

An exciting time for social science

Professor **Jennifer Rubin**, executive chair of the Economic and Social Research Council, introduces herself and the opportunities ahead for social science



I have spent the last nearly three decades building research projects, programmes and institutions inside and outside academia. It all began with the excitement of learning about comparative social science in my first degree at Loughborough, which opened questions for me about the relationship between human behaviour, policy and politics in shaping outcomes for people, communities and political systems. I pursued this interest in a PhD at King's College, Cambridge, studying how large organisations had sought to address changes to equality policy. Years as a university lecturer, a researcher and helping to build the independent not-for-profit research organisation RAND's European offices, and then leading the Policy Institute at King's College London, only deepened my interest in ensuring that those trying to improve outcomes have rigorous research to draw on in doing so.

I have certainly enjoyed my first six months working with colleagues to ensure that our core social science funding continues to support and develop the UK's world-leading social science capability. It is also an extraordinary time to help ensure that social science contributes to the wide range of areas on which the large new cross-cutting funds of UKRI are focusing. While the nine bodies which make up UKRI (the Research Councils, Innovate UK and Research England) have always worked together at various times, this has been more

episodic than systematic. There is a tremendous opportunity now to ensure that we draw the knowledge bases, methods and approaches across areas to bear on complex problems in ways that are certainly needed, as those complex problems do not respect disciplinary, sectoral or national boundaries. This sort of ground-breaking, interdisciplinary research can improve our understanding of how to make progress on important national priorities such as increasing productivity.

ESRC, working with our UKRI colleagues, has a significant role to play because social science is crucial to understanding and addressing many of our most pressing societal challenges. So many of the great challenges we currently face such as climate change and pollution, rising levels of obesity and type 2 diabetes, and antimicrobial resistance tend to be framed primarily as issues for natural science, technological advances or medicine. However, these are at heart profoundly human, social, psychological and behavioural challenges. Social science has a pivotal role in helping us understand the associated experiences and behaviours, informing policies and practices, and ensuring that we learn what works, where and for whom in trying to improve outcomes. For example, in seeking to spend public funds wisely, while we spend billions developing new antibiotics, we should also be considering the behaviours and policies that need to change to avoid ending up with further resistant strains and ineffective new drugs all over again soon afterwards.



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Add to these the many contemporary challenges that are more self-evidently issues for social science, including the way digitisation and automation are changing work and employment, low levels of social mobility, and regional growth, and it is perhaps unsurprising that so many of the government's recently published areas of research interest seem to invite our contribution.

Of course, there are other important changes with implications for the ESRC and social science. The growing availability and use of data provide enormous opportunities. This can allow us to further develop our already world-leading data infrastructure, and in doing so, to open up the potential of, for example, linked administrative data to provide insights into what have often otherwise seemed intractable social questions. Building this capability, supporting our longitudinal studies and training researchers who will have the ability to use this increasingly available data well are all important areas of focus for the ESRC in the coming years.

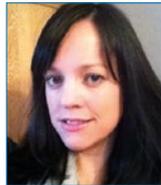
SRA Scotland

Karen Kerr and Lucy Setterfield are looking after the SRA Scotland branch on behalf of Sophie Ellison, who is currently on maternity leave. A joint event with Evaluation Network Scotland is planned for November. This will explore the similarities and differences between social research and evaluation, and will be advertised shortly at the-sra.org.uk/events/. Places will be limited, so if interested please book early. If you would like to get in touch with the branch, please contact the SRA office.

SRA Cymru

By Faye Gracey

Really looking forward to the Welsh network getting together to celebrate the SRA's 40th anniversary. Do visit the-sra.org.uk/events/ for details of our Cardiff event, and follow us [@SRACymru](https://twitter.com/SRACymru). If you want to get more involved with our organising committee don't hesitate to get in touch: faye.gracey@gov.wales T:03000 257459.



SRA Ireland

See the SRA website for further details of events. Email us on SRAIreland@the-sra.org.uk or follow us on Twitter [@SRAIreland](https://twitter.com/SRAIreland).

SRA North

By Leanne Dew

SRA North met for summer drinks in Leeds in July and has been planning a busy autumn of events. An early careers evening took place at Manchester University on 18 September, including a presentation on plans for a pilot work-shadowing scheme. We hope to have one more evening seminar by the end of the year, and you will also see our members volunteering at the SRA's 40th anniversary event in Manchester in October, and on a stand at the annual conference. Please do get in touch if you have any questions or ideas for the committee, about our events, or the shadowing scheme. Find us on Twitter ([@SRANorth](https://twitter.com/SRANorth)) or email us (sranorth@gmail.com) with any ideas, thoughts or feedback.



Social Research Practice

The sixth issue of Social Research Practice, the SRA's methods journal, was published in July. Articles include developing an open probability-based mixed-mode panel; using comparative judgement to explore drivers behind confidence in qualifications and the qualification system; and research notes on the challenges of conducting research inside Syria; and a worked example of navigating the NHS and HRA ethics and governance process. Issue 7 is due in January 2019.

The overall aim of the journal is to encourage and promote high standards of social research for public benefit. It promotes openness and discussion of problems. It is free to download at: www.the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice.

We welcome offers of articles and research notes for future issues. Read the guidelines for authors and download the article template at the link above. If you have an idea for an article or research note but are not sure if it's suitable, please email Richard Bartholomew, the editor: rabartholomew@btinternet.com



SRA chair, David Johnson, wants to hear about your rules of thumb



Well, be careful what you wish for!! After wishing you all the chance to catch some sun in my last editorial, the sun just kept shining and shining. Are the two correlated I wonder? Anyway, enough of that and welcome to this quarter's issue of SRA Research Matters.

In this edition we have articles covering a diverse range of topics including EuroCohort; the SRA's Ethics Forum; an interview with Bobby Duffy – formerly of Ipsos MORI and now a professor at King's College London; the use of comics in research; and an article from the secret Guardian-reading agency survey researcher; as well as our usual reports and book reviews.

We also say thank you to trustees, Sophie Ellison and Helen Kara, who will step down as trustees at the AGM in December. Sophie has looked after the SRA Scotland branch for six years; Helen has been a regular contributor to Research Matters (with two articles in this edition alone), and a champion of research ethics. Both are a vital part of making the SRA a successful organisation, and their energy and enthusiasm at our trustee meetings will be missed.

