What Works Network

Ross Neilson and Danielle Mason, joint heads of What Works Team, Cabinet Office, discuss the role of the network in improving evidence in public services.

Nobody wants to be prescribed a drug which hasn’t been rigorously tested or trialled. Yet all too often in the past, vast sums of public money, across whole areas of public services, have been allocated to interventions and programmes where there is little or no evidence of effectiveness. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) is a shining example of placing rigorous evidence at the heart of decision making. Created in 1999, NICE independently reviews evidence on health interventions, and produces guidelines advising on the most effective treatments. It’s surprising that the NICE model hasn’t, until now, been replicated in other policy areas.

With tight public finances it’s critical that decision makers (for example, teachers and commissioners) can get evidence about what works and more importantly, what doesn’t work. The What Works Network aims to do precisely that: to gather and summarise the evidence, and make it clear and accessible so that it can inform decision making locally and nationally.

The chief secretary to the treasury, Danny Alexander, sees the network as essential for improving decision making in government, commenting that it ‘will bring a real step-change to our evidence generating capabilities, and will further ensure government takes decisions at the spending round and future events on the basis of high quality research.’

The six independent What Works Centres, covering health and social care, education attainment, local growth, crime reduction, early intervention and ageing better, have the job of ranking the quality and strength of evidence. All too often, the evidence of the effectiveness of an intervention is limited, and does not use the mixed methods approaches that can tell us reliably whether and why something worked. This needs to change.

In areas where strong evidence is available, what’s the point of having it if it’s not used in decision making? Adopting evidence is the greatest challenge for the What Works Network. The term ‘what works’ is somewhat simplistic and is shorthand for a series of complex and sophisticated questions. Evidenced-based programmes cannot simply go into different areas in expectation of producing the same results. It is essential to understand the context and circumstances which enable interventions to succeed. As the network evolves, an important task will be to support decision makers to become more evidence-literate and smarter at using evidence to inform decisions, as the case study shows.

Overall, the What Works approach is one part of a complex prescription to improve the use and generating of evidence across public services. As the new centres in early intervention, crime and local growth establish themselves, they will be producing their first evidence this year. What happens if the evidence goes against the accepted wisdom or is weak? Then the prescription will have to evolve and require action from decision makers and evidence generators for higher quality evidence.

Case study: sharing evidence with teachers

Schools have more autonomy over allocating funding than ever before, particularly as the pupil premium has devolved an additional £2.5bn to schools, with a typical secondary school receiving an additional £200,000 for the pupil premium. However, it is not always clear which interventions will be most effective, and therefore, where they should invest their funding. The Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation, which is the designated What Works Centre for pupil attainment, has developed the teaching and learning toolkit to help school leaders find evidence about which education interventions are most effective at boosting attainment (http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit). The toolkit distils several hundred studies into a summary showing the cost, quality of evidence and efficacy of impact for different types of intervention. Presenting data in a simple and user-friendly way to school leaders is essential, and over a third of head teachers have used the toolkit to decide how to spend pupil premium funding.
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The What Works Network

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Delegates enjoy a break at the SRA annual conference at the British Library in December

SRA events

16 MAY // SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE

Our fourth annual event on this topic, at the British Library. Open for bookings late March: keep an eye on our website for details.

1 JULY // SUMMER EVENT

Presentations with a local government angle for this afternoon event at the LGA in central London. Followed by drinks on the terrace overlooking Parliament.

8 DECEMBER // ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2014

Where social researchers from all sectors gather at the British Library to share knowledge and ideas, debate our most pressing professional issues, and meet and talk.

More information on these and other SRA events: www.the-sra.org.uk

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Towards a better digital future

SRA chair, Patten Smith, discusses his hopes for a high-quality online general population survey in the UK

In our methods column (see page 8) Gerry Nicolaas outlines findings from the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods-funded GenPopWeb network. I was privileged to attend the two conferences and wrap-up workshop organised by Gerry and her team, and found these to be much more than merely intellectually stimulating and instructive (which of course they were): by the end of the network’s life a coherent vision of what a high-quality online general population survey in the UK might look like had emerged, a vision that has already been reality tested in several European countries and the USA. The idea is simple: recruit a random probability panel using conventional offline methods and then convert them into an online panel by connecting the unconnected and incentivising participation. Such an online panel would, of course, be very expensive to recruit, and its costs would, therefore, be defrayed by including each panel member in multiple rounds of online data collection. Why is this exciting? It’s because, for the first time in the UK, it would enable researchers to wholeheartedly embrace online methods for general population surveys.

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There was a time when we might have expected the research agency sector to lead on this activity – with the right model there is surely money to be made – but I very much doubt that it will. As Robert Groves has perceptively noted, over recent decades the management of private sector survey companies has tended to move away from those interested in advancing the method and towards those more interested in growing the company. Agencies now are arguably more risk-averse and less willing to implement expensive R&D that unashamedly ticks the quality boxes. To my mind, the boldness required to take the idea of a random probability internet panel forward will have to come from the public, charitable or academic sectors; from the ESRC, charitable foundations or government.

If the method adumbrated by Gerry can be made to stick in practice, the rewards will be large: at long last we would have a reasonably-priced source of methodologically-defensible general population data that (in my vision at least!) would be used by both government and academic social scientists. Money is tight in both sectors, and a high-quality online panel would provide an important mechanism for maximising the benefits accruing to every pound spent.

Of course, as Gerry hints in her article, in order to use such a panel effectively, we would have to change many of our established research habits: we would have to develop simpler questions and shorter questionnaires, potentially split across multiple interviews, and of course we could no longer pretend we were dealing with all manner of question design infelicities by producing reams of (I suspect unread) interviewer instructions. But this need for change should be seen in the broader context of a rapidly-changing research environment: whether we do or don’t end up embracing online probability panels, if the survey method is to survive, desperately clinging to sclerotic habits will not be an option.

