Making sense of Brexit
How Brexit may change the shape of UK social research
By Nigel Meager, director, Institute for Employment Studies

In the years up to and following the onset of austerity in 2010, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) took a strategic decision to diversify its funding sources into Europe. This broadened the scope of our research, and gave us resilience in the face of tightening UK research budgets. Brexit, depending on its precise terms, threatens this approach raising major questions over our future eligibility for funding from the European Commission, European Parliament and other European institutions active in our field. Even if we maintain eligibility (for example by establishing an office in another EU member state), the interest such bodies will have in research on UK-related topics is likely to diminish or disappear. Further, EU research is typically undertaken in multi-country consortia, and even while we’re still eligible for funding, we anticipate wariness on the part of colleagues in other countries about partnering with UK centres. It will be important for us and similar organisations not just to seek clarification that the existing rules continue to apply until Brexit is concluded, but to lobby the UK government to maintain as favourable a position as possible for British social research in Europe, post-Brexit. The SRA can play a role here perhaps.

IES has also benefited hugely in recent years by recruiting talented and well-qualified social science researchers from the EU. Potential loss of this recruitment source is a major concern; even if it remains technically possible to hire such people, some may see research careers in the UK as less attractive than before. Nevertheless, we plan to maintain our international orientation, and to continue to recruit and develop an international workforce.

Turning to our UK-commissioned work, research and evaluation for UK government departments may also be hit in the short-term. The civil service will be overloaded with managing Brexit, and much domestic ‘business as usual’ will slow to a halt including, we fear, much research commissioning.

Are there any positives? Well, current research contracts with European institutions are worth more in sterling than three months ago. It’s also likely that Brexit itself will create demand for applied research on the implications of withdrawal. In our case as an employment-focused centre, we anticipate interest in research on migration flows, and the implications for the UK skills-base and wage levels, for example.

Overall, however, it’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that seen from the perspective of an independent social research centre, the world is a rather bleaker, more challenging place than before 23 June.
Making sense of Brexit

The place of the UK in Europe’s research infrastructure: the European Social Survey

By Rory Fitzgerald, director, European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC), City University London

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a biennial cross-national general social survey established in 2001. It has over 90,000 data users, and over 3,000 publications have been produced using its data. It is widely seen as setting new standards in cross-national survey research, most notably demonstrated by the award of the Descartes Prize in 2005 (the first time the award was given to a social science project). By comparing countries, the ESS is also able to help identify whether patterns are universal, country specific or regional, helping scholars to better understand their own nation.

The survey reaches beyond academia: it has influenced key performance indicators for part of the Metropolitan Police; helped inform immigration legislation in Bulgaria; and stimulated discussion about democracy in the European Parliament. The data is also widely used when quantitative research methods are taught in universities across Europe. Data from the ESS sheds light on some of the key challenges facing European societies such as immigration, political trust, health inequalities, well-being, the impact of the recession on work as well as climate change and energy security amongst others. In some countries, the ESS is the only academically-led social survey providing high-quality data on issues critical to democracy and an effective civil society.

UK LEADERSHIP IN EUROPEAN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Since its inception under the leadership of the late Sir Roger Jowell, the ESS has been headed by a UK research team which has demonstrated the success of UK leadership in European social science. More recently, the ESS headquarters has become a magnet for leading young scholars from across Europe who moved to the UK in order to help lead the survey and test new methods for the future. The survey is an example of long-term social science cooperation by over 30 countries in Europe providing a beacon for others to follow. Underpinning that success has been steadfast support from the European Commission via its framework programmes which have been critical for supporting the coordination of the infrastructure as well as funding longer-term methodological research.

In 2013 the ESS was awarded European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) status establishing an intergovernmental organisation to provide long-term financial and governance arrangements. ESS ERIC is the only UK-hosted ERIC but others have been in the planning stage in differing UK scientific domains looking to the ESS ERIC as an example.

UNCERTAINTY FROM BREXIT AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

The vote to exit the EU has led to uncertainty over whether the UK will continue to attract the best scientific talent because of possible restrictions on free movement. Furthermore, questions over future access to the framework programmes and future legal arrangements for ERICs need answers as soon as possible as uncertainty itself can be destabilising. Differences between Norway and Switzerland suggest that the issue of free movement of people is likely to be central to the future of the UK’s role in the European research area.

One final reflection is that ‘Brexit’ is likely to lead to a need for more comparative data with regions beyond Europe. This will include not only areas of more historic cooperation with the UK such as the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand but also in developing countries such as China, India and parts of Africa and South America. In addition to considering how European social scientists can maintain and further develop our European links, now is surely the time to consider how we can broaden them too. With many global challenges facing social scientists, we must look both to Europe and beyond for solutions.
Making sense of Brexit
How did we get here, what happens next and other questions
By Nancy Kelley, director, Policy Research Centre, NatCen

In the aftermath of Brexit, it’s hard not to think about the potential impact on social research funding. Will we be less attractive partners for international work? Will government funding dry up as the big Whitehall ship tries to change course? What will be the favoured disciplines of the post-Brexit era?

But really, that’s not the point. The outcome of the referendum has left many of us trying to figure out how we got here, and everyone else trying to figure out what happens next. These are questions social scientists are particularly well placed to answer.

What are the implications of the rise in populist politics internationally in Europe and here in the UK? What role did identity play in the decisions made by the electorate? Or socio-economic status? What are the long-term implications of living in a society where the impacts and benefits of globalisation have been so unequally felt? With our highly polarised electoral map, how wide is the scope for policy divergence? Or federalism?

Is the sharp rise in reported hate crime an anomaly, or a sign that Brexit has opened a Pandora’s box of racism and xenophobia?

And if we are tempted to retreat in the face of talk about ‘post-truth politics’ and the idea that ‘Britain has had enough of experts’, we should consider two things. First, that politics, and by extension policymaking, has always been a thing of sentiment and identity as much as evidence and analysis. Second, if we are not able to use our knowledge to inform policy debates it’s a failure of communication on our part. It’s our job to shed light on complex social and human questions – and that includes talking about them in a way that makes sense to other people, and shapes their understanding of the world.

