Social Research Association

research:matters

DEC:12

Analysis for policy: the rise of the 'tsar'

*By **Dr Ruth Levitt** and **William Solesbury**, visiting senior research fellows, Department of Political Economy, King's College London*

Researchers assume that think tanks and consultants are their main rivals as policy analysts. However, another source of expertise is rapidly gaining ground: the policy 'tsar' (the media's label). A tsar is an individual from outside government (though not necessarily from outside politics) who is publicly appointed by a government minister to advise on policy development or delivery on the basis of their expertise. Recent examples are Richard Brown (reviewing rail franchising), Tom Winsor (police pay and conditions), Andrew Dilnot (social care), Emma Harrison ('troubled families tsar' who resigned following concerns about her company's contracts with government) and Sir Adrian Montague (advising on activating the private rented housing sector).

A few facts

Our research[1] on the tsar phenomenon reveals important facts:

- Ministers have made over 260 tsar appointments since 1997. The annual rate is accelerating: from three to eleven to 26 in Labour's three terms; the coalition's is 43 a year to July 2012
- Some ministers particularly like to use tsars for expert advice: Gordon Brown as Chancellor holds the record with 23 appointments, although Ed Balls, Alastair Darling, Michael Gove (11 appointments each) and Ruth Kelly (10) were also enthusiasts. The last two Prime Ministers have been particularly busy: only five by Blair, another 23 by Brown and 21 by Cameron
- Tsars address very diverse policy issues: strategic (e.g. social care) or operational (tax avoidance), perennial (school behaviour) or topical (rail franchising), a government priority (social mobility) or a minister's enthusiasm (dance education)
- Ministers appoint tsars quite informally: a name is identified usually because the minister knows or knows about them; an official or special adviser or the minister phones; then they meet informally and agree the broad terms. No advertisement, open competition or tendering
- Tsars' career backgrounds vary[2]: private sector business is commonest (40% of appointments). Public service and civil service (often retirees) are close (37%). Researchers (mostly academics, few from think tanks or consultancies) next (23%), before politicians (18%), serving and retired, including several ex-ministers
- Tsars are predominantly male (85%), white (98%), aged over 50 (71%); and 38% have titles (Lords, Baronesses, Sirs and Dames)
- Usually, tsars have administrative and analytical support from civil servants. Research methods may include reviews of past work, stakeholder consultations, statistical analysis. Tsars often try out ideas in advance before reporting. Their typical timescale is 6-12 months

IN THIS ISSUE:

→ **Is prudishness impeding social researchers?**
→ **Ethics and methods**
→ **Listening to children**
→ **Modelling the effect of changing skill levels**
→ **Social media and social science**
→ **Linking administrative data**
→ **Developing research at EHRC and ILC-UK**
Plus usual news, reviews and briefings

What expertise do tsars bring to their work?

Specialist tsars operate like consultants with professional experience in the relevant field (e.g. in business or public policy) or with specific skills (e.g. as a lawyer, economist, teacher). Generalist tsars address a topic outside their professional experience or skills: the minister believes that they will bring a 'fresh mind' to the issue. Advocate tsars already have known views on the topic: the minister appoints them to promote his/her policies or preferences.

Some academic researchers have been tsars: Professor John Hills of LSE has had three appointments (social housing, equality, fuel poverty). Professor Martin Cave of Warwick Business School has had four on regulatory issues (including radio spectrum management and the water industry). Professor Alison Wolf of KCL recently reviewed vocational education. To be influential, being a tsar has many advantages over contracted research or consultancy. The single tender, for prompt delivery, draws largely on accumulated knowledge and experience. Above all, it gives a direct line to the minister, with a good chance that the advice will be heeded and attributed.

The government is arguing for 'opening up' policy-making to contributors from outside the civil service.[3] This now offers researchers a strong opportunity. But they need to be aware that they have – in tsars – new rivals who ministers listen to.

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1 Policy tsars: here to stay but more transparency needed is at **www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/politicaleconomy/research/tsars.aspx**

2 Some tsars have had mixed careers so the percentages total more than 100%.

3 HM Government, The Civil Service Reform Plan, June 2012

For latest news, join SRA and sign up for our monthly e-bulletin SRA News at www.the-sra.org.uk

SRA Scotland

By Sophie Ellison

The SRA Scotland branch has struggled recently with small numbers but things are looking up! We are delighted to welcome a new member, Dr Vicki Welch, from CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland). We're also glad to welcome back Lorraine Simpson following her year travelling the world. We are still keen to recruit a few extra members to help us. If you are interested in getting involved, please get in touch with us.

We are running new two courses in consultancy skills and research project management skills in early 2013. We are also planning a social media in research training workshop, so watch this space! We are planning our networking and seminar programme for 2013, so if you have any suggestions, would like to volunteer to provide a seminar, or would like to attend one, we'd love to hear from you!

- 14 January 2013 – Consultancy Skills for Social Researchers
- 8 March 2013 – Introduction to Research Project Management

More information: Lindsay Adams (**lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk**); Sophie Ellison (**sophie.ellison@gmail.com**) and **www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_scotland.htm**

SRA Scotland looks forward to welcoming you at future training and events.

SRA Cymru

By Jennifer Evans

We hosted a members meeting in October to help ensure that local members, as well as the wider local network, are able to contribute to the planning and content for 2013 and beyond. The meeting demonstrated a clear commitment to the SRA from both the organising committee and the wider network of participants, and the event seemed to go down very well indeed.

Branch co-chairs, Richard Self and Jennifer Evans, presented an overview of the year's activities at national and local levels illustrating progress in supporting and developing community, quality and advocacy in social research. This included six evening seminars and 'behind the scenes' development of the organising committee, virtual groups on LinkedIn and active engagement through Twitter.

The meeting gave participants the chance to network and reflect. Whilst evening seminars are a good staple to continue, suggested developments included more of the pro-active networking, and consideration of how expertise across the wider network could be used to help the development of research teams and research projects.

The need for high quality local training, and the opportunity to coordinate with other local organisations and providers was made very clear, and represents a clear focus for development in 2013. Given the work done to build the reputation locally over the 2012, developing partnerships with other groups to reinforce that reputation, seems to be the obvious next step and one we are very excited to take.

The Organising Committee would like to thank all those who attended the October meeting. We look forward to seeing you all next year!

