SRA and the policy agenda

By Ceridwen Roberts, AcSS

Over the last few months the SRA has been developing its policy work and responding to a whole host of initiatives. We are working with partners where it is more appropriate to do this such as the Academy of Social Science (AcSS) or the Market Research Society (MRS).

There are several pressing issues – the SRA has recently been in the vanguard of alerting the social research community to the changes in VAT rules for research. Do you know if you will be liable for the 20% VAT to be levied on certain types of research from August 2013? The announcement on 20 December from HMRC was missed by many in the Christmas rush, but the SRA, working with the MRS, has had discussions with HMRC, consulted key social funders and providers, and argued very strongly for some key transitional arrangements for projects already funded beyond August. Look at our response on our website and get in touch if this is a concern for you. We are aiming to help HMRC draft the regulations and advice so it is as clear as possible what is or is not in scope.

Perhaps of most medium term concern is the Government Procurement Service (GPS) project to explore creating a pan-government framework for social and economic research. The project is being undertaken by the Shared Services Centre of Research Councils UK (RCUK) which provides back office functions for all the research councils, whose focus is on grants to academic bodies rather than procuring applied research. SRA members will know that the SRA has a long history of arguing for social research to be commissioned/procured in an effective way which is fair for the many different types of suppliers. There is currently an SRA/MRS group on research commissioning which is exploring how good practice can best be supported and delivered. If a single framework went ahead, it could have considerable unwelcome consequences for some SRA members, especially the smaller SMEs and sole traders. However, positive discussions have been taking place between the SRA, MRS and RCUK SSC project staff. Senior GSR staff are also discussing the issues within government. The outcome of these is expected shortly. The SRA will continue to work closely with the project team, and keep members informed about progress, via the SRA website.

Government initiatives about social research have been announced recently with the setting up of ‘What Works Centres’ and the statement about possibly establishing a chief social scientist post. The centres are an interesting and potentially important initiative. They will be independent from government and will have six core functions among which will be ‘the systematic assessment of relevant information to produce a sound, accurate, clear and actionable synthesis of the global evidence base which assesses and ranks interventions on the basis of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness …’. The SRA will be providing more information about the centres as they develop, but members should note that some centres have already been established and calls for others are being announced. Look on the ESRC website at www.esrc.ac.uk
However, in the footnote of the press release was the disappointing news that the What Works national adviser, who on appointment will sit in the Cabinet Office, ‘will explore the merits of creating a post of Government Chief Social Scientist’ with colleagues in government and the social science community. This is a distinct rowing back from the earlier understanding we all had from government that the post of CSS was to be created; this is kicking the issue into the long grass. Sir John Beddington’s recent appearance before the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology revealed his unhappiness with this turn of events. He said ‘my own view is that we need someone at the highest level from social research ... that senior challenge function is really missing’. The SRA will continue to work for a more senior voice and support for social research in government to contribute to better policymaking.

The SRA has contributed to the debate, started by AcSS, about open access to journals. This could have implications for learned societies and for those of our members who want to contribute articles to referred journals, if they are required to pay for their publication. We are also concerned this could lead to even more bias in the type of social science published, so narrowing social science research knowledge even more than now.

What are the issues coming up? The Census and possible replacements; the comprehensive spending review’s allocation of money for social science; the knock-on effect on social science of the funding increases for undergraduates – what is happening to student numbers particularly postgraduates doing the essential entry qualifications for a career in social research? If you want to know more and take an active part, do join our policy group. Barbara Doig is the convenor of the Policy Forum and welcomes active involvement to help comment on these initiatives. See page 16 for contact details.

The SRA annual conference in December enabled social researchers to share ideas and concerns.

See conference report online at www.the-sra.org.uk
SRA chair, Patten Smith, on methodology

This issue of SRA Research Matters launches a new column on social research methodology which will give expert practitioners a platform to cover the full gamut of quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Of course with a 700 word limit, this will not be an in-depth treatment of a particular methodology! Rather, our intention is to do two things. The first is to inform you about methods or methodological issues about which you might have only a sketchy knowledge. For example, if you have little idea about how ethnography works, or have always wondered exactly what a design effect is, this will provide you with the opportunity to learn a little more; and perhaps encourage you to investigate further.

Our second aim is more about exhortation than information. A guiding aim of the SRA is to promote high quality social research, by which we mean the kind of research which enables researchers to draw justifiable conclusions from their data. This can only be achieved if researchers pay scrupulous attention to methodology and the logic of their inferences. Unfortunately, however, for various reasons, which often involve some combination of budgetary pressure and lack of understanding, sub-optimal research is often commissioned and conducted. So with our methods column, we hope to alert researchers to situations where, usually through no fault of their own, they are in danger of engaging in sub-optimal practices; and encourage them to take corrective measures.