As writer, Clay Shirky, said recently about liberal intellectuals’ response to the rise of Donald Trump, ‘We brought fact checkers to the culture war. Time to get serious.’

SRA annual conference 2016: now booking
Making the links: new directions for social researchers
6 December at the British Library, London

Now more than ever, social researchers need to build strong connections outside our industry. Traditional boundaries between research methods have softened as researchers and funders recognise the value of combining approaches. Hard and fast divisions between academics, practitioners and policy researchers are blurring. Researchers are increasingly collaborating with other professionals in fields such as bio-tech and engineering. And new opportunities arise as technology redraws the limits on data collecting, data sharing and research dissemination. What challenges does this new landscape bring?

Booking at: www.the-sra.org.uk/events
Discounts for SRA members
Refreshments, lunch and a wine reception afterwards

Keynote speaker:
◗ Sharon Witherspoon, director of policy at the Academy of Social Science

Plenary speakers:
◗ Gareth Morrell, head of research at Madano: ‘Making, embracing and embedding the links: technology and qualitative research’
◗ Siobhan Campbell, deputy chief scientific advisor, head of central research team at Department for Transport: ‘Dealing with real-world complexities in policy evaluations’
◗ Tony McEnery, director of research at ESRC; distinguished professor of English language and linguistics at Lancaster University: ‘Words and numbers: linguistic analyses of big survey data’
◗ Peter Jackson, professor of human geography, University of Sheffield: ‘Social science in food policy and practice’

Workshop presentations on methodological innovation, collaboration and partnerships, communications and impact, ethical issues, evidence-informed policy and practice, unexpected outcomes and ‘the way we live now’.
SRA chair, Patten Smith, gives an assurance that the SRA will do its utmost to act as an effective industry voice in unsettled times.

I have yet to meet a social researcher who has celebrated the vote to leave the EU. Those I have spoken to, to a greater or lesser extent, Nigel Meager’s downbeat assessment (see front page) of the implications of Brexit for UK social research. Our access to European research funding is likely to be reduced; the UK will probably attract fewer talented EU social researchers; and government-funded domestic social research may be squeezed as an overburdened civil service unpicks our multiple interdependencies with the EU.

Might there be silver linings? For example, in the form of research arising directly from Brexit-generated changes to the institutional and social environment? Might there be silver linings? For example, in the form of research arising directly from Brexit-generated changes to the institutional and social environment? Maybe. But it’s hard to feel confident. Whatever happens, one thing I can assure you of is that the SRA will do its utmost to act as an effective industry voice as the future unfolds.

Something the Brexit vote starkly highlights, of course, is the need for social research. If we believe newspapers, broadcasters and social media, we are likely to accept the narrative that we are living in especially febrile and uncertain times: that political disillusion is in the air; that old loyalties are dissolving; that inter-group attitudes are polarising; and that emotion is overriding rationality. But as Nancy Kelley points out on page 3, our role as social researchers is to interrogate this narrative impartially. What are the root causes of changing attitudes and behaviours? Has the world changed as much as the media narrative says it has? Plenty here for social researchers to get their teeth into, just so long as our teeth continue to be funded!

A comparatively trivial lesson from Brexit concerns opinion polling. That the polls were unable to predict the final result with any great accuracy is unsurprising. With such an even balance of opinion, getting an accurate prediction of the outcome was a very big ask for good statistical reasons – and would have been even for surveys considerably more methodologically rigorous than the average opinion poll. Therefore, perhaps one of the main lessons from recent polling failures should be simply that we should expect less from the polls.

However, this is not to say that polls cannot also be improved. The British Polling Council inquiry into the 2015 election polling problems concluded that the polls’ samples were unrepresentative. Surveys with unrepresentative samples don’t work, and for this reason, I am most encouraged by NatCen’s development of a cost-effective mixed-mode panel with a scientifically robust sample (see page 5). Whether or not they will succeed in cracking problems with polling I don’t know, but one thing I am confident of is that the methods they are developing will have a secure future.

More on Brexit in polls articles on pages 5 and 6.
NatCen panel and the EU referendum

By Kirby Swales, director, Survey Centre, NatCen

The pages of Research Matters reflect the big debates in social research. In the past year, there has been extensive coverage of polling methods, including: the quality of samples; the differences between on-line and telephone data collection; and the impact of weighting methods. Into this mix, the ESRC has commissioned a consultation about the feasibility of a new type of web panel in the UK.

Although NatCen does not carry out regular political polls, we are interested in modernising our approach and want to take part in the debate about methods. Therefore, we ran a one-off opinion survey on the EU referendum using a new NatCen research panel – a new methodological approach for estimating British public opinion and behaviour. This was an exciting challenge which brought home the difficulties of political polling.

Although NatCen does not carry out regular political polls, we are interested in modernising our approach and want to take part in the debate about methods

The new NatCen panel attempts to address some of the perceived weakness of existing approaches, and has three distinctive features:

- The panel is the first to use a ‘random probability’ sample design in the UK. Panel members were recruited through the 2015 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey; participants were selected at random and so, unlike most online panels, it is not formed from people who have ‘volunteered’

- Whereas most polls are based on web or telephone methods, our panel uses a sequential mixed-mode approach: those who failed to respond to the survey over the internet are, if possible, followed up by telephone. Indeed, over a quarter (29%) of participants completed the survey by telephone

- It uses an extended fieldwork approach of a month rather than just a few days. This allows multiple attempts to reach hard-to-contact panel members, and is designed to minimise non-coverage and sample bias

Our internal checks on the panel suggest it is a good quality sample, and it produces similar estimates to the original BSA survey. The recruitment rate to the panel from BSA was 64% and we managed to secure responses from 62% of this group for the EU referendum survey – thus giving an overall response rate of 19%. Whilst this is reasonable, what is perhaps more important, is that the probability design allows us to apply statistical theory to the study (such as tests of significance), and we can use the wealth of original data in BSA for non-response weighting.

We are not saying the panel is the same as conducting a face-to-face survey along the lines used by surveys with National Statistics status and BSA – clearly some additional bias is introduced during the panel recruitment and survey process. We’ll assess this by looking at what may help explain the difference between the result of 52% voting Leave and our central estimate of 47%. Using a re-contact approach, we intend to see whether our estimate of opinion in the month before the referendum was explained by sample bias; a swing in that last month that the survey did not cover; or the challenges of adjusting for turnout.