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

SRA Ireland

Contact sra.ireland@gmail.com

Promoting and disseminating health care research using infographics

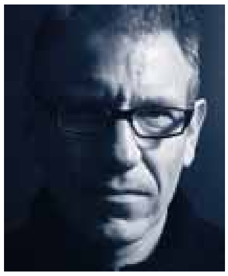
Tuesday 22 January

London SRA seminar by **Dr Michela Tinelli**, research fellow, LSE Health and Social Care and **Chiara Comiotto**, London College of Communication

SRA seminars run from 5 to 6.30pm. They are free. Places are limited and we need to give names to venue in advance. Email **admin@the-sra.org.uk** to book a place. Put seminar title in the subject line. Details of SRA seminars, events and training at **www.the-sra.org.uk**

SRA: consolidation and new directions

*SRA chair, **Patten Smith**, asks for feedback about the SRA's plans for the future*



I guess I could proffer a few familiar clichés about nights drawing in, seasonal cheer and goodwill, taking stock at the end of the year, and so on, but don't we have far too much insincere verbal tinsel thrown at us as it is? So instead, I'm going to tell you more about something I mentioned in my Spring 2012 editorial – the strategic review the SRA board has been conducting.

This has involved returning to our fundamental raison d'etre, identifying what roles a social researcher, member-based organisation should play in today's world, and defining priorities in accord with these. It was an enjoyable exercise enhanced by the fact that it demonstrated that our 2011 troubles were over.

We agreed that we should aim to ensure that the SRA serves three broad functions:

1. To promote **quality** in social research
2. To provide **advocacy** for social research to the wider world
3. To promote a sense of **community** for social researchers

We then focused on strategic areas which flow directly or indirectly from these; and finally we developed priority activities for each. I have summarised the areas, and related activities below (I have also shown which of the three functions fits in each strategic area).

Increasing membership levels (community)

We are developing a membership growth plan, and accordingly, reviewing how we can improve membership benefits, identify optimal membership structures and strengthen our online member facilities. As part of this, we are developing a business plan for a possible open-access/ online social research journal and discussing this with potential publishers.

Providing advocacy for social research (advocacy)

We are developing two new functions to help us provide a clear voice for social research:

- A Strategy Group: comprising senior volunteers from across the industry; this group will identify strategic industry-level campaigns for the SRA to progress
- A Policy Forum: virtual group which will identify and respond to consultations, media and profile pieces in social research. This will highlight issues important to social research and also raise the SRA's profile

Standards and ethics (quality)

We are reviewing our approach to research ethics to ensure it is appropriate and up to date. We plan to re-launch and raise the profile of the SRA Ethics Forum service currently available to members.

Developing the SRA competency framework (quality)

We are liaising with other bodies to develop the SRA social research competency framework to ensure that it links to the expectations of key players in the sector and integrates with similar frameworks from other organisations. Getting our framework right is critical as it forms a basis for our training programmes.

Training (quality and community)

We are planning to extend our training programme in line with the evolving competency framework. This includes trialling a blended learning workshop using online and face-to-face input; developing SRA Cymru training; and a business plan for a biennial SRA summer school.

Events (quality and community)

We continue to implement a core events programme designed to be attractive to social researchers, to generate income and also raise our profile. We are planning to expand the programme to include more one-day or half-day special events on emerging/topical research areas.

Communications (quality, advocacy and community)

We have already implemented a partial brand refresh (see www.the-sra.org.uk and SRA publications) and are now exploring how to develop this. We have re-branded SRA News as SRA Research Matters, and intend to publish two pdf versions and one hard copy version (to coincide with the December conference) annually.

We are very keen to get early feedback from you as we develop our plans: we are a membership organisation and need to ensure that we are doing what you want us to do. So please let us know if our thinking accords with yours. What role should the SRA perform in 2013 and beyond? Have we left out important areas? Are we putting too much emphasis on unimportant activities?

Send your comments to **patten.smith@ipsos.com**

Social Policy Digest

The Social Policy Digest, produced by the Social Policy Association is a free online resource listing developments across UK and European social policy.

More details at: **www.journals.cambridge.org/spd** – Feedback also welcome.

Alliance for Useful Evidence

Nesta, the Economic and Social Research Council and the Big Lottery Fund have jointly created the Alliance for Useful Evidence to champion the use of and demand for evidence that is rigorous, accessible and appropriate. Membership is free and open to any individual or organisation: **www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/public_services_lab/alliance_for_useful_evidence**

British Library and social welfare

A new portal, Social Welfare at the British Library at **www.socialwelfare.bl.uk** aims to provide a single point of access to the British Library's vast print and digital collections of research and information on policy development, implementation and evaluation. It will cover all aspects of welfare state reform and information about services for vulnerable groups.

It includes a collection of full-text high-quality research and evaluation reports available for immediate download free of charge. This includes details of books, journal articles, official papers, theses, archived websites and datasets in the British Library's collections. It is also possible to submit reports and papers for dissemination via the website. The site will be officially launched at a conference on Evidence in Social Welfare Policy and Practice at the British Library on 7 December. Attendance is free. Programme and booking: **www.bl.uk/whatson/**

Web archive for political action and communication

Since 2004, the UK Web Archive has collected copies of websites which represent the culture, politics, society and everyday life of the UK. Now holding more than 11,000 websites, a challenge is how to ensure that people getting started with the archive can find websites relevant to their own research. The Political Action and Communication collection will showcase existing websites within the archive, while adding more to represent recent events, activities and research.

Why do we need web archives and what are they for? Much research draws on material presented on the web. Not just online journals, reports and working papers, but also blogs, photographs, videos, and social networks. Research into activity on the web can draw on the content of just a few websites, but often it is interested in the networks formed between different websites and users of services on the web. For example, studies of student occupations in the last months of 2010, and of other demonstrations against spending cuts, have looked at how activists have combined their use of websites, Twitter, Facebook and mobile technologies to communicate, co-ordinate and build support.

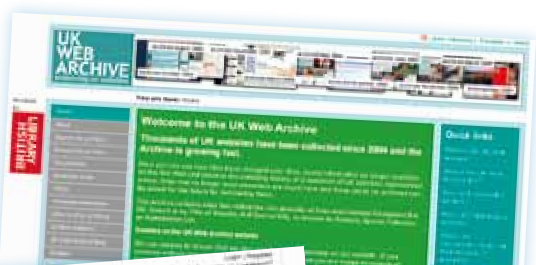
For some types of online publication, there is an infrastructure for long-term preservation. However, these tend to be for publications which most resemble the print world, for example e-journals and e-books. For everything else, the survival of material on the web tends to depend on how long it remains relevant to the authoring bodies. For campaigns, this may not be much longer than the length of the campaign itself. Web archives can collect snapshots of web sites at critical times to keep a record of what was happening, and, more specifically, how the web was used to shape activities and events.