SRA Scotland update

Report by Sophie Ellison

This is an exciting year for Scotland, full of debate and deliberations ahead of the independence referendum in September. To keep informed and to get a sense of how social research is shaping and contributing to discussions, check out these sources:

★ The Future of the UK and Scotland (www.futureukandscotland.ac.uk/) an ESRC funded programme bringing social science to the debate about Scotland’s constitutional future and its implications for the rest of the UK

★ What Scotland Thinks (http://whatscotlandthinks.org/) for impartial, up-to-date information on public attitudes to Scottish independence (See also Rachel Ormston’s article on page 6.) In other news, the committee is organising events for the year which will include a series of evening seminars, a social research social, and another careers event for aspiring researchers… so watch this space! Please get in touch if you have ideas for an event or would be interested in sharing your work at one of our seminars.

Other dates for the diary include upcoming training on research project management (see page 17) and at http://the-sra.org.uk/training/ for details and to book.

More info: sophie.ellison@gmail.com

SRA Cymru update

Report by Jennifer Evans

Any good New Year resolution involves improving a healthy lifestyle and the branch in Wales has certainly seen it to that local training has stepped up a notch! We have supported three SRA Wales-based training events so far in 2014. Our members and the wider local social research community have identified SRA training as one of the association’s main benefits. Locally-based training isn’t just for those in Wales and we welcome SRA members from across the UK.

We’ve also contributed to the programme of evening seminars across the UK, hosting a discussion with Dr Steve Marshall, chief social researcher of the GSR in Wales, entitled ‘data analysis: myth creation or myth busting’.

Our informal breakfast socials began again in February, giving local social researchers the opportunity to meet, talk and to find out what the branch is doing. There always seems to be at least one new person at the table, so keep an eye on our Twitter feed (@sracymru), web page and LinkedIn Group (Social Research Association (SRA) Cymru) for details. Do come to the next one on 15 April!

More info: sracymru@the-sra.org.uk

The British Library: are you making the most of it?

With over 150 million items, including 13 million books, five million reports, theses and conference papers, and around a million journal titles, the British Library is an extraordinary resource. But, despite half a million visits to the reading rooms annually, we still meet researchers who know little about the type and scale of resources available, and who don’t realise just how easy it is to become a reader.

The library is open to all researchers and is especially useful to social researchers with little or no local access to information resources. For instance, the social science and business reading rooms have journals (online and in print), official government publications (UK and international, including the UN, EC and OECD), market research and company annual reports. All of these provide content and add value to those reports and proposals.

Of course, it isn’t always possible to visit the building, so we’ve been developing online services. For example, www.socialwelfare.bl.uk provides a single point of access to resources on all aspects of social welfare in the UK. A related portal www.mbs-portal.bl.uk has research on management and business studies, including reports on marketing, research methods and organisational psychology. And, EthOS (www.ethos.bl.uk), holds UK doctoral research theses. At present, there are almost 100,000 full text theses and around 300,000 records.

The collections also contain photographs, private papers, maps, music videos and oral histories. The latter include interviews with activists from the women’s movement in the 70s, 80s and 90s, collections on HIV/AIDS, mental health and disability; just a few examples of materials which can enhance research.

Finally, since May 2010, the library has been recording 46 hours of television and radio news every day, from 17 channels, much of which is word-searchable. In April, we are opening a new reading room for print and digital news collections.

For more information about using the British Library visit www.bl.uk or write to social-sciences@bl.uk.

Jude England, head of social sciences at the British Library

More info:

sracymru@the-sra.org.uk
Congratulations Ceridwen!

SRA trustee, Ceridwen Roberts, has received an OBE for her services to social sciences. Lan-Ho Man (DCLG) asked her about the award and her 40 years in social science.

What is your reaction to being awarded the OBE?
CR: I am delighted, not least because it recognises social science as a valuable activity which society respects. All too often one feels this is not the case.

What have been the key moments in your career?
CR: I have worked as a social scientist for over 40 years in a variety of settings initially as a lecturer in industrial sociology but, as I preferred research, I escaped to the social science branch of the Department of Employment. I was very lucky to arrive there when they wanted to develop their research on women in the labour market and I was given the responsibility of doing this. The next five years were some of the best of my career as I had to develop the largest ever programme of work on women in the labour market. We covered pay, redundancy, unemployment, lifetime employment, new technology and all sorts of work/life balance issues. I then made a big jump to the NGO sector to be director of the Family Policy Studies Centre. This was a totally independent research and policy centre dedicated to using research to explore the interface between public policy and family change. This was a very exciting period to be working on these issues.

What are you working on at the moment?
CR: I am semi-retired but latterly have been working with colleagues at Oxford on public policy and the family courts in England and Wales. We are particularly interested in how the courts deal with parents who are separating and the decisions affecting their children. We have been working with academics in Australia who researched the effects of legislative change to increase separated fathers’ time with their children as similar legislation was being proposed here (the Children and Family Bill). It was fascinating to use the very powerful Australian evidence to argue against some of the proposals here on the grounds that these would adversely affect children. We were involved right through to debates in the Lords and will produce a ‘what does the legislation mean?’ note after the Act gets Royal Assent in April.

What should social science be addressing today?
CR: Social science has to look dispassionately and critically at how society works. It needs to be able to explain to people why things happen in the way they do, and it needs to tackle the myths about social behaviours that are so prevalent. Almost inevitably therefore, social science is sometimes accused of being too critical of the status quo but that is not really what it is about. Rather, it looks for structural explanations and patterns in people’s and organisations’ behaviour. This is what makes it so exciting.

What advice would you give to anybody starting out now?
CR: Working as a social scientist can be a most rewarding career. It will not make you rich, and these days it is often hard to get started, but there are opportunities across several sectors. I think it is very important to recognise the different entry requirements of different sectors such as a PhD for academia, and also to realise that movement between them is possible but not always easy. So, sometimes it’s a good idea to hedge your bets, and get some qualifications and experience over and above the basic undergraduate and masters’ degrees. I also think it’s essential to join the appropriate learned society and take advantage of the seminars, training and lectures which membership can offer. I have certainly found my membership of both the British Sociological Association and the Social Research Association invaluable. They have provided me with essential information at different times about ethics, commissioning and good research practice generally, as well as opportunities to meet like-minded social scientists.

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Aye or naw? Scotland decides

On September 18, Scotland will decide whether to become an independent country, or remain part of a 300-year-old union with the rest of the UK. Rachel Ormston, senior research director, ScotCen Social Research, shows how research is contributing to the discussions.