Over the summer, booking opened for our annual conference on 13 December which, as I mentioned in my last editorial, is on the theme of 'Adapting to change – where next for social research?'. This year we have some big-name plenary speakers, together with workshop presentations and some single-topic workshops on infographics, semiotics and big data, as well as chances to network and catch up with people you've not seen for a while. This year we are at a new and bigger venue so there should be plenty of spaces. We are also running a series of 40th anniversary lectures (see opposite and look out for emails from the SRA office).

On the subject of events, earlier in the summer I was invited to participate in the 'Systems perspectives on policy development and evaluation' event put on by the Policy Innovation Research Unit at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and supported by the SRA. I was there for the whole day, and was struck by the vibrancy and passion displayed by people in this area of methodological development. During the day, I reflected on how applied researchers might approach the use of these developments, particularly in a space where systems methods, theory-based evaluation and various counterfactual approaches often have different views on the way policy evaluation should be conceptualised and conducted. For me, knowing and understanding with sufficient depth the strengths and weaknesses of different methods is important, and events such as this add value. Also, and as I said in the panel discussion, my instinct has always been to fit the method to the research question(s) rather than the other way around and, though it sounds obvious, that principle has served me well in several research projects I've managed.

More generally, I'd be interested to hear from members about whether you have rules of thumb you turn to in your research work – I don't mean weighty and worthy methodological approaches you draw on, but the pithy aides-memoire that researchers use in their day-to-day work. If, that is, it's not just me! Send them to me c/o admin@the-sra.org.uk and if I get some good ones I might share them in a future issue. On the subject of future issues, December's Research Matters will be our 40th anniversary edition with a series of articles reflecting on how social research, and the lives of social researchers, have changed over recent decades. Until then, happy researching.

2018
40
YEARS
ANNIVERSARY

SRA 40th lecture series

We're celebrating the SRA's 40th year with a series of lectures across the UK, at which expert speakers will reflect on topics of key importance for researchers. The lectures are in the early evening and are free to attend.

CARDIFF, 10 OCTOBER (Cardiff University)

Professor Sophie Howe, future generations commissioner for Wales, on 'Wellbeing research – looking forward'

Chair: Dr Jamie Smith, director of research and innovation at Hafod

BELFAST, 10 OCTOBER (Queen's University)

Kathryn Torney, editor of 'The Detail', on how to get your research message across

Chair: Gavin Davidson, professor of social care, Queen's University

MANCHESTER, 24 OCTOBER (Hilton Hotel Deansgate)

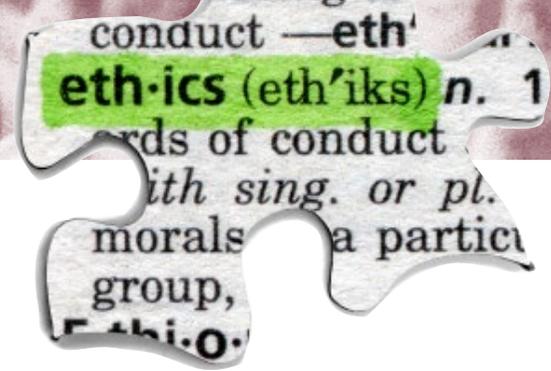
Stephen Morris, professor of evaluation at Manchester Metropolitan University's Policy Evaluation Unit, on 'RCTs past, present and future'

Chair: Mike Daly, DWP Central Analysis Division

EDINBURGH (details tbc)

Audrey McDougall, chief social researcher, Scottish Government

The lectures are free to attend but you need to book to reserve your place at: <http://the-sra.org.uk/events/>



Ethics in practice in innovative methods

By *Helen Kara*, SRA trustee



Around 50 people gathered at the SRA's recent annual summer event to hear about some of the ethical issues raised in using innovative research methods, and how these can be addressed.

The first presentation was from Maggie O'Neill, professor in sociology (criminology), University of York. She talked about the challenges, benefits, and practical and ethical issues of **walking as a research method**. She also covered other mobile, participatory and arts-based methods of research. Maggie has been using these methods for many years to investigate migration, borders, risk and belonging. For Maggie, ethics is a process, not an event. She highlighted the work of Stella Barnes at the Oval House, London, who has developed ethical principles for participatory theatre work which can also be used in research:

- ▶ Choice – participants' agenda is not pre-empted
- ▶ Respect – developed through creative process
- ▶ Equality – with groups through the creative process
- ▶ Safety – focus on present/future, no requirement to disclose
- ▶ Tutor competence – support and training, shared perspectives

She also highlighted the work of Sarah Banks and her colleagues on **community-based participatory ethics**.

We then heard from Callum Staff. When we booked him, Callum was a member of the UK Government Social Media Research Group (he has since moved to work as lead data scientist for Marks & Spencer). He pointed out that research

ethics have much in common with quality assurance, as they are both designed to make sure a process is fit for purpose. He told us about the UK Government's new **data ethics framework**, published in June. This is based on seven principles:

1. Start with clear user need and public benefit
2. Be aware of relevant legislation and codes of practice
3. Use data that is proportionate to the user need
4. Understand the limitations of the data
5. Ensure robust practices and work within your skillset
6. Make your work transparent and be accountable
7. Embed data-use responsibly

He also emphasised the importance of good planning in helping to ensure that research is ethical.

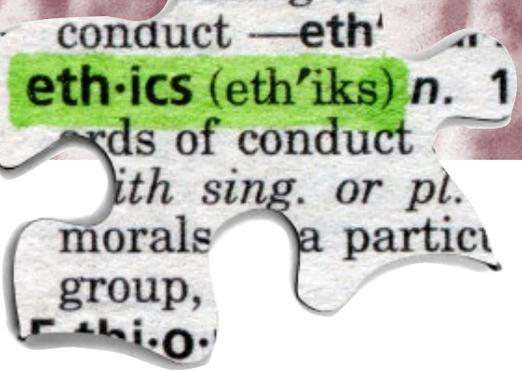
Dawn Mannay, an indigenous Welsh researcher who is also a senior lecturer in psychology at Cardiff University, spoke about ethics in practice in arts-based research. She talked of her work with children who have experienced local authority care, and explained how creative methods such as peer-led focus groups, music production, and sandboxing can help to empower young people to lead and direct conversations rather than simply respond. Quoting from her book on **visual, narrative and creative research methods**, she said it is 'useful to consider the ways in which creative narrative forms can replace visual images and detailed, identifying, biographical accounts, yet still retain impact, and ethically, yet powerfully, communicate the stories that participants have shared in the research process'.