Political Action and Communication will focus on the second of these to show how the web is being used to support and shape political engagement in 2012 and 2013. It will include the blogs of commentators and activists, and also the growth of magazine-format multi-authored blogs. Alongside the websites of individual campaigns, it will also collect those of charities and trusts which support democratic engagement and activism. The collection will demonstrate the tactics and technologies in using the web for campaigning. Also of interest will be research projects investigating these themes. At a projected 200 to 400 websites, the collection will represent considerable activity and a resource for future research.

The collection will be permissions-based. This means that we try to identify the website owner and request permission both to take copies and to republish them on the UK Web Archive (at **www.webarchive.org.uk**). This can be time-consuming and has a low success rate, but it is important as it allows us to make the archive available freely online. It also means that the authors and owners of websites can offer insights and suggestions on how the collection can develop.

Political Action and Communication will go live early in 2013. If you would like to know more about this collection, would like to suggest websites, or have a comment on themes to include, I would be very happy to hear from you.

Ian Cooke, lead curator, International and Political Studies, British Library: **ian.cooke@bl.uk**



Should children's internet use be filtered? Multi-stakeholder prudishness impedes evidence-based policy-making

*By **Sonia Livingstone**, professor of social psychology, Department of Media and Communications*

One in three European parents uses filtering tools for their child's computer, according to the EU Kids Online survey of 25,142 9-16 year olds and their parents in 25 countries. The same survey shows that one in three is worried about what or who their child may encounter on the internet. But these may not be the same people – parents use filters more if they are regular or confident users, suggesting some may be worried but lack the skills to use parental tools. So, is there a problem?

At the 2012 Safer Internet Forum, families expressed strong views against filtering tools. No-one likes the language of 'parental controls' (although arguably filters are deigned to control what is put on the internet not what children can take from it). Children wish to be trusted, guided and have their rights respected. Parents wish to trust their children too, despite their many anxieties about the internet. Perhaps if open communication between parents and children were achieved, filters would become unnecessary?

This question is currently exercising the UK's Department of Education, following the Bailey Review on the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood. It has consulted on the question of default settings – should ISPs force parents to choose if they want filters on or should they filter automatically and offer parents the chance to turn the filters off? In the UK, some MPs and children's charities have campaigned for the latter, thinking of the minority of parents (of already-vulnerable children?) who pay little attention to their children's online experiences. Is there no hope for the more liberal option?

What is impeding public debate, however, is that we seem to have become too prudish to talk about what content could or should be controlled. So we do not know if people are (or are not) concerned about mild sexual material ('page 3'), or explicit sexual content (e.g. restricted to over 18s in the cinema), or extreme/violent pornography that society traditionally restricts yet further. The result is confusion.

Stakeholders also find it hard to ask young people about their access to supposedly-inappropriate content. Depending on maturity, many would prioritise teenagers' right to view sexual content as part of their sexual development and to build resilience. It is thus important to distinguish the explicit pop-ups that bring unwanted images to children in Eastern Europe (these have been 'cleaned up' from Eastern European screens) from the content that teenagers may go looking for deliberately. Even so it is genuinely hard – for researchers too – to assess the reaction of younger children (some would include teenagers too) when they witness, say, sexual violence against women.

Stakeholders in these debates suffer from one further form of prudishness. Now that listening to the voices of youth is, rightly, in vogue, it is hard to counter their views. So those who think youth are too liberal, too confident in their own resilience, or simply too ignorant of online dangers or their effects, have a hard time being heard themselves. Hence the importance of evidence! The EU Kids Online survey found a small percentage of children express concerns about the internet – the problem is real, but not overwhelming (at least in already-regulated Western Europe). Of course, this does not make life easier (how shall we meet the needs of the minority without restricting the freedoms of the majority?) but at least it gives a clearer grasp of the scale of the problem, and it can nuance who is affected and who needs protection.

Deriving policy recommendations from evidence is rarely straightforward. I suggest that if parental filters are to play a role, greater efforts are needed to develop them. They should be widely available and truly simple to install. They should not simply ban or restrict without explanation or transparency but they should respect children's communication rights and promote child/parent dialogue about values and limits. Last, they should be effective (especially, not over-blocking; also evaluated for their effectiveness in practice – something rarely undertaken). Even then, this cannot be the only solution, but it could help manage online risk, address parental anxiety, respect child rights, and improve domestic rather than state management of internet content.

See Livingstone, S., Haddon, L., and Görzig, A. (Eds.) (2012) *Children, Risk and Safety Online: Research and policy challenges in comparative perspective*. Bristol: The Policy Press., and reports at **www.eukidsonline.com**

Ethics and methodological innovation: a complex relationship

*By **Professor Melanie Nind**, co-director, National Centre for Research Methods*

The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) has a long standing interest in innovation in social science research methods as it is part of our brief to identify and foster methodological innovation. At the hub in the University of Southampton there has been an ongoing programme of research about innovation alongside the research advancing methods in our nodes. This has indicated complexities in defining innovation, especially in the face of important questions about the concept itself. In the latest study, we have attempted to enhance understanding of how methodological work becomes recognised as innovative through three cases studies. This has involved interviewing the people central to our selected innovations and who have some claim to a critical juncture in their emergence: Robert Kozinets about 'netnography'; Mary Kellett about 'child-led' research; and David Gauntlett about 'creative research methods', particularly making metaphorical representations of identity with Lego. We also interviewed five or six people per case who could comment on its usefulness and development. Thus, we have sought the nuanced detail of methodological innovation in action and explored how disciplinary boundaries may have been crossed and methods put together in new ways or for new purposes, together with issues of timeliness, distinctiveness, breakthrough and acceptance. This has meant understanding innovation in methods in the culture and time in which they are socially constructed. This has led us to explore how research ethics and methods innovation may interact.

Research councils are as concerned with ethics as they are with innovation and sustainability of methods. Yet mostly, when innovation and ethics have been considered together, it has been to show the tensions between them. There have been well-rehearsed arguments in the research community, for example, about how the bureaucratisation of research ethics and the rise of governance have reduced researchers' willingness to take risks. This, the argument goes, has combined with movements favouring particular kinds of evidence to constrain methodological developments, resulting in impoverishing methods rather than fostering innovation. It was fascinating, therefore, to see that our case-study data could tell a different story: 'innovators', and commentators on their work, were speaking of research ethics not as inhibiting but as driving methodological innovation.