In this issue, I start by offering a few unoriginal thoughts (methodological originality should always be regarded with deep suspicion; it usually means something is wrong!) about the cost-effectiveness (or otherwise) of web-based general population surveys. We have much ground to cover in the future. For example, why would many UK-based ‘random digit dialling’ telephone surveys not be considered to be such (or indeed to be random probability surveys) in the US? Or why do we continue to use agree-disagree scales with complete equanimity when one of the most eminent question design experts in the world explicitly advises us that we should never, ever, use them?! Or why do we get our confidence intervals wrong so often? I have focused on examples from quantitative research (because this is what I know about), but I am told by qualitative researcher colleagues that their area is also replete with egregious examples; I look forward to hearing about them.

And on firsts, Helen Kara also introduces a new column on research standards and ethics. More details on page 7.

I hope you find the new columns useful and interesting. And please do let us know if you have any special methodological or ethical bugbears you would like us to cover.

SRA Summer Event

The Census: now and in future

WEDNESDAY 26 JUNE: LGA, LONDON

Chair: Mark Easton, BBC Home affairs
Speakers confirmed: Keith Dugmore of Demographics User Group, Ian Cope of ONS, Simon Briscoe, author and journalist.

Come and join social research colleagues for a lively day on a highly topical subject: what the most recent Census data tell us; and what is the future of the Census?

Latest info and booking details at www.the-sra.org.uk

Call for papers

The SRA is hosting the third Social Media in Social Research conference, on June 24 in central London.

Following the success of the first two events, we would like to receive papers and presentations on this subject which will be showcased at this year’s event. These can be from the academic research, practice policy and client communities and cover aspects of social research in social media, including case studies lessons from practice, ethical and methodological issues, and integrating social media as part of a broader research methodology on a project.

Submissions should be made to the SRA office, admin@the-sra.org.uk, by the end of April.

Authors of selected papers will be invited to present at the conference. In the spirit of new media, we are being loose in our interpretation of the term ‘paper’. In written form we expect the length of the paper to be somewhere between 1,500 and 4,000 words. In presentation form, we expect the content to be sufficient for a 20-30 minute presentation, followed by questions.

Booking will soon be available at: www.the-sra.org.uk/events
Third Sector in transition – a new free seminar series

By Razia Sharif, Third Sector Research Centre

There has been much talk about the third sector facing a ‘great unsettlement’, or at least a significant transition. Public spending cuts have hit many organisations, and others have been struggling to find their place in a new political and economic environment, amidst the range of initiatives around Big Society, civic action, localism and open public services.

In this environment, research is vital to help us understand the implications of change. But the third sector has long been an under-researched area, and good, consistent data sources are hard to come by.

Using data from the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations, for example, has enabled us to analyse the reliance of third sector organisations on public funding, as well as the distribution of local voluntary organisations. Our work on volunteering and participation uses the British Household Panel Survey, enabling us to quantify the relative contribution being made by different groups of the population.

This has helped us to identify a ‘civic core’ of people who provide the majority of giving and formal volunteering in the UK. This civic core is more likely to live in more prosperous areas of the country, be well-educated and from higher socio-economic groups. It has also led us to identify that there are fewer voluntary organisations in more deprived areas, and that organisations in the most deprived areas are most reliant on public funding. This has important implications for the capacity of communities and voluntary groups to take on the kind of responsibilities envisioned by the government.

This was the subject of the first joint seminar between the Third Sector Research Centre and SRA, on 20 March. Through a series of three free seminars, we aim to explore how quantitative and qualitative research data can help us understand the implications of economic and political change for the voluntary sector. The second seminar explores our work to capture data on sources of funding for the sector. The third draws on TSRC’s qualitative longitudinal research, which gives us a rich source of data to analyse the experiences of organisations over time.

There has been a great deal of recent debate about whether the third sector is being overwhelmed by the market. New relationships with the private sector are being encouraged and more competitive tendering for services is being promoted. Our research shows that earned income from government contracts and trading is increasing, which has implications for the identity, values and relationships of voluntary organisations. Are organisations being forced to change their behaviour and become more ‘marketised’? And how are organisations developing new markets? These questions are addressed in our second seminar, on 11 April.

Finally, our third seminar on 9 May looks closely at the experiences of organisations on the ground. It draws on TSRC’s qualitative longitudinal study, Real Times, which has been following a diverse group of 15 case studies since Spring 2010. We have been following these organisations through a period of great unsettlement – as they have struggled to deal with the challenges above. These case studies offer important insight into how organisations adapt and survive, and the relationship between organisational dynamics and the external environment. The seminar includes case studies of community action, giving us the opportunity to explore informal third sector groups that operate ‘below the radar’.

All three seminars offer a great space for practitioners, policy makers and researchers to discuss the implications of our research for both organisations and policy making. They also enable other researchers to explore some innovative types of data collection, and discuss how this data can help further research on the voluntary sector.