Interestingly, we have found that the capture of the off-line population through mixed-mode is important for securing a balanced sample – they are more likely to be social renters for example. We also found that early responders are different from the ‘hard-to-reach’.

The main purpose of the panel is to enable more organisations to conduct robust research for the benefit of society by making high-quality surveys quicker and more affordable. We are now speaking to charities, academics and others about how it can be used for studying opinion and behaviour on major social issues. Alongside this substantive work, we are keen to use the panel for further methodological research. For example, we have already published the microdata for the referendum survey, and will be talking later in the year about some of the other experiments we have been running.

The new panel is an exciting development for NatCen and, we hope, for social research in the UK.

Reference
Social grade, the EU referendum and turnout

By Luke Taylor, head of social and political attitudes, TNS BMRB

One of the most challenging aspects of political opinion polling is modelling who will vote in elections. The British Election Study provides estimates of demographic voter profiles for previous general elections which can be used to help model turnout for future general elections. However, as the EU referendum was unprecedented, pollsters did not have historical data to draw upon and instead had to develop their own approaches (based on a number of untestable assumptions) to predict who was likely to vote.

In the final week of the campaign, nine pollsters predicted the outcome of the referendum. There was considerable variation in these estimates, with predictions ranging from a four-point lead for Leave to a ten-point lead for Remain. The polls were, however, generally consistent in showing how opinion was split by social grade. Five of the final polls included cross-breaks allowing for analysis by social grade, and while there is some variation in the results (due in part to relatively small effective sample sizes), they consistently show that higher social grades (ABC1) tended to support ‘Remain’ and lower social grades (C2DE) tended to support ‘Leave’.

Given the polls broadly agreed on this aspect, it would suggest that the different predictions at the overall level were at least partly due to differences in sample composition (the distribution of social grades) due to different assumptions being made about differential turnout. The published tables for five of the final polls provide sufficient detail to test this hypothesis, and it is indeed apparent that the social grade profile among likely voters varied markedly from poll to poll.

Furthermore, by plotting for each of these polls the proportion of the voter sample classified as C2DE against the predicted referendum result (in terms of Leave vote share) we can see that there is a significant positive linear relationship. This analysis suggests that the underlying data for many of the final pre-referendum polls was consistent, but that the different assumptions made by each pollster about the profile of voters had a strong impact on their final predictions. We expect turnout models for the next general election to have a more consistent effect, as pollsters will have historical data to draw upon when developing their methods. However, there are a number of other sources where bias can be introduced in polling, and as we learned from the 2015 general election polling inquiry, the polls for that election were off due to bias in the sample rather than other factors such as differential turnout. It should therefore be noted that, while we expect the turnout modelling to be applied more consistently for future general elections, this is no guarantee that the polls will be accurate.
A charming story broke in the press last June. It focused on ten-year-old Eva from France who applied to the Paris Summer Innovation Fellowship (PSIF). These fellowships are funded by Five by Five (www.fivebyfive.io), the Paris branch of the Open Data Institute. They look for ‘20 bright young minds’ and offer them ‘2 weeks of funding, tools, space and mentorship to start prototyping the change they want to see in their city’. Eva decided she was a bright young mind. Here is a summary of her application:

‘The streets of Paris are sad. I want to build a robot that will make them happy again. I’ve already started learning how to code on Thymio1 robots, but I have trouble making it work. I want to join the program so the mentors can help me.’

Her idea was that the robot could create street art such as chalk drawings to cheer everyone up.

Kat Borlongan, one of the founding partners of Five by Five, accepted Eva’s application in an open letter which she posted on Facebook. Among other things, the letter said:

‘I am writing to you personally because your application inspired me. There was nothing on the website that said the program was open to 10-year-olds but – as you must have noticed – nothing that said it was not. You’ve openly told us that you had trouble making the robot work on your own and needed help. That was a brave thing to admit, and ultimately what convinced us to take on your project.’

Ms Borlongan also contacted Thymio to ask whether it would provide a specialist to work with Eva during her fortnight’s fellowship. Thymio replied that it would send the organisation’s president, and provide its latest robot for Eva to work with.

By now you might be thinking, well, this is all very lovely, but what does it have to do with research ethics?

My view is that this was a highly ethical action. I have several reasons for this opinion. First, while humanprogress.org tells us that the ratio of girls to boys in education has been rising steadily over recent decades, worldwide there are still fewer girls in education than boys. So accepting Eva for PSIF, which is not only highly educational but focuses on traditionally ‘male’ subjects (computer programming, robotics, urban design), is an ethical act in that context.

Second, accepting Eva for PSIF will inevitably cause some problems for the organisers. For example, they may need to change some of the language they use, explain concepts differently, and make sure all the other Fellows are happy to work alongside a ten-year-old girl as that may require adjustments from them too. It would have been easier for the funders to say ‘no’. I think it was an ethical decision not to take the easy path.

Third, I particularly love this story because Eva is an independent researcher who has been granted access to funding and support. I have been an independent researcher for 17 years and I know there are dozens of other indie researchers among the SRA’s membership, as well as other groups such as retired and unemployed researchers who might want to work independently. These groups have no access to funding in their own right from any UK research council. There are a couple of small funding streams we can apply to, from organisations like the British Academy and the Wellcome Foundation, but they are heavily over-subscribed. Yet from our independent perspective, we can often identify research questions that people constrained by institutional pressures might not see. Just like Eva did.

I think it is unethical on a structural level to exclude independent researchers from research funding. It is also a waste of a national resource. The government has been promoting its ‘widening participation agenda’ for students in higher education for many years now. I would like to see a similar initiative to encourage funders to widen participation for researchers.

There are a couple of small funding streams we can apply to, from organisations like the British Academy and the Wellcome Foundation, but they are heavily over-subscribed

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1 https://www.thymio.org/en/thymio
The SRA ethics consultancy forum

The SRA offers a free ethics forum for members to consult with when they have a specific query about research ethics.