Louise Sheridan is a former youth worker, aspiring community activist, lecturer in 'social justice place and lifelong education' at the University of Glasgow, and born and bred in the city. She talked about the ethics of place-based research, stressing that it is the people who make a place, and that local communities have the right to dignity and respect. Louise illustrated this point with 'alternative stories' of Castlemilk and Barrowfield: two areas of Glasgow which are stigmatised as having many social problems when, in fact, their residents have much to offer. On this basis, she concluded, research should be done *with* communities and not *to* communities: communities should tell their own stories and create their own histories.

These were stimulating talks which led to an interesting panel discussion and Q&A session. As often happens with research ethics, we raised more questions than we found answers to, but we also heard about, and devised, some creative solutions. If you'd like to know more, the speakers' **presentations are on the SRA website**.

THANK YOU HELEN

Helen is standing down from her research ethics role on the SRA board at the end of the year and this is her last regular column in Research Matters. The SRA and Research Matters would like to thank Helen for all her hard work and enthusiasm over the past six years and, not least, her always stimulating contributions to Research Matters. We look forward to welcoming her replacement, Jane Evans, in 2019. Read more about Jane (and other new SRA board members) in the June 2018 issue.



The SRA Ethics Forum: a membership benefit

By *Ron Iphofen*, independent consultant



If you face an ethical dilemma in your research, think about making the best of your SRA membership by asking the ethics forum for a view.

WHAT IS THE SRA ETHICS FORUM?

It's a group of SRA members from a variety of research sectors, who have experience of dealing with ethical issues. (You can see the members on the [SRA website](#).) The forum is not a research ethics scrutiny system. It's there to help researchers who may lack the immediate support and expertise of colleagues or line managers to think through ethical dilemmas. The forum acts in an advisory, encouraging and facilitative manner – it is one way to build on the nature of the SRA as a supportive professional association.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

It operates in a 'virtual' capacity – receiving requests for information and advice by email (with a guarantee of anonymity if requested). The enquiry is then circulated to forum members for each to offer comment, which is then combined into a response for the enquirer. We try to turn around the response within a week or so. In general, there has been a broad consensus in the opinions offered, but as with all ethical queries, there have also been differences of opinion, so the enquirer may see a range of views and suggestions.

WHAT KINDS OF ENQUIRIES DO MEMBERS SEND IN?

We have received requests for advice about aspects of research with children; claims to ownership of original data; and researchers' responsibility to their line managers or to their consciences. SRA members have raised issues of intellectual property rights and the consequences of disseminating potentially unpalatable research findings. Many have asked about negotiating the increasingly labyrinthine nature of ethical review procedures. The queries have come from all sectors – academic, government, independent research organisations and independent researchers.

SOME EXAMPLES ONLINE

Some past queries and the forum's responses, in the form of anonymised 'case studies', are on the [SRA website](#). We never claim our responses to be definitive. Rather, they offer our views of the best choices to make, given the problem. As would be expected, the more difficult and 'testing' problems have been too sensitive and close to disclosure to include on the website. Don't hesitate to contact us even if your problem seems sensitive or complicated – we are happy to try to help.

TO SUM UP

Feedback shows that SRA members have been pleased with the service provided and the advice given so far. This may be because the forum does not sit in judgement – it is essentially a group peer mentoring opportunity. Ultimately, the steps taken to resolve any ethical problem are for the enquirer to decide – although it may help to be able to justify those steps in light of experienced views provided through a professional association. So, do take advantage of what has proven to be an extremely valuable additional benefit to SRA membership.

To raise an ethical issue with the forum, email ron.iphofen@gmail.com

Don't hesitate to contact us even if your problem seems sensitive or complicated – we are happy to try to help



EuroCohort: Europe's first birth cohort survey

By **Gary Pollock**, professor of sociology, Manchester Metropolitan University



Across Europe, significant child wellbeing inequalities exist, as well as a desire to support children better. Ideally, policies are evidence-based, hence there is a need for high-quality data upon which to base an intervention. Longitudinal survey data, collected from birth, allows us to see how individuals change over time and the extent to which experiences early in life are associated with outcomes later in life. It is important to collect such data in order to explore the long-term effects of bullying at school, the enduring effects of living in poverty during childhood, and much more. While such surveys do exist in several countries, coverage is uneven, and there are distinct advantages in undertaking a comparative longitudinal survey through being able to observe longitudinal processes and social policy interventions in different nations, with different political and cultural traditions. This is where EuroCohort has the potential to have a fundamental impact on child wellbeing policies across the whole of Europe.

The European Cohort Development Project (ECDP) is a Horizon 2020-funded (grant agreement 777449) design study which establishes the specification and business case for a European research infrastructure that will provide comparative longitudinal survey data on child and young adult wellbeing. The infrastructure developed by ECDP will subsequently coordinate the first Europe-wide birth cohort survey, named EuroCohort. The ECDP project brings much-needed attention to the reality that policymakers do not have access to the type of data that is needed to address complex social problems which often have a negative impact on child and adolescent wellbeing. The feasibility of developing a Europe-wide

cohort survey was shown in the FP7 project 'Measuring Youth Wellbeing' (MYWeB). This provided the proof of concept for developing a Europe-wide longitudinal survey of child and youth wellbeing in regard to:

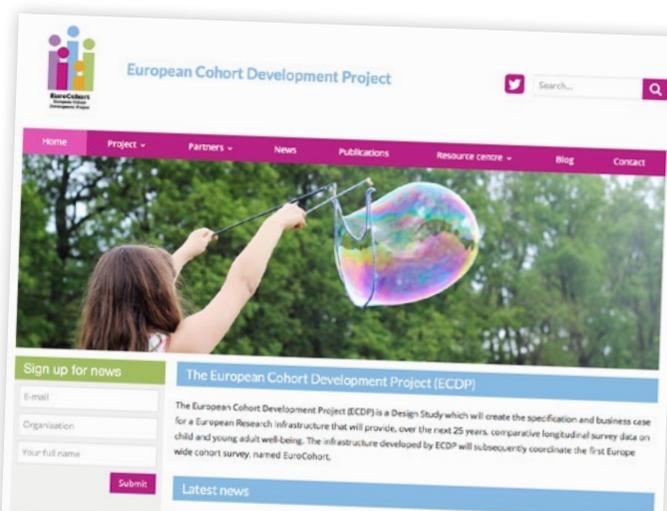
- ▶ Desirability among stakeholder groups
- ▶ Technical do-ability for questionnaire-based surveys of children
- ▶ Policy relevance to the evidence needs for policy development in the area of children, families and education
- ▶ Policy benefits weighed against the infrastructural costs

The MYWeB project established, through a Europe-wide Delphi survey of policymakers, practitioners and academics, that a nationally representative accelerated cohort design was the most desirable. The next stage in the process is to work towards establishing a cross-national research infrastructure to realise this design. In order to inform decision-making for a new research infrastructure at a European level, the ECDP will

outline realistic costs of a pan-European accelerated cohort survey over 25 years; detail the policy gains; and finalise the survey design requirements. It alerts policymakers and funding bodies to the strategic and funding needs of the scientific community. We anticipate that, once the research design is finalised, and with the support of the EU to facilitate the preparatory phase, it should be possible to field the first data collection for EuroCohort by 2025.