Future seminars will take place on 11 April and 9 May from 1.30 to 5pm. Find out more and book your place at: www.the-sra.org.uk/events
SRA Scotland

Sophie Ellison reports

After emerging from a long, cold winter of hibernation, the SRA Scotland committee has turned its attention towards event planning for the year. We have a few ideas up our sleeves, but we’re really keen to hear from:

- Anyone interested in supporting the committee to develop networking and sharing opportunities for researchers across Scotland and
- Anyone who would like to share their research or research issues with the wider social research community in Scotland.

Please get in touch with SRA Scotland chair, Sophie Ellison (sophie.ellison@gmail.com) if you’d like to discuss either of these.

We’ve also been busy on the training front. Recognising the increasing digitisation of the social and social research worlds, the SRA launched a new training course for 2013 which explores the use of social media in research. The course ran in Scotland for the first time in early February and was well-attended and well-received.

The following courses are also running in Scotland over the coming months:

- Research and evaluation for busy practitioners with Dr Helen Kara: 19 April
- Modules in qualitative research with Liz Spencer: 8-14 May

For further information or to book, see http://the-sra.org.uk/training/ or contact Lindsay Adams at lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk

If you have any ideas for future courses you’d like to see in Scotland, contact either Sophie or Lindsay.

SRA Cymru

Jennifer Evans reports

There are grand plans for the SRA in Wales for 2013! We are continuing the evening seminar series, with our first session held in February, led by Dr Jeremy Segrott from, DECIPHer, based in Cardiff University. We’re trying out new venues too – we hope this doesn’t confuse anyone!

We have also introduced new informal networking events: breakfast socials. Anyone who wants to meets up in a coffee shop somewhere in Cardiff for a chat about the research they are working on, planning or just interested in. Our first event went down very well, and our second breakfast social will take place on 26 March, overlooking Cardiff Bay. Find out more about these events through the SRACymru LinkedIn group.

There have been some exciting discussions with WISERD, the Wales Institute for Social & Economic Research Data and methods. We will be joining it at its conference in June, hosting an evening seminar and a breakfast social. We’re currently developing a new series of events looking at the various roles and ways that social research influences policy. Keep your eyes peeled for some very exciting events.

In early March SRA training returned to Wales, and we look forward to hosting SRA members who fancy popping over the western border for some high quality training. We look forward to more taking place here over the coming months.

As ever, we are always on the lookout for people who are willing and eager to help us in our endeavour to bring local social researchers together, so do get in touch with us either through our LinkedIn group, email us at sracymru@gmail.com or follow us on twitter @sracymru.

Teresa Williams – director of social research and policy

Teresa Williams joined the foundation in November 2012 and is responsible for our work in social research and policy, including the Children and Families and Law in Society grant-making programmes.

Prior to joining the foundation, Teresa was Head of Access to Justice Analytical Services and Chief Researcher at the Ministry of Justice, where she was responsible for forging strong links with the wider research community, delivering high quality research and improving public access to evidence.

Teresa has been a researcher at senior levels in the Home Office, the Government Social Research Unit, and the then-Department of Social Security. She has worked on areas including local government, welfare to work, child maintenance, drug and alcohol policy, and a wide range of criminal, civil and family justice issues. Teresa began her career as a quantitative researcher at NatCen.

SRA news and updates

Find out the latest news from the SRA along with details of training and events at www.the-sra.org.uk
Surveying the UK general population though the web

Patten Smith introduces the first in a new SRA Research Matters series of methodology articles

At the time of writing I am about to attend the opening conference for the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) Web Survey Network which will explore the methodological challenges of web-based data collection about the general population. The conference is timely given increasing pressures to use web-based data collection in social research.

Why the pressure towards web surveys? The primary answer is that clients are short of money and web surveys cost less than other data collection modes. Cheaper yes, but the critical question should be is whether this translates into their being more cost-effective, and we cannot know this without information about effectiveness. An effective survey is one that minimises the error of its estimates in two main ways: it collects data from a representative sample of the population and collects accurate measurements. For general population web surveys, the first is a good deal more problematic than the second. Why?

Getting a representative sample requires us to apply unbiased (which, if we wish to avoid dispute, means random probability) sampling methods to sample frames with good coverage of the general population. Two problems arise for web-surveys. First, only around 80% of the population is web-connected, and there is a good deal of evidence to show that the web-connected differ significantly from the remainder of the population. Second, we do not have good sample frames for the web-connected population, meaning that even if we wished simply to survey the connected population we would not have any means of directly accessing an unbiased sample of them. Good general population sample frames do exist (for example the postcode address file – PAF) but they do not identify web users and do not contain web contact details.