Here we see two interacting forces in tension: methodological development pushing forward ethical research practice, and institutionalised research ethics practices pushing back methodological developments. Interviewees were careful to counter an over-simplistic narrative about innovation in methods equating to doing something good or worthwhile in research terms. Indeed, a stronger message was that innovation lies less in the method than in the reflexivity surrounding its use. Nonetheless, without going as far as seeing innovation in research methods as a research virtue in and of itself, it often represented a response to a desire to do something virtuous, that is, as acting ethically.

It is easy to assume that methodological change is driven by necessity in the nature of the research problem, intellectually by new ways of thinking, or pragmatically by technological advances. In these case studies, though, matters of research ethics were a driver, or more specifically the methods and approaches were developed in response to concerns about the ways researchers treat people and the need to act responsibly, about the democratisation of research and the need to value different forms of expertise in the ethic of 'everyone', and about empowerment.

Ethics were hugely important to the innovators and those who respond to, use and regulate their methods. They were responding partly to the potential for research in their fields to be less than fair to the people involved, not least as they were researching in what are often perceived as ethically risky domains (the internet, children, and visual methods). Thus, they were both taking and countering risks, managing their own and others' vulnerabilities by for example, advocating something new but also codifying the development to contain it. Perhaps other case studies will shed more light on the complex relationship between innovation and ethics.

For more information see: Nind, M., Wiles, R.A., Bengry-Howell, A. & Grow, G.P. (2012) *Methodological Innovation and Research Ethics: Forces in tension or forces in harmony?* Qualitative Research, i1-18.

Ethical issues and educational data linkage with Understanding Society

*By **Stephanie McFall**, reader, and **Birgitta Rabe**, research fellow, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research*

The growth of digital technology has supported the expansion of surveys and their linkage with individual administrative records to supplement or validate survey reports. We describe some of the ethical issues and implementation challenges associated with linking survey data from Understanding Society to education records, such as the National Pupil Database (NPD). We relate our decisions to ethical principles. However, ethical frameworks operate within specific regulatory contexts, which we do not address. We are limiting the discussion to education records from England. Similar issues are relevant in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Understanding Society is a large multi-topic longitudinal study that incorporates and extends the British Household Panel Survey conducted 1991-2008. The National Pupil Database has information, including test scores, student characteristics, and courses, about students in schools and colleges in England. The linkage of Understanding Society with the NPD will make possible new research that could not be done with either of the data sets alone. The survey is unable to collect detailed test score histories for all school-age children, because this would be time-intensive and because in many cases parents would not know the scores attained. However, the NPD lacks information on family background, events in the pupil's such as personal and family life, attitudes, later life outcomes which would benefit analysis. With the linked data researchers will be able to relate school attainment to child development, family events, sibling interactions, health, higher education choices, employment, earnings, attitudes, wellbeing and more.

The most relevant ethical principles are respect for autonomy of persons and beneficence or not exposing the participant to disproportionate harm. Researchers show respect for autonomy by, for example, ensuring that the person is fully informed before agreeing to the linkage. For protecting the participant from harm, the most obvious harm in survey research is a breach in confidentiality of the data.

In initiating the linkage, the researcher requests data-sharing from organisations, in this case, the Department for Education, which is responsible for safeguarding pupil information. It is important for researchers to design and implement the consent procedures and materials to not only satisfy their own evaluations of ethics but to satisfy the data owner as well.

We originally agreed consent procedures and materials with the Department for Children, Schools and Families. Adults aged 16-25 years were asked to link their survey data with their own education records and parents were asked to consent for children aged 4-15. The information leaflets describe the types of information that would be linked to the survey data, how the records will be used, how the linkage will be created, and how information is safeguarded from disclosure. It also describes the period of consent, what happens if the person decides to withdraw consent, and issues related to consent for children, such as asking them independently to agree when they reach age 16.

You can see the text of the information leaflets and consent forms at **http://data.understandingsociety.org.uk/documentation/mainstage/fieldwork-documents** (see Wave 1 and Wave 4).

The consents were implemented in Wave 1 of Understanding Society (2009-2010) and Wave 18 of the BHPS (2008).

Following the change in government in 2010, we were dealing with the Department for Education instead of the Department for Children, Schools and Families. To some extent, we began new negotiations about procedures and materials. It was hard going for both parties since data-sharing bears heavy responsibilities. The study was particularly concerned about the effort and expense devoted to collecting the consents. The solution was to confirm the consent in Wave 4. Those who did not consent in Wave 1 (those who reached 16 in the interval, new survey participants) were asked to consent in Wave 4.

The data has been matched and is now being tested with a view to releasing the individual level linked survey data through the Secure Data Service of the UK Data Service. As one step in the application process, the Understanding Society Data Access Committee will evaluate the researchers' plans.

It's time to listen to children

*By **Ivana La Valle**, director of NCB Research Centre*

Children are one of the NHS key stakeholder groups, for example, they account for around 40% of the workload of a typical GP. They are also a key target group for public health services which aim to promote good health in childhood and adolescence to prevent a greater demand on services in later life. However, as was highlighted by the Kennedy report in 2011, children have not had a consistent voice in decisions about their care and the health services they use, and have been a disproportionately low priority in the NHS, compared with adults. The Westminster Government has recognised that the current health reforms provide an opportunity to improve children's health outcomes and their experiences of health services, and established a Children and Young People's Health Outcomes Forum to inform the development of a strategy for improving children's health outcomes. The forum made listening to what children say themselves about their health and health services a priority action, and commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to carry out a rapid review of the evidence to inform its work.

The aim of the review was to provide a picture of the extent to which children are consulted about health issues and services, and what conclusions and recommendations we can draw from this evidence. The review has found that:

- While adults are regularly surveyed about their experiences of using the NHS, children are largely excluded from these surveys: under 16s constituted only 0.6% of respondents included in national NHS surveys carried out between 2001 and 2010
- A number of small, mainly qualitative studies show that children's experiences of health provision varied. While positive experiences were reported, children's contact with health services could be characterised by lack of respect and failure to treat them with dignity, inadequate communication, lack of involvement in decision affecting their care, and poorly-planned transitions to adult services
- For children from vulnerable groups (e.g. disabled children, looked-after children) negative experiences could be amplified because services were not geared to meet their specific needs
- Children did not always feel that they had access to information and advice to make healthy choices and believed that too many public health campaigns failed to address questions they had about sensitive issues, such as sexual health
- Children want to be involved in decisions about the planning and delivery of health provision. While the review identified a number of local and national consultations, children's contribution is not systematically recorded and, therefore, it is impossible to measure their level of involvement
- The evidence reviewed shows that children want to be treated with respect and to be involved in decisions about their health and care. They also want health services which are effective, flexible, personalised and provided in child-friendly environments
- The review has shown that there is a need for mechanisms to engage children to be embedded at every level, that is: in the work of the local and national HealthWatch; Health and Well-being Boards; commissioning groups; directors of public health; Public Health England; and, in the day-to-day decisions of practitioners
- NCB is now building on the review evidence by conducting further research for the Office for Children Commissioner for England. As the health system is going through a major programme of reform, the study is exploring children's participation in strategic health decisions by:
  - Gathering examples of good practice in involving children in strategic health design and delivery
  - Mapping the emerging evidence on children's involvement in strategic health design and delivery in the new health structures, through an analysis of the national policy framework and local health plans
  - Assessing how children want to be involved in strategic health service decisions

The findings from this new study will be published in early 2013. For more information see **www.ncb.org.uk/policy-evidence/research-centre/research-projects/our-current-or-recent-research-on-health-and-well-being**

Predicting the impact of improved skill levels on poverty and income inequality using the British Household Panel Survey

*By **Tina Haux**, Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Lincoln*

Improving skills in the workforce is seen as fundamental to achieving a more competitive economy and maintaining productivity. The focus of previous and current government policy implies that an increase in skills will reduce poverty and income inequality. This research investigated the likely effect of improving skills in the UK between now and 2020 on poverty and income inequality, using data from the British Household Panel Survey.

Modelling the effect of changing skills levels on income inequality and poverty in the future is challenging. For example, we do not know the skills distribution in 2020, and the research used three different scenarios: skills levels remaining the same as now; skills levels increase as projected by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills; and the UK reaches a 'world class' standing in skills (as set by the previous Labour government). Also, it is not clear that the financial returns to acquiring particular skills will remain the same as now, although for tractability this research assumes they do. Finally, the tax-benefit system is likely to look very different in 2020 than it does currently, but this research assumes that the tax-benefit system in 2020 has the same implications at each level of gross income as the current system.

Using the British Household Panel Study

The research team used the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) for this analysis. This is a panel study of households in which all adult members of the household are interviewed every year. The BHPS was started in 1991, interviewing approximately 10,000 individuals living in 5,500 households across the UK. Additional samples were added later to boost the number of respondents in Wales and Scotland and to include Northern Ireland. In 2009, the BHPS sample was absorbed into the Understanding Society sample. Using the BHPS for this analysis has a number of advantages: Firstly, it contains detailed contextual information on all adult household members, including their income. Both gross and net incomes are available, making it easier to construct standard poverty and income inequality indices. Secondly, by following the same individuals over time, potential bias resulting from unobserved characteristics such as ability are avoided. Thirdly, it contains detailed information about qualifications attained.

For details on the modelling assumptions and approach as well as the estimation procedure, see the full report.

Findings

The research suggests that the distribution of skills currently projected for 2020 will reduce fixed (or absolute) poverty rates in the UK by 2.2 percentage points – equivalent to lifting about 1.5 million people out of poverty in comparison to the distribution of skills in 2008. Hence the changing distribution of skills by 2020 is likely to considerably improve the absolute quality of life of large groups of people where there is clear income deprivation presently. However, it will have a smaller impact if using a relative poverty measure, although still reduce relative poverty by 1.0 percentage point – equivalent to lifting about 500,000 people out of poverty. These falls in poverty emerge among families with children, and across all four UK nations (with slightly larger effects in Wales and Northern Ireland). The main reason for the smaller impact on relative than absolute poverty is that the changing distribution of skills results in an increase in incomes across the entire income distribution. This raises the relative poverty line without significantly changing the differences in incomes between those higher and lower in the distribution. Consequently, there may be some people whose incomes increase but who slip into or remain in relative poverty as a result of the skills changes. For similar reasons, the changing skills distribution is predicted to have only small impacts on income inequality.

Summary and full report:

Taylor, M, Haux, T. and Pudney, S. (2012) *Can improving UK skills levels reduce poverty and income inequality by 2020?*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [accessed on 08/10/2012] **www.jrf.org.uk/publications/can-improving-uk-skills-reduce-poverty**

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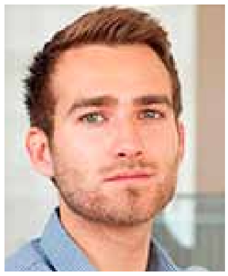
INSPIRING SOCIAL CHANGE

FINDINGS

CAN IMPROVING UK SKILLS LEVELS REDUCE POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY BY 2020?

Improving skills in the workforce is seen as fundamental to achieving a more competitive economy and maintaining productivity. Current and previous government policy implies that an increase in skills will reduce poverty and income inequality. This research investigates how improving UK skills levels will affect rates of poverty and income inequality.

Blurring the boundaries: new social media, new social science?



By ***Andy Scott****, senior researcher, NSMNSS network leader*

Social media is an increasingly important part of people's lives. As social researchers, the proliferation of new platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Blogger) has presented opportunities and challenges for helping us understand social attitudes and behaviour. But until now, there has been limited interaction between practitioners; no real attempt to synthesise or share the various methods used; and few opportunities to reflect on the implications of social media tools for our subjects of study, methods and ethics.

So, NatCen Social Research, SAGE and the Oxford Internet Institute have formed a network on new social media in social science, supported by NCRM. We aim to bring together researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to develop a community of practice with members drawn from the cutting-edge of academia, market research and applied social research. At our launch event in May, as well as great talks from leading thinkers in research using new social media (see our YouTube channel), we asked network members to identify key themes for future work: cutting edge quantitative and qualitative methods; how to ensure quality and rigour of new methods; and the ethics of using social media in research.

Understandably, ethics has been a major theme in all our discussions. There is a keen sense that participants in this new form of research are protected from harm in the same way as with traditional methods. Tellingly, even the term 'participants' is not necessarily right – they may also be 'authors' or 'content creators'. Defining the terminology is difficult and indicates the complexity of the area.

There is not the room to analyse ethics justice here, but you can read much more about this and the other issues covered on our blog (**www.nsmnss.blogspot.co.uk**). The overarching question, however, is whether existing ethical concepts are applicable for these new methods and approaches. For example, achieving informed consent is not practical in many cases. The 'offline' metaphors we use to describe online activity may be more confusing than beneficial. In short, there are many issues to iron out, but there is consensus that a set of values and principles would be more useful in this emerging field than a strict ethical procedures given the fluid and transient nature of the technology.