RESEARCH AND THE REFERENDUM
The outcome of the referendum will have significant consequences for Scotland and the rest of the UK. But whichever way the vote goes, research is vital for informing the referendum debate and shaping the future of Scotland and the UK. The Economic and Social Research Council has recognised this through its ‘Future of the UK and Scotland’ research programme (www.futureukandscotland.ac.uk). Funding from this scheme has enabled ScotCen Social Research to continue and also expand our long-standing programme of research into public attitudes to constitutional change. Alongside questions in our annual Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA), we have launched a new website, www.whatscotlandthinks.org. This contains all the latest opinion poll data for the referendum, with an interactive tool allowing more detailed exploration of 14 years of SSA data. Briefing papers on public attitudes to various issues, including women’s views of independence and attitudes to ‘devo max’ (significantly enhanced devolution within the UK), are also on the site.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES: THE SCORE AT HALF TIME
The latest findings from SSA (based on the 2013 survey) were launched at a conference in Edinburgh in January. These consider how public attitudes to the referendum appear at campaign ‘half time’. It is impossible to do full justice here to the range of findings discussed – for further detail I recommend the three excellent (and short!) papers by John Curtice and Jan Eichhorn available at http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading. However, some highlights are:

◗◗ Support for independence stood at 29% – up on 2012, but in line with the historic average since SSA started asking the question in 1999
◗◗ Women are less likely than men to support independence, and also those aged 65 and older and those in professional and managerial jobs
◗◗ A third of people in Scotland have not yet decided how they will vote
◗◗ Those who would prefer ‘devo max’ to independence or the status quo are particularly likely to be undecided about how they will vote (45%)
◗◗ In spite of the widespread media coverage of the referendum campaigns, many people think that they do not yet know enough about independence – only 22% think they know ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’
◗◗ The economy remains central to people’s attitudes to independence. If anything, beliefs about the economic consequences are even more strongly related to views on independence than they were earlier in the campaign. In 2012, 73% of those who thought Scotland’s economy would be a ‘lot better’ if the country were independent, supported independence; in 2013 the equivalent figure was 88%

While other issues have attracted significant political and media attention in the lead up to the referendum, it is less obvious that these subjects are influencing the thinking of the public. Statistical modelling indicates that beliefs about nuclear weapons, Scotland’s EU membership, and whether Scotland should/would keep the pound do little to explain whether or not people will vote yes or no. The findings give both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns much to think about, particularly for targeting the undecided who would really prefer some form of ‘devo max’, and for seeing whether issues central to campaigning so far are resonating with voters. They also show how research can help us understand the issues at stake, and the crucial role research will play in helping interpret the outcome – whether aye or naw – after September 18.

More info: www.scotcen.org.uk
Ethical developments

By Helen Kara, SRA trustee

On 10 January I was at the British Library for the Academy of Social Sciences’ (AcSS) conference ‘Finding common ground? Ethics across the social sciences’. Almost 100 people from research organisations, universities and learned societies spent the day responding to a discussion document produced from the three symposia on ethics which the AcSS held last year. There was plenty to debate, and a fair amount of polite disagreement. However, there are at least two points on which a consensus seems to have been reached.

The first is that the overarching approach to ethics in social sciences should be educative, not regulatory. There are many instances when ethical regulation has actually prevented social science researchers from acting ethically, and there is a growing body of literature on this problem. Social researchers have inherited biomedical ethical regulation systems which never really fitted what we were doing, and the fit is becoming poorer as our body of methodological options expands.

Which brings me to the second point: that we should move beyond the traditional ethical stance of ‘do no harm’ (also inherited from the biomedics via the Hippocratic Oath), and towards a position where social science research is designed to do good, right wrongs, combat social injustice. No doubt many of us are already doing this, at least to some extent – but we need to make it universal and more explicit. There is a range of methodological frameworks for research that we can draw on, and there is a growing body of literature on this problem. Social researchers have inherited biomedical ethical regulation systems which never really fitted what we were doing, and the fit is becoming poorer as our body of methodological options expands.

However, participatory research can be enormously rewarding, usually produces better quality and more robust findings than non-participatory research, and there is significant evidence that it contributes to positive social change. This applies on a small and a large scale. For example, on a small scale, Victoria Foster drew on participatory and feminist methodologies in drama-based research work with a group of parents of pre-school children in a Sure Start programme in a deprived area of the UK. Involvement in Foster’s research empowered participants, reducing isolation and increasing confidence; positive impacts which were maintained at follow-up three years later.

On a large scale, participatory research has been conducted with Roma communities across several European countries. Having no territory of their own, the Romani people have long been excluded from social decision-making processes, and are subject to high levels of individual and structural discrimination. Various research projects were conducted, such as the WORKALÓ project which aimed to find out why Romani people are excluded from the labour market and identify ways to include them. Romani people were on the project’s advisory committee from the start, and so were involved in planning and designing as well as carrying out the research. Their research was presented, at the European parliament, jointly by academic and Romani researchers. These research projects led (among other things) to formal recognition of Roma communities by several European countries, and to the development of a European strategy to ensure the full involvement of Romani people in making decisions affecting Roma communities.

DO YOU HAVE A RESEARCH ETHICS QUERY?
The SRA has a free consultancy service to support members encountering ethical dilemmas in their research.

14 senior researchers from various sectors/disciplines are available to offer you the benefit of their experience. This is an informal, confidential forum to support researchers. The participants give their time voluntarily. How it works: we circulate your question or request to the members of the consultancy forum. We collate their replies and send them to you, normally within seven working days. Email Ron Iphofen ron.iphofen@gmail.com Let him know if you prefer to remain anonymous throughout the process.

More details and names of the forum members: http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/research-ethics/ethics-consultancy-forum/
Web surveys for the general population: how, why and when?

Gerry Nicolaas, head of data collection methodology, NatCen Social Research

Using the web to survey the general population is very tempting because of its low cost and speed compared with more traditional data collection modes. Nonetheless, social researchers have been slow to embrace the web – unlike their peers in market research – because they have significant concerns about population representativeness and data quality.

For this reason, a network for methodological innovation was set up in 2012 and funded for one year by the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods. The main objective is to share and synthesise knowledge and start discussion about possibilities. It brings together UK and international experts including representatives from academia, government, and the private and not-for-profit sectors. See www.natcenweb.co.uk/genpopweb for details.