Through a better understanding of patterns and causation in children and youth wellbeing, longitudinal studies are a powerful tool for policymakers. EuroCohort can contribute towards the achievement of sustainable development goals as it would offer a greater insight into topics such as poverty, health and wellbeing, and education. In addition, knowledge exchange within and beyond the consortium will contribute to European capacity-building and strengthen cross-border links. Beyond providing high-quality wellbeing data, this infrastructure will bring together a network of people, expertise, information, knowledge, content, methods, tools and technologies from countries across Europe.

The 16 partner ECDP team responsible for developing EuroCohort is led by Manchester Metropolitan University, and benefits from expertise in longitudinal methodology from ISER at the University of Essex, as well as CLOSER at University College London. Expertise in undertaking international comparative surveys is present through the inclusion of a team from the European Social Survey based at City, University of London. It is supported by an international advisory group which includes representatives from UNICEF, EuroChild, Jacobs Foundation, Ipsos MORI and Kantar Public.



Putting the respondent at the heart of survey transformation

By *Laura Wilson*, principal research officer, Office for National Statistics (ONS)



In 2015 the UK Statistics Authority introduced a five-year strategy for the official statistics system called **Better Statistics, Better Decisions**. It was about providing high-quality statistics, analysis and advice leading to improved decision-making. It is now 2018,

and in the words of national statistician, John Pullinger, 'We are on track to realise our ambition to mobilise the power of data to help Britain make better decisions.'

So, how are we getting there? Some of you reading this may already be familiar with the transformation work that's underway at ONS. I am guessing that the area of change that you will be most interested in is that of the Census and

Data Collection Transformation Programme. This programme unites census, social and business survey data-collection change under one roof with the primary aim of operating 'administrative data by default'. The long-term goal is to reduce our reliance upon surveys to collect the data we need, and to move towards integrating and utilising government administrative data sources. The key word to take note of though is 'reduce' – surveys aren't disappearing. ONS will continue to run surveys to be able to fully meet user need but it means that there will be a different route to get there.

The programme also aligns with the UK Government digital strategy which is to be 'Digital by Default'. This means that our surveys will be online first, using traditional modes for follow-

up. The surveys are also being rationalised to ensure that data collection is more efficient and respondent burden is reduced.

To achieve this change, ONS is heavily investing in its corporate services and infrastructure. This includes integrating our systems, and sharing them across business areas – employing the principle of 'build the thing once'.

What does this mean for **social surveys**? Using administrative data and rationalising survey content helps to facilitate a 'digital by default' approach to survey design.

Going online doesn't come without its challenges but, to do it successfully, we must challenge ourselves and how we work. For us, this challenge comes in the form of user-centred design – putting the respondent back at the heart of designing

the full end-to-end survey experience. This isn't something solely recommended by ONS – the UK Government Digital Service also prescribes user-centrism in service design and has created great **principles** for us all to follow. We've blended user-centrism and service-design principles to transform ONS' social surveys.

We must not underestimate the importance of the 'experience' aspect of the respondent-survey interaction. Moving to self-completion means that we can no longer rely on highly trained interviewers to achieve response and to provide a good experience. To address this, we've fundamentally changed how we design our surveys while still meeting the output need and here's how:

- ▶ Designing mobile first, ensuring our surveys work on smartphones in the first instance
- ▶ Optimising questionnaire content for the different modes
- ▶ Using respondent mental models, learning about how they conceptualise a topic, to construct the question and flow of the questionnaire
- ▶ Learning from interviewers and seeking their assurance on our prototypes
- ▶ Using a conversational tone and using words that respondents would understand. We are also writing for the average reading age of the UK public
- ▶ Using behavioural insights to inform the design of respondent materials. We only include content that is evidenced by a respondent need and our testing has revealed that less is more. For example, shorter materials are better received

The resulting questionnaires still meet the fundamental output need of a traditional survey just in a different way.

Since October 2016 we've carried out qualitative testing with over 600 members of the public as part of developing our approach to social surveys. In July 2017, we ran an **online only quantitative test** to learn about response using this approach (without incentives) and were pleased to achieve a response rate of 23%.

Therefore, we're continuing with this respondent-centric approach and are applying it to all modes. Our next big quantitative test will examine the data quality of the mixed-mode transformed questionnaire. Findings will be available in early 2019.

In short, there is a lot going on – big change is afoot – and, for me as a researcher, it is all very exciting! This is a huge opportunity for the statistical system, and ONS is grabbing it with both hands.

We've blended user-centrism and service design principles to transform ONS' social surveys

Exploring the future of longitudinal surveys

By **Peter Lynn**, professor of survey methodology, University of Essex, and **Becky Parsons**, communications manager, Understanding Society, University of Essex



How are longitudinal surveys developing? Does new technology help or hinder the survey process? And how do we keep participants engaged in longitudinal studies? These are

just some of the questions that were discussed during the recent Methodology of Longitudinal Surveys II conference (www.mols2.org.uk). Hosted at the University of Essex by Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, the conference brought together over 200 longitudinal survey experts from around the world to share the challenges and successes of developing and delivering a host of longitudinal surveys.

EXPERIMENTAL MODELLING

A number of longitudinal surveys are using modelling to improve survey design and implementation. At MOLS2, the US Census Bureau presented work on **using adaptive-design models** to distribute workload to interviewers. The modelling helped to prioritise the fieldwork so the bureau could put more effort into cases which would improve the sample balance based on key characteristics.

Helping researchers deal with the **amount of data that longitudinal surveys produce**, was the aim of a team from RTI International and the University of North Carolina. They have developed visualisation tools to track data from multiple sources which help researchers categorise, subset and aggregate data.

Reducing survey attrition through using **machine learning** was explored by a research team from Utrecht University and the University of Mannheim. Using the German Internet Panel, machine learning models were used to find out what types of

paradata predict attrition. The team found that paradata, for example how long it takes respondents to complete the survey and how many reminders respondents need before starting the survey, were more strongly predictive of attrition than socio-demographic or psychological variables.