On the quantitative side, the question of 'big data' and its usefulness was a key consideration in our discussions. A concern is whether the 'tail was wagging the dog': are researchers just grabbing onto the 'low hanging fruit'? It must be up to social scientists to demonstrate how big data could answer research questions, rather than building research questions out of big data.

Related to this, discussion raised concerns about social science skills. Social media data sets are often bigger than the largest surveys ever commissioned. So not only are statistical skills needed, but more robust computational skills. Here the issue of working across disciplines – between social scientists and computer scientists in particular – is seen as crucial to overcoming the short-term challenges and the long-term opportunities of social media.

Our qualitative knowledge exchange seminar is still to come, but the key questions to be covered are already clear: how can qualitative approaches be used on a quantitative scale, for example, how do we interpret text in big data? A related question is the tools we use: how can we be sure of their accuracy and robustness? And how do we negotiate the changing relationship between the researcher and participant – online communities are different to face-to-face focus groups, for example – what are we to take from this change in method, and does it impact on our interpretation of data?

We are keen to hear your views and for you to get involved. So follow us on Twitter (**@NSMNSS**), check our blog for case studies, and join us on Methodspace to join the debate: **www.natcen.ac.uk/nsmnss/**

EHRC Measurement Framework

*By **David Perfect**, research manager, Equality and Human Rights Commission*

In the February 2011 issue of SRA News, I described the research work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The following article looks at our work to develop and populate a Measurement Framework (MF). This will comprise the central element of our research work over the next few years.

The MF is based on four major research reports commissioned between 2007 and 2010. These focused on equality (Alkire et al., 2009); good relations (Wigfield and Turner, 2010); children (Holder et al., 2011); and human rights (Candler et al., 2011). The MF, which covers England, Scotland and Wales, consists of various 'domains', indicators and measures. There are currently 11 domains: life; health; physical security; legal security; education and learning; standard of living; productive and valued activities; individual, family and social life; identity, expression and self-respect; participation, influence and voice; and attitudes.

Our programme of work involves using secondary analysis of national surveys and administrative datasets to populate the domains with statistical data. Where possible, we intend to provide the most recent data available for each domain indicator by the protected characteristics of age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion or belief, sexual orientation, socio-economic group or occupation and transgender. We aim to provide data for England, Scotland and Wales, as well as Great Britain. Not surprisingly, we are finding that the data varies considerably by protected characteristic: in particular, few survey or administrative sources provide data by sexual orientation and very little about transgender.

Once the relevant data have been collected and analysed, we will prepare a series of briefing papers on different domains; the first two papers, on individual, family and social life and attitudes, have already been published and are available on our website.

The EHRC will use the MF research in several ways. First, the briefing papers will form the basis of our next formal report to Parliament. Our first such report, How Fair is Britain?, published in 2010, provided statistical information on the domains; the current timetable is that our next formal report will go to Parliament in 2015 and will report on equality and human rights. Secondly, the MF research will inform ongoing work on monitoring the government's compliance with its international treaty obligations.

We also hope that quantitative researchers, including SRA members, will want to build on our MF work. So, we will also publish the detailed statistical data on which the papers are based as well as the syntax (in SPSS) and other relevant information. This should enable other researchers to analyse the data further, for example to explore the intersectional relationships between different equality characteristics.

Our work on the MF combines in-house analysis and externally-commissioned research. We will advertise procurement opportunities on our website. SRA members who might wish to tender are encouraged to contact us directly to ensure that they receive the relevant details.

The best means to keep up to date with EHRC research, including our MF work, is to join our research database. We send database members a quarterly newsletter with information about our latest publications and work; there is also a reading list on a different theme in each issue. The most recent issue (September 2012) contains a more detailed description on our MF work and summaries of the first two published briefings.

The briefing papers are available at:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/our-measurement-framework/-briefing-papers-and-data/

Published EHRC research reports are available at:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/publications/our-research/

How Fair is Britain? is available at:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/how-fair-is-britain/

For more information about the research database contact:
research@equalityhumanrights.com

Procurement opportunities are at:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/procurement-opportunities/

Linking admin data: considerations for sharing personal data

By **Dr Chris Dibben**, Department of Geography & Sustainable Development, University of St Andrews

Administrative data has many advantages for social science research and administrative data linkage provides further research uses. Data linkage can, however, be problematic because of ethical, legal and security barriers.

Ethical and legal considerations

Benefits have to be balanced against data security requirements to ensure personal information is protected. Where the risk of disclosing confidential personal information is high, greater security surrounds the data release for research. The Administrative Data Liaison Service (ADLS[1]) encourages sharing and linking administrative data between academic researchers and data holding organisations, whilst promoting safe methods of data access and linkage.

Data linkage requires consideration of data protection legislation to assess whether personal data can be lawfully accessed and shared. There is no single source of UK law regulating the use, collection and sharing of personal information. The principal legislation is the common law tort of breach of confidence; the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European Convention on Human Rights; the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007; and the Data Protection Act 1998. The implications of data linking all have to be considered, such as whether the data sharing breaches any duty of confidence; whether any human rights are breached; whether the researcher applying for access to personal data needs to acquire 'approved researcher' status; and whether the data linkage accords with the Data Protection Act's data protection principles?[2]

Data security

Within academic research, data linkage is a time-efficient way of facilitating information dissemination, but it presents risks. As information systems and the worldwide web become more complex and widespread, so the potential for disclosing more information about individuals without consent increases. The ADLS advocates carrying out risk assessments before decisions are taken to disclose personal data.[3]

Some innovations to improve sharing, linking and knowledge of administrative data for research: Privacy-preserving record linkage

Encrypting identifiable data at source ensures that it can be linked without revealing an individual's identity. This requires the encrypted data to be non-reversable (or near impossible to reverse), and it must overcome the problem of linked fields being similar, but not the same. Privacy-Preserving Record Linkage with Bloom Filters is a method of linking datasets whilst overcoming these issues.[4]

ADLS trusted third party

Using identifiable data to create detailed, linked datasets is important for social science research. The main concern when releasing identifiable data for this is the risk of disclosure of individuals' identity or loss of data. Trusted Third Parties (TTPs) are used for linking datasets to minimise this. TTPs are necessary for research where, despite the end product not being sensitive, the transformation process carries data security and/or privacy risks. The ADLS TTP provides researchers and data-holding organisations which can combine and enhance research administrative data.