This leads to a difficult choice if we want to use web methods for a general population sample:

1 We can follow up responders to a previous survey for whom we have email contacts, approaching the non-web-connected through another survey mode (for example telephone). In most cases, this is not an option as we will not have access to a previous survey; but if it is, web-based data collection may be cheap and effective.

2 We can approach a sample taken from a high coverage frame like PAF using non-web contact modes, ask the web-connected to respond by web and ask others to respond by another mode. Unfortunately, it is hard to persuade people to respond by web when they are first approached by post or phone and it is not cost-effective to approach them initially face-to-face. There are tests of this general approach in the UK but it is too early to draw conclusions about levels of bias and cost savings associated with it.

3 We can give up on using random probability methods and source our online sample from commercially-available online volunteer panels or ‘river samples’ (samples based on web-site intercepts). But if we do this, not only do we exclude the non-web-connected population, but, more importantly, we lose the guarantees of sample unbiasedness provided by random probability sampling, guarantees which somehow need to be replaced with other assurance mechanisms. Although a number of these mechanisms have been offered in various guises including Bayesian credibility intervals, propensity score matching/weighting, model-based estimation of outcomes, all of them are only as good as their strong, and often inadequately tested, assumptions. Many survey experts, therefore, feel that convincing evidence of the representivity of non-probability web samples has yet to be collected, as recent statements from the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) demonstrate.

In contrast, the ability of web-based methods to collect reasonably accurate measurements is not disputed. There is much evidence on how to ask and present questions in online surveys in order to avoid more obvious measurement errors, but none of this suggests that web surveys are in any way deficient relative to other modes.

Summing up:

- Although non-random probability web-based general population surveys can be cheap, their effectiveness in providing accurate data is unproven.
- Any UK web-based data collection from the web-connected part of the general population needs to be supplemented by data collection from the non-web-connected population using alternative modes.
- Random probability web-based follow-up surveys of web-connected respondents to previous (random probability) surveys offer promise as cost-effective means for covering the web-connected part of the general population.
- The jury is still out on whether web-based methods can be used as cost-effective components of surveys covering fresh samples of the UK general population.

I suggest that in most circumstances, the cost-effectiveness case has yet to be definitively made for the use of web-based data collection in surveys of the general population.
SRA and ethics: what’s next?

Helen Kara discusses research ethics and the SRA’s continuing work and the developing partnership with other learned societies through the Academy of Social Science.

I would like to introduce myself as a new SRA board member with lead responsibility for standards and ethics. I have been an SRA member for over ten years, and am an independent researcher and writer on research methods based in the Midlands. I’m delighted to be taking the lead on standards and ethics, and will be writing a short piece on ethics in each issue of SRA Research Matters. To begin this series, I want to focus on where the SRA is now with ethics, and where we seem to be heading.

First, some background and context. The SRA is a ‘learned society’. Learned societies have a long and distinguished history, the first being formed in Europe in the 1400s with several still in existence dating back to the 1600s. Formed in 1978, the SRA is a bit younger. The purpose of a learned society is to promote an academic discipline or profession, such as literature, medicine, or – in our case – social research. Most learned societies are members of larger ‘academies’, and the SRA is a member of the UK Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) formed in 1999 to represent social science nationally. There are over 800 individual members of AcSS, known as ‘Academicians’, who must be nominated and accepted by other Academicians. There are also around 50 learned societies in membership which cover a wide range of social science disciplines and professions from anthropology to town planning.

During 2009 there were discussions at events organised by the Academy and the SRA about the possibility of developing some general principles of ethical research practice to which all social scientists might be able to subscribe. At the same time, AcSS became aware that several of its learned society members were thinking about updating their ethics guidelines. It was thought that if some principles could be developed which found general favour, they could form a common base for the ethical guidelines of individual social science learned societies.

Ron Iphofen who convenes the SRA’s research ethics forum (and who led the last update of the SRA Guidelines), along with Janet Lewis, established an Academy working group to explore developing generic ethics principles in social science research. Ron and Janet are both SRA members and Academicians, and were joined by Robert Dingwall and John Oates who have acknowledged expertise in the field of research ethics. Last year, the group obtained funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Psychological Society to run a series of events to support the development of these principles. There will be three symposia in March, April and May 2013 which are invitation-only. The outcomes of each symposium will be published on the AcSS website, with links from the SRA website. In autumn 2013 there will be one or two events which are open to all, to discuss and consolidate the findings from the symposia. Details of these events have not yet been finalised, so keep an eye on the SRA’s e-newsletter; we will circulate information as soon as it becomes available.

I have now joined the ethics forum and will liaise between the forum and the executive committee. If you put a query to the forum, you can be sure of comprehensive and up-to-date advice. I’ll be writing more about the forum in the next issue of SRA Research Matters.

