May	Conducting focus groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly
9 May	Qualitative data analysis	Liz Spencer
10 May	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Liz Spencer

CARDIFF

26 February	Questionnaire design and testing	Dr Pamela Campanelli
27 February	Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests	Dr Pamela Campanelli
28 February	Survey sampling and introduction to weighting	Dr Pamela Campanelli
28 March	Designing a qualitative study	Professor Karen O'Reilly
29 March	Conducting focus groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly
30 March	Analysis of qualitative data: approaches and techniques	Professor Karen O'Reilly
17 May	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney

LONDON

15 January	Foundations of evaluation	Professor David Parsons
16 January	Impact evaluation: understanding options, choices and practice (advanced level)	Professor David Parsons
16 January	Cognitive interviewing for testing survey questions	Dr Pamela Campanelli
17 January	Questionnaire design and testing	Dr Pamela Campanelli
18 January	Sampling and introduction to weighting	Dr Pamela Campanelli
26 January	Introduction to qualitative research	NatCen Social Research
7 February	Qualitative data analysis	Liz Spencer
8 February	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Liz Spencer
15 March	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney
15 & 16 March	Depth interviews	NatCen Social Research
22 & 23 March	Designing and moderating focus groups	NatCen Social Research
23 & 24 April	Analysis of qualitative data	NatCen Social Research
14 May	Reporting qualitative data	NatCen Social Research
11 June	Managing challenging interviews	NatCen Social Research
12 June	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
13 June	Conducting focus groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly
14 June	Ethnographic methods	Professor Karen O'Reilly

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