DATA LINKAGE

The ability to link longitudinal survey data to administrative or government data opens up new avenues for research and has the potential to enrich longitudinal datasets. But linking to administrative data can be challenging.

In Canada a **well-defined linking process** has helped to facilitate the creation of linked administrative data, speeding up the linking process and helping longitudinal studies inform socio-economic policies. Researchers from the Australian National University Centre for Social Research and Methods presented a methodological approach that included **linking to census data**, which allowed researchers to better focus on socially-defined populations.

Consent for longitudinal data linkage was explored by researchers from the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies who used data from Next Steps to look at what might determine whether participants give consent for multiple linkages, including health, economic, education and criminal records. Factors associated with giving consent to data linkage included a range of attitudinal and behavioural characteristics.

Making sure that participants **understand what they are consenting to** was a topic addressed by researchers from Understanding Society. Initial results from qualitative interviews suggested that participants misunderstood how personal data would be used and for what purposes.

The Understanding Society team found that various factors influenced whether someone consented to linking their data, including their attitude towards data sharing, their personality type and trust in the survey organisation. They found that consent to data linkage is not a fixed decision, with up to 50% of respondents who refused consent changing their mind when asked again at a later point in the survey.

USING MIXED MODES

A number of longitudinal surveys have moved to using a mixed-mode design for data collection which could include web-based surveys, telephone interviews and face-to-face interviews. While using a mixed-mode design can bring cost benefits and provide participants with choice in how they complete their interview, maintaining comparable measures across the different survey modes can be a challenge.

Researchers from the University of Michigan presented new work on **measuring cognitive function in a mixed mode survey**, with preliminary results showing that respondents appeared to perform better using the web than by telephone or face-to-face.

The impact of **moving from face-to-face to web-based interviews** in Understanding Society was highlighted by Kantar Public. Targeted methods to increase the online response had led to a reduction in the cost of fieldwork and maintained the high response rate for the survey.

This is just a small taster of the MOLS2 conference. If you are interested in longitudinal survey methods, all the monograph papers from MOLS2 will be published in a book, 'Advances in Longitudinal Survey Methodology', in early 2020. Additionally, a selection of the contributed papers will appear in a special edition of the journal, 'Longitudinal and Life Course Studies'.

Comics and graphic novels in research

By *Helen Kara*, SRA trustee



As a lifelong lover of comics, it delights me to see this versatile method of visual storytelling take its place in the wider world. Last year iTunes launched [a comic version of its terms and conditions](#); this year a graphic novel (Sabrina) has been longlisted for the Man Booker prize. And comics are also, increasingly, being used in research.

Academia is leading this trend. In the US in 2014, Nick Sousanis successfully defended his doctoral thesis, 'Unflattening', which he had produced in the form of a graphic novel. In 2015 it was published by Harvard University Press, and Nick Sousanis is now an associate professor in San Francisco. There is an undergraduate degree course in cartoon and comic arts at Staffordshire University; postgraduate degree courses at Dundee and Teesside; and Lancaster University hosts an international graphic novels and comics network.

No methods conference these days should be without a comics presentation or three, and other conferences are realising the worth of [graphic recording](#).

Researchers are finding all sorts of ways to use comics and graphic novels. The internet offers free comic templates which can be used as a basis for data collection. Graphic novels are being used for dissemination. For example, a big research project collecting the life stories of homeless people culminated in a graphic novel with text taken entirely

from the words of participants. [Somewhere nowhere: lives without homes](#) contains five stories of people experiencing homelessness. And it's not all about academia. For example, [NHS researchers are using comics](#) (and animation and puppets) in their evaluation research.

One of the biggest comic art festivals in the UK is the [Lakes International Comic Art Festival](#). In 2015 and 2016 there were working lunches for researchers on the Friday before the conference opened officially. In 2017 there was a half-day conference, which attracted researchers from as far away as Australia, and in 2018 there is a full-day conference. Academic publications are also using comics, from [cartoon abstracts for journal articles](#) to full-length works such as Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele's [Queer: a graphic history](#) which explains queer theory.

Not everyone likes comics. One person explained to me that she couldn't read them because, 'I don't know where my eyes are supposed to go'. In some countries, such as France, the art form is respected and mainstream; here in the UK it is seen by some as peripheral and childish. A professional comics author commented to me that he thought the term 'graphic novel' was invented to help adults feel more comfortable with comics. Yet it seems to me that comics have at least two advantages for some research projects.

First, data collection – particularly with children, young people and those who are artistic. A blank template of perhaps six panels on a page of A4 enables vivid sequential storytelling in response to a research question. This is fun for

participants and can be illuminating for researchers. Second, communication. Making a comic enables a narrator to get out of the way of their story, and can give readers a more immediate understanding of others' experiences and interactions.

If the prospect of making a comic seems daunting, remember you don't have to write *and* draw; you can work with a collaborator. There is lots of advice available, such as the excellent books by comic artist Scott McCloud, [Understanding comics](#), and [Making comics](#) – which are, of course, in comic format themselves. And if you are digitally inclined, there is some very good software such as Comic Life and Pixton.

I was inspired to make a comic at the Research Methods Festival in 2016. People researching pedagogy spoke about the difficulty in bridging the gap between classroom and practice when teaching research methods. I immediately thought comics could help, so I wrote a narrative, recruited Sophie Jackson from Staffordshire University, and we made [Conversation with a purpose](#). It is designed to support teaching research interviewing, and is free to download and print. If I can do it, maybe you can too!



The SRA interview: Bobby Duffy

Professor **Bobby Duffy** is director of the Policy Institute, King's College London, and previously the chair of Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute.

What made you pursue a career in social research?

I studied social and political science at university, and loved it – but at the time, really didn't want to continue in academia (I think I just felt like trying something different). So, I looked around, and found an advert for MORI in the careers service, and I remember the very distinct feeling that I couldn't believe people were paid to do commercial research on something I thought of as a passion or just something I'd do anyway! I can't help looking for a story in data or any sort of information – describing how things really are, and then trying to understand why, and how they could be changed.

Who have been your biggest influences in research and why?

Ah, what a good question! There have been so many at Ipsos MORI, who generously taught me so much – too many to mention. And then some big influences externally on how I thought about research. This includes people like Robert Putnam, who's just retired from Harvard. When he wrote 'Bowling Alone' I was looking at very similar trends in the UK, and again, he was so generous with his time and sharing ideas. That storytelling based on robust analysis of data on one of the key

challenges of our time (declining social trust and capital) is what I admire. That is what great social science is about for me.

You've been working in social research for more than 20 years. How has research changed in that time?