If you encounter an ethical dilemma in your research you can email your question to the SRA forum convenor. Your question is then circulated to members of the consultancy forum; they have considerable experience of social research across different sectors. Their responses are collated and sent back to you, usually within seven working days. It’s an informal service and you may receive a range of views on your query.

Below is an example of a question on observation studies submitted to the ethics forum. Other examples are at: http://the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy-forum/ethics-cases/

**Question**

‘I am currently undertaking some research on drinking and would like to carry out some observation within bars/pubs. Could you tell me if it is possible for me to do this without telling individuals? Would it be possible to put up a notice within venues to say that we were there and carry the research out this way?’

**Reply**

Observational research remains a particularly contentious ethical area and with some widely diverging views. If your research proposal is subject to ethical scrutiny of some sort (a research ethics committee – REC) you may find some members regard covert observation work as inherently unethical. If that were true, much of early social science would have been ruled out. If no REC scrutiny is required it is up to you, as a responsible professional researcher, to find the best way to protect your subjects and yourself. The section of the SRA’s ethical guidelines that deals with this is: 4.3(a) (and ff. p31-4).

Not fully disclosing your presence highlights the balance between your methodological requirements and the ethical concern of protecting the subject from undue interference. If there are really strong methodological requirements for (covert) observation, and the study would be worthless without it, you can justify doing it – as long as there are no undue consequences for those under observation. Typically this is done both by concealing their identities and the site of the study. You protect the subject by ensuring that it would be impossible for anyone to find out who you are studying and where you did the study. If you can guarantee this and the ‘worth’ of the study (to society and, possibly, even to the individuals/group under study) outweighs any conceivable harm, your ethical hand is strengthened.

If you do put up a notice, your design is inevitably compromised. That is, the subjects might behave differently as a consequence of knowing you are there. But more problematically, this might not even secure informed consent.

You would have no evidence, other than the notice, that the consent was truly ‘informed’. (That is usually guaranteed by a signed consent form.) People could say they had not seen the notice and, if they hear about it subsequently, could get upset about being observed. You would then have to design a grievance procedure for redress of any ‘harm’. Nonetheless, putting up such a notice has become a standard consent procedure for observational studies.

In all cases, it is vital you secure the consent of the owners of the premises. (There may be indemnity issues involved.) In the USA there is little concern about observations in public places for various reasons – people are ‘observing’ each other anyway. Whether they make notes about it, write about it and publish it is a secondary concern – and if people are unhappy about how they are described, and their identities revealed, they can take it to law! Remember, journalists and novelists are less bothered about this than we as professional researchers.

The important thing is to make a full rationale for however you proceed, including all measures to protect the interests of your subjects. Also have a look at the MRS ethical guidelines – it has a clear statement on this.

For more about the SRA ethics consultancy forum or to ask for advice see: http://the-sra.org.uk/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy-forum/
Driving behaviour change

By Helen Angle, head of communications evaluation, TNS BMRB; Gareth Tuck, UK director, Eye Square and Jo Parry, head of marketing, Department for Transport

The Department for Transport’s (DfT) THINK! campaign aims to reduce the number of people killed and injured on roads. KSI (killed or seriously injured) data highlighted that country roads account for 60% of annual road deaths but only 40% of actual traffic. The risk of dying on a rural road is twice as high. A campaign to address this problem was needed.

Loss of control whilst driving around a bend is the factor most commonly cited in accidents on country roads, with men aged 17 to 35 most often involved.

Through consulting road safety experts and academics, a single action was identified to help avoid these accidents – correcting braking behaviour on bends. This understanding of the problem framed the ‘THINK! country roads’ campaign objective: to persuade young, male drivers to ‘brake before the bend, not on it’ – launched in 2014 and repeated in 2015.

Having found a creative route, evaluating it effectively was more of a challenge. Measuring braking behaviour going into a bend using standard research techniques is problematic. Self-reporting of driving attitudes and behaviour is the approach we often use for the THINK! campaign, but this was unlikely to give us the accurate readings we needed for this type of automatic behaviour which people are not consciously aware of. The alternative, waiting for accident figures to be accumulated, takes time to become available, and it is difficult to prove the link with the campaign. We needed a new methodology that provided additional data to supplement the pre/post surveys, focused on explicit changes in individual behaviour.

Technology offers several tools to observe driving behaviour, some of which operate roadside and others on-board. We worked with Eye Square, a company which is highly experienced in using camera-observation technology in user and brand research. Our solution was an on-board GPS system linked to a ‘control box’, and an in-vehicle car camcorder mounted on the dashboard which recorded road conditions and other environmental information. This technology enabled researchers to objectively measure the car’s speed approaching a bend and its speed at every point on that bend, under natural driving conditions, and gave researchers all the information needed to assess the three key campaign performance indicators:

1. The time before entering a corner when deceleration begins
2. The speed at which drivers enter corners
3. The average speed on country roads

Alongside pre- and post-campaign surveys of 750 drivers to measure awareness, attitudes and norms at scale, we installed the GPS device into the cars of 30 men aged 18 to 35 who drive regularly on the same country road routes. We used video to take into account driving conditions and GPS to track routes. We assigned bends to one of six curve types, according to their radius. Finally, we removed data points when it was clear from reviewing the video that the driver had been unable to drive at a natural speed because of slower moving traffic in front. This provided 2,074 data points to analyse.

Following the campaign, participants exposed to the campaign drove significantly slower at curve entry points and drove significantly slower on country roads generally. They also started to decelerate earlier before the bend.

In 2015, we adjusted the approach to enable us to scale up the behaviour element by using a mobile phone app and recruited 144 young male drivers of whom 60 gave data for 13 weeks. However, although this provided more data (5,846 bends) and demonstrated similar changes, it relied more on participants remembering to activate their phones, and so some journeys were missed, mainly the shorter local ones. Therefore, in 2016, we plan to revert to the GPS devices and use DfT electronic traffic monitoring data to supplement the evaluation.