What are the main findings so far? Population internet access is rapidly increasing and will reach near universal coverage in the foreseeable future. Before it does, we can offer the unconnected alternative data collection modes, or even an internet connection. We have a good understanding of how to minimise differences in measurement between web and other modes, and new research promises to help us detect and adjust for remaining differences. But we are still struggling with two other major obstacles: selection and participation. Our dependency on the postcode address file for selecting general population probability samples requires either postal contact (leading to selection bias), or in-person visits (negating most of web surveys’ cost advantages). And web surveys have much lower response rates than comparable surveys using face-to-face interviews – the dominant mode for high-quality UK random probability surveys. Many of us are rightly reluctant to opt for a web survey without knowing more about the impact of low response rates on non-response bias.

Other countries (the Netherlands, France, the USA and Germany) have recently tackled some of these challenges by setting up probability-based web panels1. Substantial efforts are made to recruit probability samples of panel members from conventional sampling frames using traditional contact modes and incentive regimes; offline households are included by providing internet access or allowing participation through a different mode. The costs associated with this level of recruitment and coverage are then recouped through multiple data collections using web rather than expensive traditional modes. This model is proving to be very attractive and is now being considered in Norway and Southern Europe, and for collecting official statistics in Germany and the Netherlands.

Such a probability-based web panel would be a hugely valuable resource for researchers in the UK, allowing them to collect survey data at lower cost and to develop and test a wide range of web data collection innovations.

Of course not all surveys can migrate their data collection to probability-based web panels, and experiments/trials are being conducted on, for example, the UK birth cohort studies, the European Social Survey, the Understanding Society Innovation Panel, the Labour Force Survey and the Cabinet Office’s Community Life Survey. Although all these efforts contribute to a better understanding of how and when to use web data collection, they are also constrained by the requirement to replicate rather than improve measurement on these surveys. The decades-long dominance of face-to-face interviewing for high-quality surveys in the UK has resulted in survey design customs which are unsuitable for web surveys – long and dull questionnaires, and complex questions requiring regular face-to-face interviewer support.

Ongoing changes in web technology stretch our survey design customs to their limit. For example, the rapid uptake of mobile web should force us to rethink radically how we design and conduct surveys. But web technology also provides huge opportunities for collecting other types of data which do not rely on the survey interviewing (e.g. passive measurement). If we are to make significant progress, we may have to step back from existing survey design as the starting point, and start from scratch.

More information: gerry.nicolaas@natcen.ac.uk

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1 The LISS panel in the Netherlands (www.centerdata.nl/en/survey-research/mess-liiss-panel), the GIP panel in Germany (http://reforms.uni-mannheim.de/internet_panel/home/), the ELIPSS panel in France (www.elipss.fr/elipss/recruitment/), the Knowledge Panel in the USA (www.knowledgenetworks.com/knpanel/), and the GESIS panel in Germany (www.gesis.org/en/services/data-collection/gesis-panel/general-overview)
**A better start: using evidence from research to make a difference**

*By Louise Morpeth, co-director, Social Research Unit at Dartington*

The Big Lottery Fund is investing £165 million in Better Start, a programme of preventative approaches in pregnancy and the first three years of life to improve the life chances of babies and young children. A maximum of five sites across England will be selected to receive this investment, and will have ten years to make a marked and measurable impact on children’s nutrition, social and emotional development, and communication and language.

There is a commitment to use evidence from research to shape the entire programme. For example, the fund has asked the 15 shortlisted sites to prepare their applications for a share of the Better Start pot. The sites must demonstrate a good understanding of the needs of their children so that they can set stretching but realistic targets for the population level changes they will achieve for children’s development. They must also propose a portfolio of activities to bring about these changes which draws heavily on research.

The Social Research Unit at Dartington has been supporting the sites to gather evidence, including a survey of parents in each site to gather high-quality, valid and reliable data on the wellbeing of children aged 0-8 living in the selected communities (typically four or five wards in an authority). Samples were constructed to give an overview of main developmental outcomes and risks to development in the selected communities and in the wider local authority area. This data was shared widely in each site with community members, leaders of public services and the voluntary sector to enable them to choose priorities for investment. Collecting the data in this way gives two points of comparison: children’s development in the selected wards compared with children in the authority more generally and with the entire sample of children from across all 15 sites (N=11,603). Participants’ engagement with the findings has meant that rather than seeing the data as prescribing the priorities, it has prompted lively and thoughtful discussions in which other data sources have been introduced and collectively, the agencies, community and voluntary sector have agreed shared priorities.

The following quotes from senior professionals in one site give a sense of survey findings on the benefits of early intervention and costs of not intervening early:

‘I like the sense of shock here – something needs to be done. Everything is singing to me that changes are needed to the system.’

‘This is shocking and I feel a sense of outrage; we need to hang on to that sense of outrage. We must not think of this as normal...’

The same constituents – professionals, community and voluntary sector – were expected to propose a ‘balanced portfolio’ of activities to make a positive impact on the wellbeing of pregnant women and young children. Where possible, activities were evidence-based, and where there were gaps in the evidence, activities were ‘science-based’ – hence the idea of a balanced portfolio. Two reviews of the evidence were commissioned to help sites. The first review examined the research literature to determine what works to improve children’s wellbeing. The second reviewed how children develop and what affects their development, and was intended to help sites design innovative approaches grounded in science.

The reports from both reviews were written for a wide audience, and in many sites, they were used in workshops and meetings to increase people’s understanding of the findings from the research and its strengths and weaknesses.

In June the fund will announce which of the 15 sites are to be awarded between £30 and £50 million each to spend over the next ten years. The decision will be shaped in part by the sites’ commitment to evidence: their use of evidence to shape their proposals, their potential to contribute to the evidence over the ten years and their willingness to participate in the research that will determine whether an investment of this size can actually give children a better start.

See [www.betterstart.dartington.org.uk](http://www.betterstart.dartington.org.uk) to download the reviews referred to above and for more information about the wellbeing surveys.
RCTs – are they worth the hassle?

Matt Barnard, head of evaluation, NSPCC

The NSPCC has recently published the first report in its new ‘Impact and Evidence’ series. This is an important moment for the evaluation department, because it marks the beginning of an intense period of reporting based on evaluation and research carried out over the last four years in 25 projects. The programme used various methodologies, including qualitative approaches, surveys and before-and-after studies using standardised psychometric instruments. We are also running four randomised controlled trials (RCTs).