In so many ways! Obviously, the methods and sources of information have just exploded, and so we all have to be much more agnostic in what we look at – making sense of those myriad sources is the skill. But within that, our 'traditional' knowledge and expertise is still vitally important. No research methods appear to be dying – it's just that new methods are layered on top. I like that about our area: we can adapt while holding on to the core of what we do.

What do you see as the main challenges to the social research sector over the next few years?

I actually see more opportunity than challenge. We've maybe been a bit too apologetic in making the case for the importance of social science. But I think we can, and should, be bolder than that. In some ways, other disciplines are making the case better on our behalf – with the natural and medical sciences increasingly trying to situate their analysis in societal settings. They get

the value of the attitudinal and behavioural insights we can bring. So, we need to grasp the opportunity that coming together across disciplines brings – and remember that we have the stories that explain what people and institutions are doing and why. We have a lot more allies than we think.

A lot of your recent work has been focused on the perils of perception – how and why people's perceptions of society can differ from the reality – which is the topic of your new book. What are the key messages for those studying society?

Ah, my favourite subject! The book is called 'The perils of perception: why we're wrong about nearly everything', and while that subtitle is an addition from the publisher to get some interest, there is some truth in it – we get a lot wrong about society and politics, everything from immigration and crime rates to the sex lives of young people.

But, in short, my main points are:

1. This is not just a media or political effect, it reflects biases in how we think, such as focusing on negative information
2. This means we can't myth-bust or fact-check our way out of it, we need to engage in stories



3. The current information context is particularly perilous, as the internet is basically built on those biases, showing us what we want
4. But people are also not automatons, slaves to their biases, so we shouldn't give up on facts and just appeal to emotion
5. And in the end, our misperceptions are great clues to what we really think

You've recently left Ipsos MORI to take up the role of director at The Policy Institute at King's College London. Could you tell us a little about that role?

Yes, it's a really exciting move for me! I'm very sad to be leaving such a brilliant team at Ipsos MORI, but it's a great role at King's. Effectively, it is focused on translating academic research into policy and practice impact. In that sense, it fits perfectly with themes I hold very dear – making sure debates and decision-making are based on insightful evidence and real expertise. Look out for more news on our programme very soon!

Four waves of the evidence revolution

By **Howard White**, CEO, Campbell Collaboration



Social researchers and policymakers look for effective answers to social problems based, as far as possible, on strong evidence. However, decision-makers do not have the resources to keep up with academic literature, much of which is often inaccessible. Researchers, and research commissioners, need to take steps to ensure that their research can be put into use. The What Works movement – especially the recently created What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care and the Centre for Homelessness Impact – are developing platforms to aid decision-makers to draw on evidence for more effective interventions. The What Works movement is the latest wave of the evidence revolution in social policy.

FIRST WAVE

The first wave was the ‘results agenda’, which was particularly prominent in the US under the Clinton administration and in the UK during the Blair government, notably the ‘Modernising Government’ White Paper published in 1999. All government agencies and cross-government programmes were required to have three-year public service agreements (PSAs) listing the results they were to achieve.

The results agenda was important in shifting the focus in measuring the success of government programmes from inputs, activities or, at best, outputs to outcomes and impacts. But measuring the change in outcomes doesn’t tell us what difference our efforts are making. For that we need rigorous impact evaluations, preferably randomised controlled trials (RCTs) in which one group gets an intervention and the control group get ‘usual services’ or (rarely) nothing at all.

SECOND WAVE

The increase in the use of RCTs since the early 2000s to measure what difference programmes make to behaviour and welfare is the second wave of the evidence revolution.

But there may be limits to how much we can generalise from a single study. Family Nurse Partnership – a home visitation programme for young, disadvantaged mothers – was found to improve parenting skills and child outcomes in the US. But an RCT of the programme in the UK failed to find any effect – most likely as the NHS provides very similar services to the programme. What we should do is draw together all available relevant evidence. This is what systematic reviews do.

THIRD WAVE

High-quality systematic reviews, of the sort of published by the **Campbell Collaboration**, are the third wave of the evidence revolution. I will explain more about systematic reviews in the March 2019 issue of Research Matters. For now, I turn to the fourth wave of the evidence revolution: knowledge brokering.

FOURTH WAVE

Knowledge brokering or knowledge translation packages evidence in user-friendly ways. There is a spectrum of ways that can be used as shown by the knowledge-brokering pyramid opposite. I will talk about the more ‘heavily brokered’ options.

Knowledge portals provide the evidence in an accessible manner leaving decision-makers to decide what to do based on the information provided. Many such portals have been developed in the US over the last ten years, such as the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. The best example in the UK is **the Teacher and Learning Toolkit** produced by the Education Endowment Foundation. A 2015 study by the National Audit Office found that 64% of school managers use the toolkit.



The next level up of the pyramid are guidelines which go a step beyond portals by making recommendations. The mandate of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence was expanded to include social care in 2013. It has published guidelines in such areas as transition from mental health settings to community settings, and child abuse and neglect. These guidelines are based on systematic reviews, some of which are commissioned specifically for that purpose.

And top of the knowledge-brokering pyramid are checklists. Portals make evidence available for the decision-maker to decide what to do, guidelines give recommendations, and checklists say ‘don’t think about it, do this’. Checklists are more action-oriented for practice, whereas recommendations may be more policy-oriented. So, guidance may list factors to consider about taking a child into care, whereas a checklist may list signals to look for in the child’s behaviour and home environment which are flags for possible abuse. Checklists are useful as reminders, to improve practice, and to ensure adherence in diverse teams. The Social Care Institute of Excellence provides a number of checklists.

Together, these evidence tools hold great promise to increase the use of evidence in policy and practice by responding to the needs of the intended users. The evidence revolution is here. Let’s do what we can to make it work for the good of all.

The secret Guardian-reading agency survey researcher

By a researcher in a commercial research organisation



Survey researchers like me often do such research because it's reasonably remunerated and interesting, and contributes to the social good. Typically, we also care about doing our job well. As a group, we tend to cross boundaries between agency and client, practitioner organisations and academia. For short, I refer to this group as 'people like us'.¹

Because we care about quality, people like us who work in commercial or quasi-commercial agencies usually end up doing expensive surveys for clients who care about the truth of their findings, and who can distinguish the wheat from the chaff.

So what's it like being one of us? The most important factor is whether our agency values the surveys we do. Arguably, they should: these surveys are generally big with predictable revenues, are well known, and enhance the technical and logistical reputation of organisations involved.