Our innovative approach has allowed us to make detailed measures of actual driver behaviour to supplement our survey data instead of relying on reported behaviour. It has also opened up possibilities for evaluating the impact of campaigns which target automatic behaviour.
New ways of evaluating impact of arts on wellbeing

By Yulia Kartalova-O’Doherty, director, Applied Research Consultancy Limited and Josefien Breedvelt, research manager, The Mental Health Foundation

The arts could be beneficial for psychological wellbeing1. However, their subjective and multi-faceted nature makes it notoriously difficult to evaluate their impact on wellbeing. Moreover, in-depth evaluation of subjective experiences during or after arts events may be perceived as intrusive, interfering with people’s enjoyment of, and benefit from, arts events2.

The London Anxiety Arts Festival 20143 comprised 76 festival events around London between May and July including films, concerts, creative workshops, discussions, plays and exhibitions.

The MHF evaluated the impact of the festival on wellbeing and attitudes to people with mental health problems; in this article we focus on two of the evaluation aims, which were to assess if the festival surprised, challenged and delighted audiences by showcasing visual art, performance, music, film, exhibitions.

1, 047 words such as interested, irritated, happy or tired. Following the principles of linguistic analysis4 and the guidelines of the Edinburgh-Warwick psychological wellbeing scale5, researchers re-coded words describing positive feelings and emotions into factors of psychological wellbeing such as happiness and contentedness, good relationships with others or self-motivation. They re-coded negative feelings such as irritation or boredom into categories of ‘tired-bored’ and ‘nervous-irritated’. They also created, two ‘neutral’ categories, such as overwhelmed or sad6.

The majority of respondents reported feeling excited or inspired by festival events (97.9%) and happy or content (88.6%). A quarter reported feeling nervous, irritated or uncomfortable; a small percentage felt tired or bored, and sad or nostalgic.

Provided that data is collected and coded in a systematic manner, psycholinguistic analysis of words describing feelings and emotions could be a practical and non-intrusive approach to evaluation of impact of arts on subjective wellbeing.

This approach could be especially useful when large numbers of people attend diverse events at multiple venues. Further testing and fine-tuning of the approach is needed. To improve response rates, a thorough briefing of volunteers and festival hosts about the purposes and means of evaluation should be carried out consistently across all venues.

Future research could explore the long-term impact of arts festivals on attitudes, behaviour and social connectedness.


3 Curated by the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) and co-funded by the Maudsley Charity, Arts Council England, Britten-Pears Foundation, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, PRS Foundation for Music, the Peter Minet Trust, in partnership with the University of the Arts in London.


A research commissioner’s view

Revealingly perhaps, after many years involved in commissioning research, I find it easier to cite examples of the thoughtlessness and insensitivity sometimes shown by commissioners towards their research contractors than I do to list the ways in which contractors can irritate or exasperate commissioners. The worst examples of poor behaviour by commissioners are usually the result of inexperience or lack of appreciation of what matters most to contractors (such as giving honest feedback). However, the increasing bureaucratisation of commissioning processes hasn’t helped foster a more open discussion between the two sides.

But what do I find most irritating or frustrating about research contractors?

OVERPROMISING AND ‘OPTIMISM BIAS’

‘Optimism bias’, particularly over what can be delivered by when, is an ever-present danger in research commissioning. Commissioners are just as, if not more, guilty of this than potential contractors – they often start with unrealistic assumptions about what is achievable. Conversely, the penalties to a contractor for showing too much of a ‘pessimism bias’ can be high. They risk not winning the contract and may fear that challenging the commissioner’s unrealistic assumptions will not help their bid or reputation. But failing to constructively challenge unrealistic assumptions and objectives at the outset invariably leads to tears and recriminations later on when the timetable fouls up, the level of response is woefully low, or the budget runs out.

It is in the interests of both commissioners and contractors if the latter are, without penalty, able and willing to constructively challenge the initial assumptions of commissioners and put forward achievable alternatives. Research agencies should be more confident about doing this but commissioners also need to be more accepting and encouraging of that challenge. However, even without any pressure from commissioners, research organisations are still quite capable of succumbing to their own optimism bias, with their most optimistic assumption about timing, sampling and so on quickly becoming their central assumption.

NOT STAYING IN TOUCH

Good communication is a two-way process. I am well aware of the failures of research commissioners to keep bidders and contractors up to date with relevant information or even to provide basic information on the fate of proposals. But research contractors can also irritate by failing to maintain a regular flow of information to their clients about progress, even if there appears to be little new to say. It is usually taken to be an ominous sign when there are long silences, when updates from the contractor cease: ‘What’s gone wrong? What are they hiding from me?’ Unwelcome news is rarely improved by delay or obfuscation.

POOR REPORTING

Some types of clients, notably those in the public sector where accountability and publication is seen as paramount, attach strong importance to the quality of final reports. This can seem like an obsession (and some of it is driven by political sensitivity) but it is important not to underestimate how much it matters to such clients. It is not always clear that contractors value reporting to the same degree or perhaps they do but are just not that good at it. Standards have improved as clients have become more exacting and social research has become more competitive but commissioners still see it as an area of high risk. A proven record of good report writing improves a contractor’s chances of selection.

Too many reports are still doggedly descriptive with little real analysis or interpretation, little attempt to set the findings in context or to make comparisons. Sometimes, alas, the shortcomings are more elementary: clumsy, convoluted wording which obscures meaning; unfocused sprawling arguments. We don’t expect (or want!) Shakespearian prose but it is reasonable to expect research organisations to ensure processes for checking and editing rather than sending off apparently unedited and ill-considered drafts. The best agencies and institutes seem to be able to do this. Why not all?

I believe commissioners get a pretty good service from their research contractors most of the time. Hopefully, this series of frank exchanges will help us improve even more how we interact.
**ESRC Secondary Data Analysis Initiative**

Researchers share their experiences of taking part in the ESRC SDAI

**Jane Elliott**, chief executive, ESRC
The ESRC has invested in a wide range of world-leading data resources, from our portfolio of longitudinal studies through to investments made as part of the ESRC Big Data Network. A key aim is to ensure that rich resources such as these are exploited to their full potential, and that analytic capability is developed. The Secondary Data Analysis Initiative (SDAI) was, therefore, designed to support high-quality research which has an impact on policy and practice, focusing on the exploitation of existing data resources. Three phases of SDAI have been commissioned since 2012 supporting nearly 100 projects.