ADLS statistical disclosure risk analysis

Organisations holding personal data may be reluctant to publish datasets, disseminate them to third parties or add new information because of disclosure risks. Lack of skills, confidence and resources within a data holding organisation to conduct such tasks is prohibitive to research potential in the academic community. To help overcome this, the ADLS offers data-holding organisations a statistical disclosure risk analysis service to assess risk or audit practice.

Methods, models and codes bank (P-ADLS)

As administrative data is typically given to researchers for 'one off' and time limited applications, the possibility of archiving datasets is often lacking. Although the data itself cannot be archived because of legal constraints, the syntax or programming can be. P-ADLS (or Portal of the ADLS) is an online development that allows researchers and data-holding organisations to archive useful indicators, measures, syntax and files about administrative data research, to improve the consistency, quality and quantity of administrative data research by allowing researchers to view, replicate and develop existing methods.

Please note that any advice provided by the ADLS is for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice. If you are unsure about any aspect of administrative data research, please consult your legal department or the relevant data holding organisation.

Chris Dibben is director of the ESRC Administrative Data Liaison Service and director of the Longitudinal Studies Centre – Scotland.

1 The Administrative Data Liaison Service (ADLS) is funded by the ESRC to support administrative data based research in the UK. Its function is to act as an intermediary between academic researchers and data holding organisations to provide information, aid with communication and promote the use of administrative data for research. The ADLS website (see **www.adls.ac.uk**) provides information about many data sources and how researchers can access them.

2 For a discussion of these considerations, see: **www.adls.ac.uk/publications-and-documents/**

3 For further information about statistical disclosure risk, data security guidance and disclosure risk guidance for administrative data, visit the ADLS website.

4 A Bloom filter is a data structure proposed by Bloom (1970) to check set membership efficiently. The method has been utilised, tested and evaluated by Rainer Schnell et al., (2010) to calculate the similarity of two encrypted strings for record linkage.

Using research to reach out to wider audiences: a developing role for the International Longevity Centre

By ***David Sinclair****, assistant director, policy and communications, ILC-UK*

The International Longevity Centre – UK (ILC-UK) has found itself working increasingly with the academic community to help policy-makers understand, and prepare for, an ageing society. As the leading think tank on longevity on demographic change, our remit is to develop ideas, undertake research and create a forum for debate. Working with universities is key to our underlying aim of helping society to plan for tomorrow today.

Historically, our relationship with academic researchers has been on a commissioning basis. If we did not have the research skills in our team, we would outsource parts of the work to the academic community and we could contribute to the policy analysis.

But over recent years, our relationship with the sector has changed. We have seen a growing trend towards the development of formal and informal partnerships where we actively promote, steer or contribute to the work being done by others.

We are also increasingly acting as an intermediary between the social research community and the policy and practice community. In 2010/11 we worked with Professor Ann Bowling on a project funded by the ESRC to help disseminate her research on quality of life. We organised events across the country and produced a summary report for policy makers. In 2012 we organised an event with the New Dynamics of Ageing, highlighting the latest research on technology and ageing. We also collaborated with University of York to disseminate its work on 'payments in an ageing society' to a policy and business audience. And we have organised events at the political party conferences with the University of Manchester. We have also developed a stronger relationship with the British Society of Gerontology and encourage its members to contribute think pieces for our website. Such activities help academics to ensure that their findings reach beyond academic debate and into the policy-making sphere.

We often find ourselves as a partner on academic funding proposals through having a role in undertaking and influencing the research, as well as the dissemination. This helps to ensure that the potential impact of research on policy is incorporated into projects from the beginning. For example, we are about to begin an ESRC-funded project on consumption and quality of life among older people, working with the Personal Finance Research Centre at the University of Bristol. We are also co-supervising a student based at UCL as part of a linked PhD studentship, ensuring that the training received includes an overview of the way in which research can help to influence policy.

This trend is good news. The Academy of Social Science report, '*Great Expectations*' made the case for working with intermediaries about ten years ago.

The development of a greater focus on research impact over recent years has undoubtedly added to the pressures to engage. There is increased recognition that publishing a piece of work in an academic journal in itself is not an adequate dissemination strategy if the findings are to contribute to wider society. The fact that the public cannot access much academic literature, despite funding it, is hard to justify. It would be wrong to suggest that dissemination is a stumbling block for all academics – many are brilliant at disseminating their research. But occasionally some will need to work with others.

For us to deliver this translational role, we need to ensure the relationship is two-way. We need the academic community to tell us when we are wrong; help us understand and communicate complex issues; challenge lazy assumptions; and debate the moral and ethical issues which the political classes may fear. Our own relationship with the academic community is bi-directional and our work is supported by an academic advisory board to advise us on methodological and substantive issues on ageing; such a board is not the norm for intermediary organisations as ourselves. We also need researchers to be timely and policy relevant. It is still the case that far too much research is published too late to affect policy.

Research and evaluation for busy practitioners

Helen Kara

POLICY PRESS, 2012

Reviewed by Dr Simon Haslam, director, FMR Research Ltd

Helen Kara's recently-published book is targeted at practitioners in public services. This means those that work day in and day out in areas like health, social care, criminal justice, education and government administration. As such, the book aims to equip them with enough knowledge of techniques and terminology to move around the research community without bumping into the furniture. It does this pretty successfully.

It is probably fair to say the book's core quality is explaining research to a lay readership. There is sufficient insight into research paradigms, the research process, primary data gathering, data analysis and dissemination to provide practitioners with the ability to commission research from an informed perspective or become directly involved in research projects themselves. It covers qualitative and quantitative research as well as secondary data analysis, with a firm enough guiding hand, which is no mean feat for a relatively slim volume.

The text handles the potential vulnerability of skimming the surface of a broad discipline by being well referenced and providing readers with signposts for further information. Aimed at a general/foundation level, it avoids getting too close to some emerging areas in research such as the role of social media and boutique methods, which is totally understandable. But it does give attention to areas of particular interest in vogue with many in public services such as 'social return on investment'. The book's content is capably brought to life by examples from research projects, mainly from the author's own experience. And the author and publisher look to have worked on its visual layout, to help an already readable text appear accessible at first glance. There are also lovely illustrations by Carol Burns, herself a researcher.

My biggest concern is the book's title, and I hope that misinterpretation doesn't sell it short. Though once we understand that within 'Research and Evaluation for Busy Practitioners' the term 'practitioners' refers to those engaged in public service delivery (not seasoned research practitioners) and that 'research' really means social research, it's all good. I have little doubt Helen's book will develop quite a fan base in the UK public services community, and it gets a 'thumbs up' for its contribution in helping promote the quality social research message.