More information from Helen at: Helen@weresearchit.co.uk

The SRA has had a strong voice in promoting ethical research practice in the UK
The ‘Ethics Rupture’ and the New Brunswick Declaration

By Ron Iphofen, AcSS

The first ‘Ethics Rupture Summit’ was an invitational event in October 2012, which brought together researchers from around the world who are committed to enhancing ethical research practice. Researchers from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, the UK and the US met in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the two universities in Fredericton: St. Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick, and The Atlantic Centre for Qualitative Research and Analysis at St. Thomas University. The main aim of the meeting was to explore innovative alternatives to the formal regulation of research ethics that often inhibits novel methodologies and tends to be dominated by concerns for institutional reputations and traditional biomedical research models.

Inspiration for the event came originally from Will van Den Hoonard whose book, The Seduction of Ethics, offered a trenchant critique of the formal research-ethics committee ‘industry’ in Canada which costs over 35m dollars annually. He argues that while ethics codes might have some public appeal, they fuel moral panic and increase demands for institutional accountability. Will was not alone in offering such a critical perspective. Also present was Zachary Schrag whose views about ‘ethical imperialism’ have, as for many of us, derived initially from personal experience of the obstructive and sometimes unreasonable behaviour of ethics review committees (Institutional Review Boards in the USA). And in the UK, many of us will have come across Robert Dingwall’s attack on the undemocratic, even unethical, nature of the institutional reviews systems which are now spread across higher education and permeate all research practices.

More than one commentator pointed out how these reflections are more than mere frustrating hindrances to getting on with the business of research. They have grown into large corporate systems of institutional protection which put their own material and political concerns above those of free enquiry. The culture of ethical review has become constrained by dominant perceptions of what constitutes ‘proper’ research procedures and leads to dictating requirements unsuited to a range of emerging methodologies – particularly in the social sciences and humanities.

Thus, for example, ‘informed consent’ is presented in an almost ritualised formatted process which takes little account of its appropriateness in diverse research settings and for the great variety of research goals. Concerns for data protection, privacy, covert observation, participatory methods and so on are limited by formulaic requirements little suited to the research site or allowing adjustment to the culture of the ‘community’ under study. But this was not just a conference of whingeing, if valid, complaints – it sought a way of moving beyond the rigidities of formalised ethical review and, as a first step, produced ‘The New Brunswick Declaration (see below).

My own contribution was to stress the value of professional association in addressing this range of concerns. I argued that it is mainly by working together with other experienced researchers, sharing our knowledge of what works and what might not and constructing and maintaining our own guidelines for ethical research behaviour that we can best help each other and bring novice researchers up to the high standards we respect. The role of the SRA in helping researchers get the ethics right without fearing formal review has been vital in my view. SRA guidelines, our ethics forum and our training are all part of how we offer such support. The declaration is available on the SRA website (Resources/Research ethics). I am happy to receive any comments you wish to make to contribute to this development and forward them to the ‘Ethics Rupture’ group.

Full details of the summit and podcasts of all the presentations are at: http://wp.stu.ca/ethicsrupture/
The New Brunswick Declaration: 

A Declaration on Research Ethics, Integrity and Governance resulting from the 1st Ethics Rupture Summit, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada

The Ethics Rupture Summit was a gathering in October 2012 of researchers from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, who are committed to enhancing ethical research practice, and supporting innovative alternatives to the regulation of research ethics that might achieve this end.

As signatories of the New Brunswick Declaration, we:

1. affirm that the practice of research should respect persons and collectivities and privilege the possibility of benefit over risk. We champion constructive relationships among research participants, researchers, funders, publishers, research institutions, research ethics regulators and the wider community that aim to develop better understandings of ethical principles and practices;

2. believe researchers must be held to professional standards of competence, integrity and trust, which include expectations that they will act reflexively and responsibly when new ethical challenges arise before, during, and long after the completion of research projects. Standards should be based on professional codes of ethical practice espoused by the full diversity of professional associations to which those who study human experience belong, which include the behavioural, health and social sciences, arts and humanities;

3. encourage a variety of means of regulating ethical conduct involving a broad range of parties in promoting and ensuring ethical conduct, such as participant communities, academic journals, professional associations, state and non-state funding agencies, academic departments and institutions, and oversight ethics committees;

4. encourage regulators and administrators to nurture a regulatory culture that grants researchers the same level of respect that researchers should offer research participants;

5. seek to promote the social reproduction of ethical communities of practice. Effective ethics education works in socially-embedded settings and from the ground-up: it depends on strong mentoring, experiential learning and nurturance when engaging students and novice researchers with ethics in research settings;

6. are committed to ongoing critical analysis of new and revised ethics regulations by: highlighting exemplary and innovative research ethics review processes; identifying tensions and contradictions among various elements of research ethics governance; and seeing that every venue devoted to discussing proposed ethics guidelines includes critical analysis and research about research ethics governance, and

7. shall work together to bring new experience, insights and expertise to bear on these principles, goals, and mechanisms.