The SDAI has also been successful in funding projects which have been co-produced by non-academics. In Phase 2, this was an explicit requirement of the call, and 21 projects were funded which involved a non-academic partner. In the other phases, the initiative has strongly encouraged, but not mandated, non-academic collaboration.

Further details of the SDAI’s impact is in our SDAI Phase 1 research impacts leaflet at: www.esrc.ac.uk/files/news-events-and-publications/publications/themed-publications/sdai-phase-1-research-impacts/

**Svetlana Speight**, research director, NatCen Social Research
The project ‘Fathers, work and families in 21st century Britain: beyond the male breadwinner model?’ was funded as part of SDAI Phase 1. I was the principal investigator, Professor Margaret O’Brien (UCL Institute of Education) and Professor Sara Connolly (University of East Anglia) were co-investigators, and the team also included Dr Matthew Aldrich (UEA) and Eloise Poole (NatCen).

We were fortunate to be able to draw on support from our partner the Fatherhood Institute, its joint CEO, Adrienne Burgess, in particular. It helped us throughout the project with impact, by linking our research to the current debates around fatherhood, by publicising our project website www.modernfatherhood.org and by disseminating our findings directly to its large database through its regular newsletters. Our advisory group, consisting of representatives of government departments, charities and researchers, was also helpful in shaping our research in its early stages and later facilitating our access to policymakers and practitioners. In the end, we held several dissemination events targeting different groups with research findings relevant to them (for example, talking about fathers and work at the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and about a broad range of issues at an event aimed at professionals working with fathers). Our project website had many hits and downloads of the policy briefing papers which we published. We have also published two papers in top-ranking journals, which means we are reaching out to wide academic audiences in the UK and abroad.

This project was very rewarding for many reasons but mainly because of the dissemination opportunities we had, having no ‘client’ as such but instead a funder (ESRC) keen on impact from academic research, academic as well as non-academic. We are continuing to build on that positive experience, even though we are no longer funded by the ESRC. We are maintaining the Modern Fatherhood website as a source of up-to-date information on fathers’ work and family life. We recently published four new research notes there, which examine fathers’ work patterns in the UK and in Europe, and how these have been changing since the beginning of this century.

The SDAI is now open to receiving proposals throughout the year. It also provides more opportunities for the ESRC to work with partner funding organisations to increase the number of projects supported.

More information: www.esrc.ac.uk/research/our-research/secondary-data-analysis-initiative and to discuss SDAI contact: sdai@esrc.ac.uk

continued over...
I have been lucky enough to be successful with two SDAI bids, each involving the Department for Transport (DfT).

My particular research interest is in how longitudinal data can help improve understanding of how people’s travel needs and behaviour change over the life course. The groundwork for working with DfT started during the consultation process for the new UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS, otherwise known as Understanding Society). DfT’s social research and evaluation division and I both contributed to this process, and we were aware that a stronger case could be made for including transport-related content by discussing ideas and coordinating submissions into the process. So, when the SDAI Phase 1 call came out there was an appetite on both of our parts to capitalise on the UKHLS data which was starting to become available to the research community. We worked out a research project idea, Life Transitions and Travel Behaviour, which met DfT’s evidence priorities, and would also contribute to knowledge gaps in the research field.

It proved essential to the success of the proposal that the partners carefully worked out the mechanisms of working together during the project. It was important that DfT offered a single point of contact for those interested in the project, actively publicised the project to colleagues, and involved them when appropriate. As academics, we were steered by DfT into producing evidence briefings, arranging seminars for staff across DfT, and training DfT staff to use the data which the project generated.

Having sought to understand how people’s life circumstances influenced their travel behaviour, we subsequently submitted a proposal on ‘Commuting and Wellbeing’. A DfT review had highlighted an absence of persuasive evidence on the long-term relationship between commuting and wellbeing. Interest in this topic extends beyond transport, and DfT was able to bring in the Department of Health, Department for Communities and Local Government and What Works Centre for Wellbeing as research partners. The proposal reflected the interests of all partners and this strengthened the proposal considerably as it increased its potential to influence policy and practice.

We have also set up a stakeholder interest group with a wider range of non-government organisations to ensure that the project outcomes are useful in the ‘real world’.

In my experience it has been invaluable for researchers and research users to nurture connections with each other to increase understanding of each other’s perspectives and priorities. It has also placed us in a strong position to seize funding opportunities.

More information about the two projects: www.travelbehaviour.com

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**Tools for social media research**

#NSMNSS/SRA event: an introduction to tools for social media research

11 October 2016 at Friends House, London

The SRA and #NSMNSS are teaming up with eight expert speakers to present a one-day session on tools for social media research.

Speakers:

- **Steven McDermot**, University of the Arts London: ‘Critically engaging with social media research tools’
- **Wasim Ahmed**, University of Sheffield: ‘Introduction to NodeXL’
- **Luke Sloan**, Social Data Science Lab, Cardiff University: ‘Democratising access to social media data: the collaborative online social media observatory (COSMOS)’
- **Gillian Mooney**, University of Leeds: ‘Using Facebook as a research tool’
- **Phillip Brooker**, University of Bath: ‘Doing social media analytics with Chorus’
- **Sarah Lewthwaite**, NCRM University of Southampton: ‘Developing inclusive and accessible digital methods: engaging critically with your digital toolbox’
- **Yeran Sun**, Urban Big Data Centre, University of Glasgow: ‘How to use R and QGIS to find out tourism hotspots in cities’
- **Francesco D’Orazio**, Pulsar: ‘The visual DNA of car brands in social media’

Booking at: [www.the-sra.org.uk/events](http://www.the-sra.org.uk/events)

£95 for SRA members, £115 for non-members

#NSMNSS for more information
How can we make publicly-available data more accessible to a broader audience?

By Ethan Greenwood, project manager, Wellcome Trust

A senior manager once advised me that, as much as he admired my desire to share important statistics with colleagues, it was better to peg them to a broader narrative. Social researchers don’t usually have much in common with advertising creatives, artists or novelists but perhaps there is something to learn from them about presenting information in an engaging way. Anyone looking at the UK Data Archive for the first time will be both impressed and overwhelmed by what’s on offer to download. But with so much available, are people really using it? For example, even though between October 2015 and March 2016 the UK Data Archive had around 217,000 searches, the data was less likely to be downloaded, around 50,000 times.