Our largest RCT will be the first in the world to measure the impact of a psychodynamic approach to therapy for children and young people who have been sexually abused. It has just hit a key milestone, with 105 cases randomly allocated to the intervention or onto a waiting list – this represents half our required sample.

Bristol and Durham Universities are leading the RCT, and I don’t know what they would say if I asked them, ‘Is it worth the hassle?’. Every step has been challenging, partly because NSPCC is not in the business of running research projects – we’re trying help vulnerable children and learn at the same time. Considering that, at one point, we weren’t sure whether the RCT would be possible, we’ve made huge progress. But there’s still a long way to go.

Given the challenges of implementing the RCTs, I have been reflecting on last year’s RSS/SRA Cathie Marsh lecture ‘What can RCTs bring to social policy evaluation?’. The lecture involved a debate on the pros and cons of RCTs. In the event, the two speakers, Leon Feinstein of the Early Intervention Foundation and Jeremy Hardie of the London School of Economics, ended up agreeing that they are the best form of evidence we have, though they have limitations. Jeremy Hardie made an interesting argument that RCTs only tell you about how something worked in a particular time and place, and that they tell you nothing about why something worked. Therefore, to gain confidence in their results, a single RCT is not enough; you need to do multiple trials.

As an organisation finding out the hard way how difficult it is to conduct a single trial, this was not the most welcome Christmas message. However, it was a very useful stimulus for me to think about what we are getting out of the studies, and I think that I disagree with Jeremy. It seems to me that all research is limited by the fact that it was conducted in a particular place at a particular time, and generalising from it requires a leap of faith that it will be relevant to the future. The difference with RCTs, I think, is that, generally, they make no attempt to draw a representative sample, and this is because the question they are asking in the first instance is not ‘does this approach work?’ but rather ‘can this approach work?’.

The implication is that, effectively, the only thing an RCT is telling you is about the mechanism, and if you don’t have a well worked out theory of change you are in danger of not getting anything out of them. Fortunately, for our RCTs, we have very well specified theories of change, and assuming that we find the approaches can work, the next step will be to learn more about who they work for and under what circumstances. Interestingly, the focus on the model underlying an experiment is what is emphasised within the natural sciences. Perhaps the problem isn’t that social science has adopted the methodology of natural sciences, but that it hasn’t adopted it well enough.

And to make sure the original question isn’t left hanging, my answer is yes.

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How children answer survey questions

By Kate Smith, survey manager Millennium Cohort Study, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education and Lucinda Platt, professor of social policy, LSE

The voices of children and young people are increasingly being sought in social survey research, but we still have much to learn about the best ways of getting accurate and comprehensive information without over-burdening them.

Research has shown that children understand and answer survey questions differently from adults and may not interpret them as intended. In preparation for the Age 11 survey of the Millennium Cohort Study, we carried out two experiments to see how best to get children to report on frequencies and quantities for potentially sensitive questions on experience of bullying and alcohol consumption. Bullying and early alcohol initiation are major policy concerns and it is, therefore, really important to ask questions which children can understand and answer meaningfully.

Two Experiments

The experiments, carried out as part of a large-scale Ipsos MORI Omnibus panel of 2,739 children aged 10-15, evaluated the quality of answers obtained from different response options to questions on: a) frequency of bullying, and b) quantities of alcohol consumed over different periods. The bullying question was modelled on the one used in the age 10-15 questionnaire of Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study. However, those response categories include both a quantity of frequency and a descriptive judgement e.g. ‘not much/1-3 times in the past month’, which we thought could be ambiguous. In our experiment, we unpacked the response categories by asking the same question twice to the same children, but providing first just descriptive responses (e.g. ‘not much’) and second just numeric frequency responses (e.g. ‘1-3 times in the past month’). We compared the responses to our experimental versions to the answers to the original combined question used in Understanding Society.

Results

We found that children answered the frequency of bullying only question in a very similar way to the combined question, but their answers to the descriptive element did not map fully onto the equivalent numeric categories. This suggests that children tended to disregard the descriptive part of the combined question. With the frequency option they were more likely to respond ‘never’ (in the last six months) than if they were offered just a description of how often they were bullied: almost half of the children who said ‘not much’ to the descriptive only question answered ‘never’ when just given numeric responses. This suggests that for these children, there is a sense of being bullied which can’t be enumerated. There were also differences between what children counted or felt was a lot of bullying depending on the response options. For instance, for many, being bullied ‘a few times a week’ was not evaluated as ‘a lot’ – an alarming insight into the regularity of bullying. Our findings suggest that children struggle to answer questions which offer vague quantifiers of frequency in a consistent way as they need clear definitions. For consistency of response, numeric categories are likely to be preferable, even if they miss out on some of the qualitative differences in experience expressed through phrases such as ‘a lot’ or ‘not much’. Moreover, we need to be alert to the fact that children say they are ‘never’ bullied in response to frequency responses simply because they can’t quantify how often it happens.

For the alcohol questions, we found that the quality of the data, as measured by lower non-response and fewer extreme responses, was higher with banded frequency options compared to open-answered questions. We also found that when comparing the means and medians of the responses, the fact that we offered 40+ as one of the banded consumption options did not, as we had feared it would, artificially inflate the average amounts drunk compared to those who did not have such a metric to work to. The mean consumption values were very comparable across both measures, and indeed were slightly lower for the banded option. Moreover, the potential additional precision offered by write-in responses was undermined by the tendency for the children to respond at focal values such as 5 and 10. We concluded that providing clear, numerically-defined categories is preferable for children of this age.

Our experiments emphasise the value of quantitative question testing in helping us understand how children respond; and hence how to improve the quality and interpretation of data collected in large-scale studies.

The full report is at: www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/workingpapers
Can evidence set your project free?

_Sally Mehta_, operations director at Working with Men, describes the benefits and challenges of working with Project Oracle to embed evaluation in the development of a new project with young people.