But equally arguably, they should not: these surveys are rarely money spinners, generally have relatively low profit margins, and (because they are complicated and challenging), can easily go wrong and lose money.

Consequently, the agencies that support these surveys are generally large, confident and managed by people with an eye on the big picture. They are typically run by senior managers who have come through the ranks and have first-hand experience of quality surveys. Luckily for people like us, several agencies fit this description.

But although working for an agency that appreciates our work is gratifying, we still like to complain because of:

- ▶ **Organisational inefficiencies:** in my experience, these abound in every agency, organisation and government department. Decisions about staffing and management systems are made by managers remote from day-to-day projects and who don't see the need to invest adequately in future systems. At worst, decision-making relies too heavily on textbook theories or short-term budgetary considerations and too little on the reality of survey delivery. Often this leads to understaffing (which equals overwork for researchers and others) or under-delivery.
- ▶ **Parachuted-in bosses:** the best agencies are managed by researchers who understand what we do. But research agencies can be seen as small platoons in large corporate armies. At times, high command appears to regard survey expertise as a disqualification for managing survey teams. This means there is always a danger of being subjected to the whims of parachuted-in bosses. In my experience, they know the answers without knowing the business, and generate the inefficiencies described above and below.
- ▶ **Wrong-tree barking:** at times, senior managers have peculiar ideas about how best to market our services. This often leads to flashy, but largely vacuous, 'thought leadership' pieces aimed at getting noticed by newspapers and pundits, rather than reassuring commissioners of quality surveys that we are the go-to people. Does this matter? It has little impact on us so long as we don't have to write them. However, because they often involve simplistic but confident interpretation of often-dodgy data (for example from online panels), they can make it harder to prove to clients that we work in an agency that values the quality of its data.
- ▶ **Island in the bog:** many of us work for companies whose ultimate aim is profit for shareholders. No client wanting to pay for research will get turned down, meaning that much of what's done is cheap and poor quality (online panels for example). This can be difficult for people like us who take pride in high-quality work. What do we say about such questionable practices? Usually nothing.
- ▶ **Career progression and metamorphosis:** as people like us become more senior, our careers can develop in one of two ways: either we become senior technical specialists or we become managers rather than researchers. Most of us prefer the former: we take pride in our work and would enjoy it less if its primary focus became gross margins and bottom-line profitability. This means we usually hit a career ceiling in a commercial agency. But, we didn't go into the work for the money! And in any case, we have a niche skillset and can usually move to a client, or even an academic, job.

My verdict? All in all, so long as we work for the right employer, we could do a lot worse.



¹ A term popularised by Margaret Thatcher.

Adapting to change: where next for social research?

Thursday 13 December 2018 Kings Place, London

As the SRA turns 40, we take stock and look ahead. With the advent of innovative techniques, tools and technology, social research has transformed in recent decades. But with advancement has come data misuse, and widespread public scepticism – so the profession faces continuing rapid change and rising uncertainty. The conference will explore how researchers can adapt to these changes, while also asking what are the enduring principles of research that will guide good practice and maintain public confidence for the next 40 years.

We look forward to hearing our plenary speakers reflect on these issues:

- ▶ **Sir John Curtice**, eminent and vastly knowledgeable political scientist, and the nation's favourite polling expert. *Keynote speaker*
- ▶ **Jennifer Rubin**, who has a huge role as the ESRC's new executive chair, will report on how research and innovation can create policy impact, and what social research can expect from the new UKRI.
- ▶ Internationally renowned qualitative expert **Trish Greenhalgh, OBE** will explore why introducing technologies in the hope of driving change almost never works.



CONFERENCE HASHTAG #SRAevents

BREAKOUTS: The day will also feature two rounds of parallel workshop sessions, with pairs of presentations from practising researchers sharing their real-world challenges, insights and lessons learned. Workshop themes this year include:

- ▶ In-the-moment qualitative research
- ▶ Moving online
- ▶ People power
- ▶ Impact evaluation
- ▶ Survey representativeness

NEW: We're adding some single-topic workshops to the breakouts:

- ▶ An infographic 101 – practical, step-by-step guidance on how to create a simple infographic, plus tips and pitfalls.
- ▶ Semiotics for researchers – using visible evidence and cultural information to better understand people, society and social problems.
- ▶ Big data and social research – exploring some essentials of big data, its application and the challenges it brings, with case studies.
- ▶ Networking – a guided, semi-structured workshop to help you make new connections at the conference, about research topics, methods, experiences and challenges.

Some of these workshops have limited places, so once you've registered we'll be in touch later on to ask for your breakout preferences.

NEW VENUE – this year we are in Kings Place, a new, spacious, award-winning conference and events venue close to Kings Cross. London.

Come to learn, discuss, hear from those at the top of our profession, and help us celebrate the SRA's 40th year!

Book your place on the SRA website: <http://the-sra.org.uk/event-registration/?ee=691>

The delegate rate of £190 includes lunch, refreshments, and a drinks reception afterwards.

SRA members receive substantial discounts on the delegate rate, so if you're interested in membership, find out more [here](#).

Demystifying evaluation: practical approaches for researchers and users

David Parsons
Policy Press, 2017

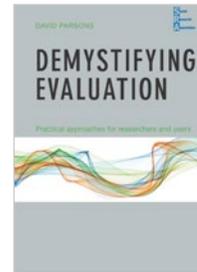
Reviewed by Jane Evans, Fine Grain Consultancy

I learned a great deal from this concise but hugely practical book. The structure is accessible and clear, with chapters on conducting process, economic, and impact evaluations, based on the fundamental elements of compilation: setting the right foundations; and composition: designing for needs. I also appreciated the glossary and clearly set out annexes. Parsons aims to provide a short, practical guide for a range of readers, covering an array of evaluation methods and highlighting some pitfalls. He more than achieves this, and so he should, because an important part of the message of this work is the essential task of setting SMART objectives in compiling an evaluation.

As a qualitative/mixed methods researcher myself, I found the chapters on economic evaluation and experimental methods particularly informative. While I may not use most of those models, I am pleased I now

understand more fully how they fit into the field.

Although this book is mainly intended to be used by evaluators, I would recommend all those procuring an evaluation to read chapters two and three on compilation and composition before setting out their tender or commissioning documents. Many organisations are looking for an evaluation to please the funder, but are unclear about what they should, or could, ask of an evaluator. Similarly, reading this book has given me the confidence to offer a stronger steer to commissioners, especially when they seem unsure of what can and cannot be achieved through an evaluation. Parsons' guidance that 'ideally, decisions on scale should lead decisions on budget, and not vice versa' is one I would commend to everyone involved in designing an evaluation.