Perhaps there is a reason for this, or as Professor Patrick Sturgis puts it: ‘If it is difficult to get trained academics to access the data, is it realistic to think that un-trained members of the public will?’ He is sceptical about the cost-effectiveness of any strategy designed to open up data access to non-specialists who won’t use it because they don’t know how to. Both Professor Sturgis from Southampton University and Dr Neil Spencer from Hertfordshire University, who were interviewed for this article, agreed that, ultimately, the existing system of education provides the best way to train analysts of data.

Nonetheless, more can be done. Those of us who have the job of communicating research findings to a diverse audience know the importance of tailoring different products to different people. Producing only an SPSS dataset might inspire a statistical expert but it deprives others who may find the insights more useful than the figures behind them. Similarly, releasing a report only is insufficient for people wishing to explore any of the findings in more detail.

The UK Data Archive does not usually hold the reports for its data but this might help make them more accessible. A map on the homepage linking broader societal themes to their respective reports, with the data and tables underneath, might make the website easier to use. Clicking on the health link would lead to sub themes such as medicine, patient satisfaction, behaviour and so on, which, in turn, would lead to reports, some of which can link to each other. Reports sharing common themes could also link to each other.

In his recent book1, David Walker criticised the ESRC for not doing more to ensure that the academics it funded shared their work with a broader audience. Impact is now being taken more seriously, but experts in their field who turn data into meaningful insights need to have more direct contact with the politicians and policymakers who their work is meant to influence. So why don’t those academics who have used data to enrich knowledge in their field and the government analysts who have interrogated it to inform policy, post examples of this next to their relevant datasets, and in doing so inspire others?

Dr Hannah Fry, presenter of a recent BBC4 programme ‘The Joy of Data’,2 celebrated a future in which data is in the hands of the many and not the few. The problem of there being too much data and too little analysis has been a theme of SRA conferences in the past. The social research industry needs to keep improving how its data can be bought to bear on current societal challenges. I hope my suggestions contribute to that process.

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2 http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07lk6tj
Proposals to address challenges faced by Irish researchers and data users in data sharing and linkage

By Rosalyn Moran, cross-organisation strategic project manager, Health Research Board

Researchers worldwide report problems in data sharing and linkage, with similar consequences. Data is a valuable asset, and its reuse results in considerable cost savings, but without data sharing and linkage support, the same data may be collected again at considerable cost; or valuable studies with potential to inform policy and practice may be abandoned or delayed.

There are various initiatives promoting greater openness and sharing of data such as Open Data agenda, EU Horizon 2020, and Open Science/Open Cloud Initiative. Sharing and linking data, that which holds personal identifiers, raises some important ethical or legal issues requiring rigorous safeguarding provisions to protect the privacy of individuals.

**PROBLEMS REPORTED BY DATA USERS**

Problems experienced by researchers in trying to share or link data vary according to legal and regulatory environments, the culture surrounding data sharing and data practices. Research in the Irish context (Moran 2016) identified the following as the main challenges:

- Absence of unique identifiers, metadata and so on
- Culture of caution surrounding data sharing
- Uncertainty about the role and mandate of the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, ethics committees and other authorising entities
- Lack of familiarity about the kinds of infrastructure and services which could support greater data sharing and linkage

**THE DASSL MODEL**

The data access, storage, sharing and linkage (DASSL) model was developed to frame the complex social, cultural, technical and governance issues around health data-sharing in the Irish context. The model was informed by best practice particularly in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Administrative Data Research Centre, Northern Ireland); Scotland (Scottish Health Information Programme and the Mason Institute); Wales (Secure Anonymised Information Linkage); and France (INSEE).

The model comprises the following main elements (Moran 2016):

- Governance: a recommendation to establish an information governance review panel which will adjudicate on the compliance of data linkage projects with guiding principles and best practice guidelines agreed by stakeholders
- Four facilitative pieces of infrastructure/services are designed to support safe storage, sharing, linkage and use of data:
  - A health research data hub which would gather and make safe data available, and provide safe access to non-health data
  - A trusted third party indexing/anonymisation and data linkage service (often separately housed) which outputs de-identified data
  - A safe haven which provides a secure environment with highly-controlled access to, or use of, sensitive data
  - Research unit to support researchers throughout the process of using the infrastructure/services. 15 functions are outlined in the report including training and liaison with technical infrastructure

- Output checking and disclosure control: will check data before release to safeguard against possible disclosure
- Public engagement: programmes to engage the public in order to maintain and build trust in research activities

**TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR SAFE DATA USE IN IRELAND**

The Health Research Board formally launched the Moran report and initiated the debate amongst stakeholders at a seminar in April 2016. Strong leadership and committed engagement are required for implementation. It is planned to monitor developments towards establishing the infrastructure and services outlined in the DASSL model in Ireland. The lessons learned should be of benefit to other countries starting down this road.

**Reference**


4 https://www.openaire.eu/opendatapilot
6 http://opendatacharter.net/who-we-are
7 National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, France
Volunteers needed
Can you help us by suggesting ideas for articles? The editorial team is looking for a new member or two. We’re an informal group of volunteers who meet by conference call every three months to plan the next issue of ‘Research Matters’. If you have a few hours a month to spare for this career-relevant activity, and have some research experience under your belt, we’d like to hear from you. Please email Graham on admin@the-sra.org.uk to find out more.

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

SRA Scotland update
Report by Lucy Setterfield
We are currently planning our events programme which will involve a seminar on using citizen juries for participative research (early autumn) and also a seminar on visual and participatory research methods by Dr Janet Salmons (October).

Check out the SRA website for details and to book. To receive updates and stay in touch with us, visit the SRA website, or engage with us on Linkedin (http://tinyurl.com/oh9ao4h4) or Twitter (@SRA_Scotland).