21 February 2013
Community-based participatory research

By Lan-Ho Man, Department for Communities and Local Government

In November, the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University, published a guide to community-based participatory research (CBPR) which developed as part of a research project in its ‘connected communities’ programme. The document contains three sections. The first, ‘A guide to ethical principles and practice’ includes two sections: the ethical and practical principles and guidelines associated with carrying out CBPR. The second includes case studies, with a discussion of the ethical issues and subsequent learning, and case examples written by those who have taken part in CBPR with accompanying commentary from interested professionals.

The case studies and examples are valuable and interesting. There are four case studies put together by groups of people involved in the research or by the editors from a mixture of written materials and interviews with the key participants. They focus on ethical issues arising from CBPR, reflections on how things might be done differently in the future and questions for discussion. Three further case examples which provide personal accounts of the ethical issues and how these have been dealt with. These have been written from the perspective of a community researcher, a youth worker and a community outreach worker. Each is followed by a commentary by professionals on the ethical and practice issues raised in the example.

CBPR takes a different approach to traditional research, because it includes those being researched in the process: ‘the boundaries between researchers and research subjects begin to blur’ towards beneficial outcomes for all participants, especially ‘communities’. By communities we mean groups of people who share something in common – e.g. people living in a particular locality [such as a housing estate, village, etc.] or groups based on a common identity, interest or practice [including lesbian women’s group, black young people’s network, etc.].’

The document discusses the difficulties of carrying out research in this way and ensuring that the ethical principles, which emphasise democratic participation in the research process, are adhered to. The authors stress the importance of making the principles explicit to ensure all participants are aware of them, able to discuss what they mean in their own contexts and all work together to interpret develop and implement them.

The practice principles and guidelines are designed to aid those involved in undertaking this process. As such they include discussion/definition of the ethical issues to consider under headings including mutual respect, equality and inclusion, democratic participation and active learning, as well as a practical guide on how to prepare and plan, carry out the research, share the findings and implement them.

The case studies and examples include the editors’ reflections of compiling the materials and working with the contributors, and the challenges of defining ethical issues and the different ways in which participants and observers frame these. The editors and key participants worked through these to compile the materials for the guide along with suggestions about how the materials could be used for training and/or for developing ethical sensitivity.

The case studies and examples can both be downloaded from: www.publicengagement.ac.uk/how-we-help/our-publications
Having carried out several longer-term research projects with survivors of childhood sexual abuse, I recently discovered how brief projects can have surprisingly positive, imaginative and far-reaching results.

When Open Secret, the Scottish sexual abuse support agency, gained funding for a pioneering Physical Health Groupwork project, they were responding to physical ill-health faced by more than 80% of their clients. Yet the mental health effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) are far better publicised, researched or even acknowledged. This is despite survivors having above-average rates of both ‘medically explained’ conditions (like diabetes, auto-immune diseases or some cancers) and ‘medically-unexplained’ ones (like irritable bowel syndrome or chronic fatigue).

The weekly groups gave mutual support and received ‘taster’ sessions of complementary therapies, and well-researched information about links between traumatic stress and ill-health. Gradually and reluctantly, people revealed a battery of often debilitating conditions, from chronic pain and gynaecological problems to auto-immune diseases and severe arthritis. Sadly, there were more negative than positive experiences of healthcare: with people often seen as mentally ill, as hypochondriacs or timewasters, their overwhelming complaint was the assumption that their problems must be psychogenic even if they came in with an eye infection or twisted ankle. For instance: ‘I don’t want to hear about your musculo-skeletal problems, I want to know why you’re really here!’

The material from this small piece of collaborative research was rich, and made it possible to construct chapters on understanding the fears both survivor clients and healthcare staff bring: about how to create safe, reassuring health settings; about responding to, or inviting, disclosures about an abuse history and why this is a ‘taboo subject’; and about the meaning of open-minded care in practice.

Among disbelieving, nervous or dismissive responses to disclosure, examples of simple empathy and good practice were much valued by the survivors: ‘And my GP said at once, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry that happened to you. He said it as a human being.”’

A surprising finding was that when doctors or nurses chose to give more time to the survivors – for instance by booking in extra regular appointments – their anxieties dropped, their need to use the services decreased, and relationships improved. That is counter-intuitive to many health professionals who often see people with anxiety, and/or with chronic conditions which prove hard to diagnose, as manipulative or attention-seeking. Yet fear or cumulative frustration is more likely to be the patients’ problem.

Most clients were also on numerous medications – sometimes as many as 13 a day – yet these had brought little positive result, and many unwelcome side-effects. Open Secret and KASP are seeking much more dialogue with health professionals about polypharmacy and its possible alternatives. Already, the Royal College of General Practitioners in Scotland gave its support to the booklet project, and a launch seminar has taken place with interested health professionals.