Assessing the quality of survey data

Joerg Blasius and Victor Thiessen

SAGE, 2012

Reviewed by Catherine Owens, senior research officer, Department for Education

Assessing the Quality of Survey Data has been written for all researchers who want to be good data detectives. It aims to be a guide to identifying potential issues from 'dirty' data, especially from issues in response styles. For example, it demonstrates and exposes the impact of several common survey response issues, such as acquiescence, extreme responding (e.g. always choosing strongly agree/disagree), interview fatigue, comprehension problems and faked data. It sets out to show how you can identify the variation and measurement error created by various response styles, using techniques derived from multiple correspondence analysis.

This book comprehensively shows that it does not matter which of these response style issues you are looking for, there are techniques that can quickly identify data that may not be good quality. The book is written in a clear and engaging style and meets its data identification/detective objectives very well. The use of graphs to illustrate data issues is particularly helpful and there is also a good selection of examples of large well known surveys.

Some of the more technical, statistical, aspects were challenging. The book has been thorough in ensuring the data principles are explained, but this does require a certain amount of understanding to get its full benefit. I would recommend this book for anyone with a strong grasp of numbers, particularly statistics, but for those less numerate a different book may be better to read first. It is also best used by those at the dirty end of the data, those checking validity, checking finding, and looking for meaning.

This book has some considerable strengths. It really got me to reflect on the assumptions I had made about data sets I had handled. It highlighted how relatively easy it is to spot data issues early on in analysis. It also made me think of response style challenges to be more than a survey design/sampling issues and to include much more data screening. Although I won't be setting up my own detective agency, I have certainly picked up some sleuthing tips.

Social work in extremis: lessons for social work internationally

Edited by Michael Lavalette and Vasilios Ioakimidis

POLICY PRESS, 2011

Reviewed by Gayle Munro, research manager at The Salvation Army and PhD student at University College London

Published during a period of economic uncertainty, when many countries, including several in Europe, are undergoing or have recently experienced what Naomi Klein has described as 'social shock', this edited volume, including case studies of 'popular social work' from around the globe, is a timely publication. Focusing on the argument that organic, grassroots social work 'from below' can often be more effective and have a more significant impact than interventions by large-scale multinational state-run or non-governmental organisations, the contributors present a range of examples of 'popular social work' from the Palestinian West Bank, Beirut, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Haiti, Uzbekistan, the former Yugoslavia and several parts of Greece. The collection encompasses case studies from the present day and different parts of history, concluding with a chapter written in the wake of the more recent upheavals in Greece and other parts of Europe (including England). As such, the editors acknowledge that developments potentially affecting much of their argument are still ongoing and that their 'intention is not to provide definite answers and quick-fix solutions but rather to start a debate and shift attention to the various forms of popular social work that can develop in extremis' (p168).

This book is a fascinating read and offers insights from a variety of time and geographical perspectives into the ways in which communities can organise themselves in the wake of upheaval. Many of the chapters also touch on themes such as the relationships between 'local' vs 'international' or 'external' volunteering, the role of academics in the development of social work policy and activism and the part that history, memory and storytelling can play in the formation and identity of contemporary communities. It was particularly interesting to read in several chapters how the position of the author impacted upon the choice of subject matter and his/her perspective. Many of the contributors focused on the need to develop local responses to local problems, rather than the 'cut and paste' of Western models of social work, as critiqued by Maglajlic (p 112). It may however have been useful to include in the volume more discussion of popular social work which impacted upon different layers of community, the term 'community' was not really defined or discussed in detail by any of the contributors (with the exception of Murphy in discussing Northern Ireland, p162) and it would be interesting to explore how some of the more 'successful' case studies celebrated as part of this book have played out in the longer term. This could perhaps be considered as a follow-up for some of the chapters which have focussed on more recent developments.

Overall, this book makes for a very enjoyable and informative read which should appeal to a wide readership including social work practitioners, policy makers, students and more established academics.

Making sense of statistical methods in social research

Keming Yang

SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 2010

Reviewed by Annika Coughlin, research assistant, University of Bedfordshire

This book isn't a 'how to' book on how to do statistics or how to use a package such as SPSS. Instead, It helps the reader to think logically about using statistics. The book asks and answers fundamental questions vital to all researchers such as: when should you use statistics?; why should you use them?; and, which statistical test is best for the phenomenon under study?

Chapters 1-5 are about the status of statistics and issues to do with sampling. Chapter 2 is particularly helpful, giving rules for when and when not to use statistics and handy tips learned from the author's extensive teaching experience. Chapters 6-11 are more complex and the author suggests the reader will need some understanding of statistics first. Indeed, I decided to come back to these sections when I am using statistics in my work.

I would use this publication with a more usual 'how to' type of book when it comes to actually doing statistics, but would highly recommend it to students and researchers who need to understand the value, pitfalls and rules of statistics.

Publishing journal articles

Lucinda Becker and Pam Denicolo

SAGE PUBLICATIONS, 2012

Reviewed by Dr Simon Haslam, Director, FMR Research Ltd

This is a new text in an area of growing interest for many in the research community. Maybe the strongest accolade I can give this book is that it has now become one of the core texts for the SRA's training courses on writing research reports and publishing research. It's not the only text the SRA cites, but sitting alongside the works of Barbara Minto and Rowena Murray, it keeps select company.

Increasingly, researchers and practitioners outside the academic context are interested in getting their research work recognised as part of the literature in that field. For most of these, motivation extends beyond Research Excellent Framework (REF) brownie points. Publishing Journal Articles is ideal for such people. It holds your hand, provides practical guidance and does it with a good sense of empathy.

The book covers the subjects of when, what and where to publish, planning, writing style, working with editors and intellectual property. It augments these by addressing subjects such as coping with writer's block and recovering from rejection. The text is concise – 138 pages – and presented in an accessible format which makes it easy to dip in and out of. Both Dr Lucinda Becker and Professor Pam Denicolo are accomplished writers, so there are no issues with the deftness of their prose.

It doesn't cover everything you'll ever need to know, or even will ever learn about getting published, as I said it's not the only text which underpins our writing workshops. However, there's more than enough in what Becker and Denicolo say to set you capably on course. A small quibble, an index would have been helpful, but that's about all.

In summary, it's well worth a read if you are new to this area. On Amazon, I've given it four out of five stars. Oh, and keep a look out for Developing Research Proposals by the same authors (reviewed in the previous SRA News).

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Thanks to all who've reviewed books for the SRA.

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