We need a new approach to tackling relationship violence among young people. Earlier this month, the Sex Education Forum released results from a survey of 890 young people which found that three in ten did not learn about consent in school. It also found that what they do learn tends to be too theoretical and fails to discuss real-life relationship situations and what to do ‘if something happens’ – one in three young people either ‘didn’t know’ or were ‘unsure’ where to get help if they were sexually assaulted. But so many of the projects aiming to reduce relationship violence work with only boys or only girls, and very few of these are able to gather and share evidence of successful outcomes.

Between March 2011 and December 2012, three voluntary sector organisations came together to consider this issue and develop a gendered approach to supporting young people to understand and value healthy relationships. From these meetings, the Bridge project emerged – a partnership between Working With Men, Women and Girls Network and Tender, funded by Trust for London and The Henry Smith Charity. The aim was to work in both single gender and mixed groups, bringing the boys and girls together after they had been able to explore the issues.

A project pilot gave us a chance to explore how to embed evaluation in our work from the start, helping us to understand the effectiveness of our approach over time. Project Oracle, in particular, was able to provide essential evaluation training and support to our team, as well as a research placement working with us for three months.

The result was a clear evaluation framework and accessible, easy-to-use tools to measure our outcomes, which is a luxury for many organisations our size because all too often we find that we just do not have the resources to implement and evaluate at the same time. The impact of this support has been evident: the delivery team can now collect and examine the results throughout the life of the project, helping us to learn from experience as we implement.

Incorporating evaluation into our project has, of course, been challenging and we have had to reassess some of our ways of working. For example, school timetables meant that, in some locations, our intervention has to be shorter than we had initially hoped. And with limited resources, difficult choices also had to be made as to how, when and where to focus our energy. Project Oracle’s support helped us to confront these challenges, encouraging us to be ambitious with our evaluation, whilst respecting our staff’s knowledge of the realities of running the project.

We are now in full swing, working with hundreds of young people. With the structures and tools in place to track our impact, we will continue to learn as we go and hope to replicate the project elsewhere. Above all, we are eager to see how the lives and relationships of the young people we work with develop and grow, set free from the trap of negative attitudes to relationships.
For many social researchers, misinterpretation or misrepresentation of their work can be a professional nightmare. For research findings to be taken up and distorted by the media, politicians, pressure groups or others is completely contrary to the aim of research, which is to expand knowledge.

But the ramifications go beyond the world of research. Most obviously, inaccurate claims that go unchallenged can become the basis for policy, something that at best diverts resources from where they are needed and at worst can be actively harmful. And on a wider scale, inaccurate claims contribute to public distrust of politicians and disengagement with politics more generally.

Full Fact tackles these problems by checking the claims we hear from politicians, the media and pressure groups, and providing advice and tools so that anyone can do the same. As the UK’s only independent fact checking organisation, we have secured corrections from ministers, government departments, MPs, the BBC, pressure groups and national newspapers. Our working relationships with newspapers have allowed us to play an instrumental role in the introduction of corrections columns by the Daily Mail and others. Last year we won an award for transparency from the Political Studies Association in recognition of our work.

If unsubstantiated claims go unchallenged, they can very quickly achieve the status of conventional wisdom. For example, research carried out in 2007 by the Government’s social exclusion unit found that 120,000 families were suffering from five of seven disadvantages, including worklessness, health problems, low incomes, and material deprivation. In 2011, the Department for Communities and Local Government published figures which conflated this group with those families who were engaged in antisocial behaviour, despite there being no attempt to measure this in the original report. Assertions about the cost to the state and to communities of these so-called ‘problem families’ were repeated by ministers and seized upon by parts of the press. The myth of 120,000 trouble-making families continues to be cited erroneously in reference to matters ranging from welfare dependency to family breakdown.

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No one should have to guess whether a claim stacks up. From the economy to education, we aim to make policy-makers’ evidence base more reliable, and help equip the rest of us to make up our own minds up on the issues that matter. To achieve this, it’s essential that Full Fact is a trusted source of information. We work to rigorous standards of accuracy and approach issues from a non-partisan viewpoint. We don’t just correct errors, but fill in shades of grey too. As well as using our own in-house expertise, we are building a network of expert volunteers and organisations which can offer in-depth knowledge. We’ve been successful in using these links to identify and check many claims, but there are still gaps to fill. If we’d been working with experts when the ‘problem families’ claim first gained traction, we’d have been able to identify and rebut it much faster, potentially limiting its impact on a number of policy debates.

By regularly checking specific facts, we’ve developed broader insight into how unsubstantiated claims come about and how they are spread. We’ve used this specific expertise to contribute at a systemic level. For example, we’ve worked with the Government Statistical Service, advising on communicating data effectively and hosting secondments.

We’ve also given evidence by invitation to the Public Administration Select Committee and the Leveson Inquiry. We are keen to broaden our contribution to other areas, and with this in mind, welcome any thoughts from the SRA and its members on how we might take a collaborative approach to identify areas where public understanding could be improved.

Please get in touch with us if you share these goals, or have any thoughts on what our next steps should be. Our communications officer, Phoebe Arnold, is the best person to contact: phoebe@fullfact.org

More info: www.fullfact.org
Accreditation for qualitative researchers

By Michael Herbert, chair, Association of Qualitative Research (AQR) sub-committee on accreditation

The qualitative research industry has no clear recognised minimum requirements for knowledge and skills, or standards or certification for measuring and acknowledging them. Currently, if you say you are a qualitative researcher then you are one. What could be simpler than getting a few people together, talking to them and telling the client what they said and then making some recommendations?!

But as practising qualitative researchers in the UK, we know that we need to have a substantial body of knowledge and a complex set of skills in order to be competent.

CURRENT QUALITATIVE TRAINING

In the UK, one of the world leaders in qualitative research, newcomers currently gain their qualitative knowledge and skills in an ad hoc system of internal ‘on the job training’, devised and run by individual qualitative research agencies. This is often topped up by training courses run by industry bodies such as the SRA, AQR and the MRS.

This type of training can be flexible and responsive to agency requirements and to individual researchers’ abilities and needs. No doubt a lot of excellent training is conducted, which provides the basis for highly-competent researchers who know what they are doing and have the practical skills to do it. And it is free of bureaucratic encumbrance.

On the other hand, there is no obligation for a research agency to provide training, or for a researcher to reach any required standard. With few industry benchmarks and little transparency, it is extremely difficult for both clients and agencies to assess the level of knowledge and skills of individual researchers. Should an industry of our size and standing still be relying on ad hoc training?