SRA Cymru update
Report by Faye Gracey
We were pleased by the packed venue at our recent joint SRA Cymru/WISERD evening seminar on creative, visual and participatory methods (http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/creative-visual-and-participatory-methods-dawn-mannay.pdf/), and to meet many more of you at our exhibition stand at the annual WISERD conference in Swansea. Register online now (http://the-sra.org.uk/event-registration/?ee=415) to attend our next evening seminar on the 13 September on childhood obesity: perceptions among parents/grandparents in Wales.

Do keep an eye on the SRA website, Twitter (@sracymru), and LinkedIn Group (SRA Cymru) for details. Faye.Gracey@wales.gsi.gov.uk

SRA Ireland update
Report by Noelle Cotter
We were delighted to partner with the Irish Social Policy Association for its recent annual conference. Our session focused on methods of researching with children. All presentations are at: http://www.ispa.ie/conference

There’s been great demand for evaluation training. Our Dublin ‘programme evaluation in practice’ training was oversubscribed and we plan on rerunning this training on 7 October. Email SRA.Ireland@gmail.com for details. We are also running two further training sessions on evaluation in Belfast in the autumn (see page 19).

The SRA (Ireland) AGM took place on 6 September in Dublin. We advertise all events on the SRA website, on Twitter and through our mailing list. To join our mailing list, email sra.ireland@gmail.com. Or follow us on Twitter: @SRAIreland for events, conferences and job listings.

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

Gina Higginbottom and Pranee Liamputtong
SAGE Publishing, 2015
Reviewed by Rosemary Lamport, independent social researcher

This recent title is a welcome addition to the literature on participatory research (PR). It’s also very much of the moment, with government, policymakers and academic funders – and most recently the Health Research Agency – all advocating PR: research that involves community members and users of services in an equal partnership with researchers throughout the research process, and in which all partners contribute expertise and share ownership and decision-making.

The editors are keen to situate PR in context, exploring its post-war origins and evolution in the developing world, with an overview of the theoretical frameworks and defining characteristics of an umbrella genre; this includes exploring the various models of PR, their parameters and boundaries.

The book has a clear and understandable style: each chapter follows a set format, setting out aims, objectives, practical tips and recommendations. Short vignettes bring the text alive, with extensive bibliographies accompanying each chapter.

Particularly interesting and useful chapters include Wendy Austin on the shifting parameters of ethical approval and how to navigate the process; Higginbottom on data management, analysis and interpretation – researcher- rather than community-led; and the editors’ own chapter on engaging older people: the benefits and pitfalls, acknowledging the invisibility of older people in wider society and not just health research.

Other chapters look at different cohorts and the very different challenges of involving them in research – children and people with learning disabilities in particular.

The focus of the collection, however, is on non-UK health economies, and on public health rather than clinical settings; so the rich tradition of involving patients in health care research in the UK is untapped. There is also little on training participants, with the exception of the chapter on older people; yet this is a critical component for all of those involved in PR, and at all stages of the research process, which as researchers we underplay and undervalue at our risk.

Addressing the work of UK organisations like Involve and the National Institute for Health Research, would have illuminated the practical aspects of PR for potential researchers. For it is potential PR researchers for whom this book is most suited: students, health and social care practitioners. It may perhaps also be of interest for ‘conventional’ qualitative researchers looking for more participative opportunities. However, overall this remains an accessible, inclusive, and timely text. Hopefully we will see more UK-based studies on PR published in the future.

Mixed methods for policy research and program evaluation

Patricia Burch and Carolyn J. Heinrich
SAGE Publishing, 2016
Reviewed by James Canton, social and behavioural research, Department for Transport

The core message of this book is that combining qualitative and quantitative methods provides stronger evidence to policymakers than either would alone. The authors argue that a focus on numbers can lead to an innocence about what is happening out in the real, and often messy, world of people and their motives. It is hard to disagree. Qualitative methods can help researchers investigate the processes underlying any patterns or outcomes uncovered by quantitative work. This can enhance understanding of the generalisability of quantitative findings by helping to identify whether and how the underlying social processes may be context-dependent. Although this message is hardly new, the book does a good job of presenting the argument, especially for people new to mixed-method research.

The book’s biggest strength is its emphasis on the practicalities of integrating different methods throughout the life cycle of a research project. For example, all the chapters end with discussion questions, which force the reader to think through and better understand how the material presented might apply to their own work. The book is also illustrated with rich case studies (mostly from the education and social welfare arenas) to aid understanding.

However, this emphasis on the practical, whilst a strength, is somewhat of a double-edged sword. One thing the book lacks is a solid theoretical backbone for integrating methods. The authors think that qualitative and quantitative methods come from ‘different paradigms’ and that, ultimately, the paradigms cannot be bridged. This leads to a somewhat jarring justification for mixed-methods research.

I would also have liked to have seen more space devoted to overcoming the potential challenges of mixed-method research. The authors, for example, give little attention to how to make their suggested approach work in a context tight on time and money, when policymakers are demanding quick results at low cost.

I would recommend this book to students and practitioners looking for a good primer on integrating methods through the different stages of a research project. It is worth saying, however, that the book does assume a basic knowledge of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Interested readers might also explore Ray Pawson’s ‘The Science of Evaluation’ for an equally strong justification for mixed method research, albeit with more theoretical backbone.
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

Here are some of the titles on offer:

- **Digital ethnography principles and practice**
  Mario Callegaro, Katja Lozar Manfreda and Vasja Vehovar, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Ethnography for the internet: embedded, embodied and everyday**
  Christine Hine, Bloomsbury, 2015

- **Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research**
  Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Grounded theory: a practical guide: second edition**
  Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Interpreting qualitative data: fifth edition**
  David Silverman, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Qualitative online interviews: strategies design and skills: second edition**
  Janet E. Salmons, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Questionnaire (Object Lessons) – 01 edition**
  Evan Kindley, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016

- **Web survey methodology**
  Manfreda and Vasja Vehovar, SAGE Publications, 2015

- **Exaggerated claims?**
  David Walker, SAGE Publications, 2015

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- Focus groups
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- Qualitative data analysis

For an informal chat contact the SRA office: admin@the-sra.org.uk or 0207 998 0304
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## EVALUATION

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<tr>
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<td>Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation</td>
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