If the DVD and new materials can gain funding, the support organisations hope future collaboration will do even more to heal the rift that too often exists: where these patients see healthcare as scary or unsympathetic, and doctors see these patients as ‘difficult or demanding’.

Surviving Well: good practice for health professionals working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. By survivors from Open Secret and KASP. Edited by Sarah Nelson. Electronic and limited number of hard copies available. Contact Open Secret 01324 630100 or info@opensecret.org or see www.opensecret.org

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Recession hits workplaces, but not employee attitudes

By Professor Stephen Wood, AcSS, University of Leicester

First findings from the Workplace Employee Relations Survey of 2011 (WERS) show that employees’ satisfaction and well-being at work have increased despite the recession. Employees’ satisfaction with most aspects of their jobs increased between 2004, when the last survey was conducted, and 2011. The exception was satisfaction with job security, which declined. Yet, in 90% of workplaces, managers reported that the recession had adversely affected the workplace, and in most cases they had responded with changes in employment practices. The increase in satisfaction and well-being levels was accompanied by changes in management practices, increases in job control for employees, and greater organizational commitment.

The vast majority of workplaces were affected to some extent by the recession, by which we mean the lengthy period of economic malaise that we have seen since the onset of the financial crisis in late 2008 and the associated rising public debt. Nonetheless there was variation in the experiences between industries and among workplaces within industries; the most extensive effects were in construction, transport and communication, financial services and the public sector. Even in industries where the impact was less widespread, such as the utilities, there were still many workplaces that were strongly affected by the recession.

Three-quarters (76%) of workplaces changed some aspect of their staffing practices in response to the recession. These changes included wage freezes or cuts, a hold on filling vacant posts or re-organising work. Such actions were common in both the private and public sectors; the only actions that were more common among private sector workplaces were compulsory redundancies and reductions in basic hours.

Despite the recession, employers’ and employees’ perceptions of the climate of employment relations at the workplace had not deteriorated since 2004 and employees’ commitment to their organisation actually increased. Satisfaction with a range of aspects of employees’ jobs increased slightly with one exception as there was a fall in the level of those who were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their job security, from 64% to 59%. The pattern for well-being mirrors that for job satisfaction. The proportion of those who either ‘never’ or ‘occasionally’ have felt tense, worried or uneasy in the weeks before they were surveyed had increased between 2004 and 2011.

Initial investigation of the management practices, which may lie behind the increases in employee commitment and satisfaction, suggests at least three factors may be important. First, managers are communicating more with employees, second, the proportion of high training workplaces has increased, and third, the proportion of workers with high levels of autonomy of workers has increased. While the proportion of employees with very high job demands has increased, any adverse effects of this on satisfaction and well-being were, at least partly, offset by the increase in autonomy.

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Whilst commitment and satisfaction may have increased overall between 2004 and 2011, there is nonetheless some evidence that these were affected by the recession. For example, satisfaction with pay, with job security and well-being levels were lower in workplaces most strongly affected by the recession. Employees in workplaces that cut back on training in the recession were less satisfied with training than other workplaces (51% compared with 56%). The proportion of those who never had enough time to get their work done is
also higher in those workplaces most strongly affected by the recession. Overall, people appear to be working harder but perhaps more efficiently but are more likely to feel pressured in recession-hit workplaces.

The 2011 Workplace Employee Relations Study (WERS) is the sixth in the WERS series. Interviews for the 2011 WERS were undertaken with around 2,700 workplace managers and 1,000 employee representatives, whilst over 20,000 employees completed questionnaires. The sample is of workplaces with five or more employees. Previous surveys were conducted in 1980, 1984, 1990, 1998 and 2004.

The 2011 WERS was jointly sponsored by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, the ESRC, ACAS, and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (whose contribution was made possible by a grant from the Nuffield Foundation).

The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study: First Findings by Brigid Van Wanrooy, Helen Bewley, Alex Bryson, John Forth, Stephanie Freeth, Lucy Stokes and Stephen Wood is published by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. A copy of the publication can be downloaded from the BIS website at:

The data from the 2011 WERS is available through the UK Data Service: www.ukdataservice.ac.uk
Aiding the message

Visual memories are easier to retrieve than words. Audiences tend to remember how speakers look better than their messages, and memory experts recommend linking information to visual scenes, as a hook. If the information is already visual, it has a built-in hook.

Visuals make abstract relationships tangible. If you’re talking about numbers which are interrelated parts of a whole, and you show them as interlinked parts of a whole, readers just see it, and spend time browsing the information rather than decoding the explanation.

This reduces common misunderstandings and ambiguity. Visual and verbal explanations are different routes to the same destination, allowing a ‘belt and braces’ approach. Accompany key messages with an appropriate icon or diagram, and if your reader gets it wrong, they’ll see that their interpretation of one mismatches the other. If they get it right, they know to continue with confidence.