THE UNILEVER INITIATIVE

Matters came to a head in 2012 when Unilever, concerned by the variable quality of the research it commissions worldwide, instituted its own qualitative accreditation scheme. This was widely discussed in the UK at the time with views expressed for and against (for example see http://rwconnect.esomar.org/damned-if-you-dont-thoughts-on-the-unilever-accreditation-programme/)

The challenge laid down by Unilever gives us an opportunity to implement an industry-wide, publicly-recognised minimum set of standards of knowledge and skills, accompanied by an assessment and certification process.

MAKING A START

The industry-wide Qualitative Accreditation Steering Group met for the first time in central London in February, bringing together industry association leaders, prominent qual researchers and clients. Although an AQR initiative, the steering group is not being run under its auspices; it has been set up to have as wide a qualitative industry footprint as possible.

Independent researcher, Clarissa White represents the SRA on the group, and Isabella Pereira of Ipsos MORI’s Social Research Institute, is also putting forward the social research perspective. Other association representatives include Debrah Harding of MRS and Finn Raben for ESOMAR. Many research agencies are represented, including TNS-BMRB and Unilever. Leading thinkers and educationalists in qualitative research were also at the meeting, including Wendy Gordon, Roy Langmaid and Joanna Chrzanowska.

THE ROLE OF QUALITATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

At the meeting the SRA asked whether social and market qualitative research, often with a very different focus and types of projects, are compatible in being able to develop training and qualifications under the same umbrella group. This is a pertinent question and one that all social researchers should be thinking about as the steering group develops.

EDITOR’S COMMENT:

The SRA welcomes your thoughts. We want to represent the social research community from commissioning and practitioner perspectives:

◗ What do you think about the idea of qualitative accreditation for social researchers?
◗ What are the options for qualitative social researchers to demonstrate they have reached a required standard of research knowledge and skills?
◗ How well can the skills and knowledge required by qualitative social researchers be incorporated in an accreditation scheme aimed more at commercial market research?
◗ What are the key skills and areas of knowledge that we need to ensure are included in a new scheme, and how do these differ from the needs of qualitative market research?
◗ What are the risks and potential rewards of an accreditation scheme?

Please email admin@the-sra.org.uk with your views.
Teaching quantitative methods: getting the basics right

Reviewed by Phil Jones, PhD research student in human geography and health inequalities at the University of Sheffield
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With such a title you could be forgiven for thinking that this book is simply a ‘how-to’ guide for surviving a weekly quantitative methods class of fearful, reluctant students. In fact, it is much more than that, reflecting on and analysing what the editors describe as the ‘quantitative crisis’ in social sciences.

The collection of essays tends to focus on the discipline of sociology but the authors of each chapter come from various academic backgrounds and areas of expertise, so there is some insight in to most social science disciplines.

The first half of the book analysis the ‘quantitative crisis’ in social sciences. It includes a history of quantitative methods teaching, the recent realisation and attempts to address the lack of quantitative specialists in the social sciences, and a personal reflection of these issues from the 1960s to the present.

The authors and editors present a thorough assessment of the situation and its causes. The anxiety and fear expressed by many new undergraduate students, the uneven teaching of mathematics at secondary education, and the structure of many universities’ social science curriculums all contribute to this ‘crisis’. Understanding these causes is necessary to understand the type of approach most likely to be effective for improving quantitative skills.

The second half of the book presents case studies from various academic institutions. Most are variations on a theme: incorporate research methods (not just quantitative) into the substantive teaching students receive; use contemporary and relevant materials and data sets; and provide opportunities for students to use these skills in a ‘real’ project, be that fieldwork, coursework, or as part of a work placement. Finally, two case studies are of shared repositories – METAL and Jorum – for students and teachers to share resources.

So comprehensive is the book that I think all new teachers of social science courses at undergraduate level should be issued a copy and tested on its contents. Despite this, the (deliberate) focus on undergraduate teaching means that it is probably less of an essential read for social scientists and teachers outside academic institutions.

Understanding research for social policy and social work: themes, methods and approaches

Reviewed by Helen Kara, SRA trustee

The second edition of this book is hugely expanded, with twice as many contributors as the first edition. The list of contributors reads like a ‘who’s who’ of social research: Pete Alcock, Peter Beresford, Joanna Bornat, Lynn Froggett, Martyn Hammersley, Jonathan Potter, Colin Robson, William Solesbury, Pat Thomson, and many others. The content is sensibly divided into seven sections: context-setting, ethics, research ideas and questions, methodological issues and approaches, quantitative research, qualitative research, and dissemination and implementation.

The book is intended to help readers understand the policy-making process and the role of research within it, as well as to increase knowledge of research methods, ethics, and how to get evidence into practice. The content is excellent: wide-ranging, authoritative, and readable. All the usual subjects are covered, such as sampling and interviewing skills, as well as some subjects which are not covered so often, such as online data collection (quantitative and qualitative), feminist methodologies, and knowledge transfer. Each chapter is written by several authors, some of whom contribute text while others contribute exposition, through figures offering definitions or alternative views, or boxes providing practical examples of the subject or method under discussion. There is a very useful glossary which will be a huge asset for students. In terms of the content, the book certainly achieves its aims.

The only problem with this book is that it’s difficult to navigate. There is no overall list of chapters. The chapters in each section are listed at the front of that section, but the authors are not shown, and the index is not much help. Many of the contributors are not listed in the index, and indexing of cited references is also very patchy. For example, Tom Wengraf is indexed against pages 293 and 319, where his work is cited; it is also cited on page 180 (but not indexed) and quite possibly elsewhere. Given that few people are likely to read from cover to cover, this is a flaw which, unfortunately, lets down the editors and authors of this otherwise excellent book.

Nevertheless, this is a magisterial volume which should be on the course list for every undergraduate and postgraduate course covering social policy or social work.
Analyzing social networks

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

This book takes the reader on a tour of key theoretical concepts in social network analysis. It is divided into four sections: introduction, research methods, core concepts and measures and a final section which deals with what the writers describe as ‘three cross-cutting chapters’ on ‘affiliation-type data’, ‘large networks’ and ‘ego network data’. Although primarily theoretical, the book refers to interesting empirical work across the social sciences and health care in order to illustrate core concepts. It introduces readers to software – UCINET and NetDraw – which they can use to analyse and visualise network data but refers to a dedicated website for readers who require a software tutorial.