Communicating your research with social media: a practical guide to using blogs, podcasts, data visualisations and video

Amy Mollet, Cheryl Brumley, Chris Gilson and Sierra Williams
SAGE, 2017

Reviewed by Andrew Richardson, independent researcher

This is an engaging and highly readable book. The authors deftly weave the theoretical with the practical, and include relevant and inspiring examples of how 'knowledge workers' can make use of social media across the full research life cycle. The authors define 'knowledge workers' as 'academics, researchers, students, and communication professionals looking to understand more about research'. As a doctoral candidate nearing completion of my thesis and with 'dissemination' in mind, I found the chapters focused on blogging, infographics, data visualisations and podcasts both instructive and inspiring. Strategies to reach wider audiences and to achieve greater impact with research will appeal to researchers and other knowledge workers across a wide range of disciplines. Importantly, the authors also

explore issues of copyright and navigating the risks of online visibility and, in so doing, speak to some of the anxieties that may be barriers for some researchers making greater professional use of social media. A companion website adds another level of engagement for the reader with good use of videos and blogs to bring the topics to life and illustrate what is possible with social media.

The authors set out to demonstrate that social media matters, and can be incredibly important to the work and careers of knowledge workers. In my view, they succeed in this ambition. In such a fast-moving digital world, I thought the authors' hope that the book offers 'as timeless a guide as possible' was a noble but somewhat tall order. Revised and updated future editions are, however, warranted and well deserved.



An adventure in statistics: the reality enigma

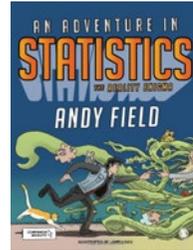
Andy Field

SAGE, 2016

Reviewed by Marguerite Adewoye, Research Impact Unit, Department for Education

This book gives readers a solid grounding in basic statistics and in introductory R, a programming language and open source statistical computing package. It's an excellent resource and successfully makes statistics more accessible. I would recommend it for people who are new to statistics, for example in social sciences degrees, or those who have used statistics without formal training, but need to pick up a full grounding in statistical theory without the benefit of a lecturer to guide them.

In this book, the statistical theory is cleverly embedded in a sci-fi novel. The story gives the reader a very good reason to start right back at the basics. One of the benefits of this approach, is that readers don't accidentally skip a basic principle or statistical notation which will be applied again in more complex theories. The book also uses earlier aspects of the story to act as reminders for previous lessons. Basic



statistics books are usually fairly weighty, and this book is no exception. However, the story format encourages readers to persevere and to complete the course. It also gives readers quirky (and therefore memorable) analogies with which to visualise or conceptualise the statistical theories.

Despite starting with the basics, covering statistics that most readers will have learned in secondary school, the tone is not patronising. It moves steadily to more advanced topics of variance and dispersion, probabilities, central limit theorem and hypothesis testing. The most advanced topics covered are probably general linear modelling, including methods for different kinds of experimental or research designs, and factorial designs. The inclusion of simple instructions for the open source R statistical package is also a boon for newcomers to statistical analysis.

See these and other new reviews at: http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/book-reviews/

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 below. If you are interested, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and we'll send you guidelines.

Titles for review:

What is qualitative longitudinal data analysis?

Vernon Gayle and Paul Lambert, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018



Understanding research in the digital age

Sarah Quinton and Nina Reynolds, SAGE Publishing, 2018



Pioneering ethics in a longitudinal study: the early development of the ALSPAC ethics and law committee

Karen Birmingham, Policy Press, 2018



A journey through qualitative research: from design to reporting

Stéphanie Gaudet and Dominique Robert, SAGE Publishing, 2018

Practice-based research in children's play

Edited by Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester and Hilary Smith, Policy Press, 2018



Investigative research: theory and practice

Derek Layder, SAGE Publishing, 2018



BRISTOL

25 October	Foundations of evaluation	Professor David Parsons
26 October	Impact evaluation (advanced): understanding options, choices and practice	Professor David Parsons

CARDIFF

19 November	Designing a qualitative study	Professor Karen O'Reilly
20 November	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
21 November	Conducting focus groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly

EDINBURGH

8 October	Designing a qualitative study	Professor Karen O'Reilly
9 October	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
10 October	Conducting Focus Groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly
11 October	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney
24 October	Qualitative data analysis – FULL	Liz Spencer
25 October	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings – FULL	Liz Spencer
26 November	Questionnaire design and testing	Dr Pamela Campanelli
27 November	Cognitive interviewing for testing survey questions	Dr Pamela Campanelli
28 November	Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests	Dr Pamela Campanelli
29 November	Sampling and introduction to weighting	Dr Pamela Campanelli
5 December	Qualitative data analysis	Liz Spencer
6 December	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Liz Spencer

LONDON

1 October	Foundations of evaluation	Professor David Parsons
2 October	Impact evaluation (advanced): understanding options, choices and practice	Professor David Parsons
5 October	Introduction to qualitative research – FULL	NatCen Social Research
9 October	Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests	Dr Pamela Campanelli
10 October	Sampling and introduction to weighting	Dr Pamela Campanelli
16 October	Ethnographic methods	Professor Karen O'Reilly
17 October	Qualitative data analysis – FULL	Liz Spencer
18 October	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings – FULL	Liz Spencer

SRA member discount: make sure to use your promo code. More information: Lindsay Adams, training co-ordinator: lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk
Full details of all SRA courses and booking at: www.the-sra.org.uk/training

18 & 19 Oct	Depth interviews – FULL	NatCen Social Research
19 October	Project management in research and evaluation	Professor David Parsons
30 October	Designing a qualitative study	Professor Karen O'Reilly
31 October	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
1 November	Conducting focus groups	Professor Karen O'Reilly
2 November	Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research	Dr Karen Lumsden
5 November	Qualitative data analysis	Liz Spencer
6 November	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Liz Spencer
8 November	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design	Lulu Pinney
12 & 13 Nov	Analysis of qualitative data	NatCen Social Research
14 November	Imputation and weighting for survey data	Dr Pamela Campanelli
15 November	Web surveys	Dr Pamela Campanelli
27 November	Introduction to grounded theory	Dr Karen O'Reilly
28 November	Public involvement in social research and evaluation	Dr Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham
30 November	Introduction to participatory action research	Dr Karen Lumsden
6 & 7 Dec	Basic statistical analysis for social research	NatCen Social Research

SHEFFIELD

16 October	Creative research methods for evaluation	Dr Helen Kara
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SRA RESEARCH MATTERS

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

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