The toolkit

The first question is always: what is your audience and aim? Good infographics can turn uninterested passers-by into curious readers, curious readers into interested inquirers formulating their own questions, and interested inquirers into keen confident information explorers. Structure your information and design accordingly.

Infographics are essentially images exploring a topic using tools from the information design toolkit, which is primarily, data visualisation, pictograms and diagrams:

- **Data visualisation.** Showing quantitative information. Be careful that non-data noise such as labels, grids, notes and decoration don’t obscure or distort the data. Used for:
  - context, e.g. ‘Sparklines’ – small charts inline with text
  - visualising data relationships, e.g. parallel co-ordinates, tree-maps and sunburst charts
  - comparisons, e.g. ‘small multiples’ (arrays of charts with the same scale and structure) allow many comparisons while remaining clear

- **Pictograms.** Simple, clear icons representing ideas and things
  - See *thenounproject.com* for a huge, growing library of great icons which can be used for free or a few pounds. See also *gerdarntz.org* for the 1930s work it’s inspired by

- **Diagrams.** The seemingly infinite ways to organise information visually boil down to five types (sometimes called ‘LATCH’ or ‘the five hat racks’)
  - Location: geographic or spatial position. Use when people need to navigate, or browse by distance or proximity
  - Arbitrary conventions like alphabetical order, for lookups like reference materials and indexes
  - Time: for historical context, changes, trends and sequences
  - Category: for clear clusters where it makes sense to explore or compare within and between categories
  - Hierarchy: for important quantitative scales that can be used for ranking
Ethnomethodology at work (directions in ethnomethodology and conversational analysis)

Rouncefield, M. and Tolmie, P. Ashgate, 2011
Reviewed by Alison Pollard, senior research officer, Department of Energy and Climate Change

This book provides an accessible and engaging introduction to ethnomethodology. It has been written to address the absence of introductory text books which explain the purpose, focus and merit of ethnomethodological studies. The book clearly explains how and why ethnomethodology is different to sociology. It enables the reader to understand the unique insight gained from using an ethnomethodological approach to study organisations and paid employment. The individual chapter authors show how, in a range of work environments, people actively interpret and make sense of their day-to-day work. Accessible analysis and examples of ethnomethodological research undertaken in different workplaces show that the discipline is grounded in the empirical rather than the theoretical sphere. This enables the reader to appreciate how ethnomethodology illuminates mundane, every day and routine activities which are often over-looked by sociologists and traditional approaches to social research.

A major strength of the book is its clear and logical narrative, which is accompanied by engaging examples from different workplace; from telephone banking call centres to hospital cancer departments. Each chapter has a different area of focus, such as organisational acumen, calculation and text at work, and demonstrates how ethnomethodological studies have provided insightful analysis about various corporate and public sector workplaces. The book shows how human interaction in the workplace and human relationships with machines, technology and paper-based files in even the most automated workplaces, provide an understanding of how work is negotiated, understood and accomplished. Each chapter also provides the reader with a useful critique of sociological approaches to the study of organisations and workplaces; enabling the reader to critically examine and evaluate the relative merit and limitations of sociological and ethnomethodological approaches to studying organisations and workplaces.

This book is suitable for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying sociology, business studies and management sciences. It is also appropriate for generalist readers who are interested in learning about ethnomethodology.

Data collection: key debates and methods in social research

Wendy Olsen, Sage, 2012
Reviewed by Sara Dunn, independent research and communications consultant

As an independent researcher, I am probably not alone in suffering periodic bouts of anxiety about being challenged on my research methods and their underlying conceptual assumptions. So I very much welcome insights from an experienced practitioner like Wendy Olsen about these concepts and debates, and their impact on data collection. Particularly welcome is her resolute refusal to get caught up in the schism between ‘quant and qual’, and the equally sterile stand-off between social models and scientific-medical models. The focus on the important but ‘mundane’ aspects of data collection – things like data transcription, handling digital files and so on – is great – getting stuck into the hands-on stuff is very refreshing. Having said that, I did feel the occasional disconnect in the book, as if it was trying to address two divergent audiences. There were some vertiginous swoops where we went straight from the highly practical – cutting and pasting data – to the highly theoretical – a delineation of hermeneutics – which left me feeling a bit disoriented.

Everyone has their own areas of interest and practice, and it’s impossible to get a balance that suits all, but for me, some of the methods sections such as that on questionnaires could have been expanded, while some sections – such as a discourse on observer bias using a newspaper article example – felt over long. The chapter on participatory techniques was very engaging however, and practical advice on issues such as ethical clearance, ethics and volunteers and market research show what a broad canvas the author addresses. A more systematic structure within chapters, with the key messages more clearly identified in some way, would make it an easier book to dip in and out of, but nonetheless there is a wealth of practical wisdom and guidance that will act as both reassurance and reference at crucial points in the research journey.

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