There is much to commend in this book. The authors provide a clear introduction to graph theory and matrix algebra for non-mathematicians. There is also an interesting introduction to core concepts like ‘centrality’, ‘sub-group’ and ‘equivalence’ and a fascinating discussion of how hypothesis testing is possible with network data when the assumptions of standard inferential tests are violated. The authors also provide invaluable advice on how best to lay out network diagrams in order to make interpretation easier.

However, I think that how information is presented may need to be reviewed. The authors assume that readers are familiar with research terminology without necessarily defining their terms. Although this is a reasonable assumption if the book is for established researchers, beginners may need to refer to an introductory research methods textbook in order to take full advantage of the material. Borgatti et al. also state that a sequential reading of each chapter isn’t needed although this suggestion doesn’t work for readers who assume that a book will begin with straightforward material before moving to advanced topics. A glossary would be useful.

This is an informative book for established social researchers with some prior exposure to social network analysis. Aspirant social network analysts may find the book a little too advanced.

The designer’s guide to presenting numbers, figures, and charts

Reviewed by William Solesbury, independent consultant

Researchers use three languages: verbal, numerical and graphical. Choosing between them to design, conduct and communicate research is usually instinctual – we just start writing or figuring or doodling without much consideration of the options. What this book offers is advice on making choices between tables and charts and how to do both effectively. In its 100-odd pages it offers basic principles to heed, and illustrates the many kinds of table and chart with their pros and cons. It states the six rules of plain figures’ as: put figures in an order; add focus (through averages, percentages and totals); keep comparisons visually close; round figures for clarity; add a written summary (to emphasise conclusions, trends, anomalies and patterns); and use page layout (to guide the reader’s eyes).

These provide the foundation for chapters on different types of table or chart. Among tables, they usefully distinguish reference tables used for comprehensive data which the reader can interrogate themselves (as with a timetable or spreadsheet) and demonstration tables with selective data designed to make an argument (about, say, a comparison or a trend). For charts, they emphasise the importance of being clear about the message and finding the simplest graphical presentation. The authors are scathing about the 70 standard charts offered by Microsoft’s chart wizard, claiming only six or so are useful. ‘Chart junk’ is the nice term coined for over-elaboration where decoration interferes with meaning. Nevertheless, the book does extend its coverage beyond the familiar bar charts, line graphs and pie charts into the more exotic creations of so-called data visualisation like scatter-plots, radar charts, dashboards, tree maps, flowcharts, organograms, timelines and others; and recognises the potential for some of these to be animated for online presentation.

The book presents all this in a brief, readable and lively form. It is full of examples and tips to demonstrate its arguments. Much of what it says will seem familiar to many researchers, but be a useful aide-memoire. Any reader will find something new here to try. So this is one for the bookshelf of every researcher.
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/book-reviews

Here are a few of the titles on offer:

Sociology, an introduction.

Youth and community empowerment in Europe, international perspectives.

The impact of research in education, an international perspective.
Ben Levin, Jie Qi, Hilary Edelstein and Jacqueline Sohn. The Policy Press, 2013


Robert Ackland. SAGE, 2013

If you are interested, please email us on admin@the-sra.org.uk and we’ll send you our reviewing guidelines.

SRA training

We are delighted to announce the SRA’s first research training course in Manchester. ‘Introduction to research project management’, led by Dr Simon Haslam, will run in central Manchester on 9 June. Other upcoming courses are:

CARDIFF

25 MARCH Introduction to systematic reviews – Tim Bickerstaffe and Ben Mitchell

EDINBURGH

31 MARCH Research project management – Simon Haslam

7 MAY Designing a qualitative study – Liz Spencer

8 MAY Qualitative interviewing – Liz Spencer

9 MAY Focus groups – Liz Spencer

12 MAY Analysis of qualitative data – Liz Spencer

13 MAY Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings – Liz Spencer

MANCHESTER

9 JUNE Introduction to research project management – Dr Simon Haslam

LONDON

19 MARCH Analysis of qualitative data – Liz Spencer

20 MARCH Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings – Liz Spencer

25 MARCH Sampling and introduction to weighting – Pamela Campanelli

26 MARCH Basic statistical analysis – Pamela Campanelli

31 MARCH Research and evaluation with children & young people – Louca Mai Brady & Berni Graham

2 APRIL Qualitative research with digital media – Karen O’Reilly

23 APRIL Introduction to ethnographic methods – Karen O’Reilly

6 MAY Introduction to participative research methods – Chris Blantern

21 MAY Questionnaire design and testing – Pamela Campanelli

22 MAY How to implement your survey more effectively – Pamela Campanelli

23 JUNE Writing effective research reports – Simon Haslam

25 JUNE Introduction to evaluation – David Devins

1 JULY Research using social media – Farida Vis

8 JULY Data visualisation – Jon Minton

One-day courses cost £195 for members (£260 for non-members).

Full details of these and other SRA training: www.the-sra.org.uk/training
A valuable learning experience

The SRA can help you to arrange a training course that is:

- Delivered just to your staff
- Designed to meet your organisation’s needs
- Held on your premises

Our expert trainers can provide a wide range of courses around the UK. Recent examples include:

- Questionnaire design
- Qualitative interviewing
- How to maximise research impact
- Project management for researchers
- Introduction to qualitative research

An in-house training session is not just a valuable learning experience; it can be very cost effective too, with prices from £1,500 for up to 15 staff attending a full day’s training.

For an informal chat about how we can help you please contact the SRA office: admin@the-sra.org.uk or 0207 388 2391

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**EDITORIAL POLICY**

SRA Research Matters will include any copy that may be of interest to its readers in the social research community. We will notify you if we are unable to include an item. Copy submitted for publication is accepted on the basis that it may be edited to ensure coherence within the publication. The views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

**SRA RESEARCH MATTERS PUBLICATION**

Next copy dates: 7 May (June issue), 18 July (September issue) and 23 October (December issue)

For latest news and details of training from the SRA see online at www.the-sra.org.uk