

research matters



Are paid work placements the answer?

By Jackie Carter, University of Manchester

Well, it depends what the question is.

I'm often asked by my undergraduate students what a career in social research involves. They are taking social science courses, often combining sociology, criminology, politics, international relations, social anthropology and economics. They are interested in the substantive nature of their subject, and at the University of Manchester we teach them



the research methods that will assist them to form and explore research questions during their degree.

It's a great way to teach the skills and knowledge that underpin social research. But it's not such a great way to show how social research is undertaken in that mysterious place, 'the real world'. The application of those skills and knowledge is missing from the classroom, no matter how many real-world examples we use. How can we bridge the gap between the classroom and the workplace?



In 2013 we set up the Q-Step Centre at the University of Manchester, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the ESRC to provide quantitative skills training to social science undergraduates. We created opportunities to experience the workplace through paid internships (now called data fellowships). We have placed 300 students into public, private and third sector organisations to do applied social research. I turned their experiences into a book – *Work placements, internships and applied social research* – for others to discover all about the applied work placement experience.

The programme opens doors to future careers that undergraduates might not be aware of. The book includes vignettes from NatGen, Ipsos and The Future Foundation based on interviews with early career researchers. Many former students now have social research careers, and some feature in the ten case studies in the book.

Having ended up in an academic role through a very unconventional route, I was also mindful that access to opportunity can often be a reflection of our backgrounds and upbringing, and our connections and experiences. I'm thrilled that the data fellowship programme has placed 25% of those 300 from widening participation backgrounds or under-represented groups. Creating a diverse talent

pipeline into social research careers is something I am not only proud of but am now doggedly pursuing.

I was a first-gen university student, and my experiences in navigating my own career opened my eyes to the many invisible barriers. It amazes me how we have focused so myopically on opening up access to education for those from non-traditional backgrounds, but there is so little joined up thinking about how to open up similar routes to the workplace, especially in non-vocational degrees like those in the social sciences. This siloed thinking results in the widespread initiatives in organisations that recruit social science graduates, where they try to fix a leaky pipeline – by addressing equality, diversity and inclusion **in the workplace**. That's too late. We need to be thinking about earlier interventions in the educational life course – and building more intelligent and purposeful routes into social research careers to ensure diversity is designed in, and resourced. And critically, we need to fast track people from non-traditional backgrounds and under-represented groups into positions where they can influence recruitment practices.

The programme I describe here could be an answer. Take socioeconomic background for example. This year I polled 60 of my data fellows asking whether they would have undertaken

a placement had it not been paid (they work for eight weeks and are paid minimum wage). Over half said no, they could not and would not have done this. The Sutton Trust proposes that work placements longer than four weeks' duration should be paid at least the minimum wage. The just-published ESRC [Review of the PhD in the social sciences](#) includes a call for more work experience.

Experiential learning is valuable and can open up careers for those wishing to go into social research. But access needs to be open **to all**, if we are to create a more diverse talent pipeline.

Work placements provide much needed applied knowledge and insight into social research careers, but they provide important transferable skills too. This combination of analytical, research and professional skills is powerful. As one former intern so neatly put it, 'No one in my family would have a clue what a career in social research is. Thanks to the work placement I am now in a job that none of my family could ever have done'. Then again, according to a postgraduate student recently, 'How on earth I could afford the cost of living in London to undertake a research placement beats me'. Paid work placements need funding at a level that makes them a realistic option for those who perhaps could benefit from them most.

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On inclusion, methods and data

Ailbhe McNabola, SRA co-chair, highlights some of the topics covered in this issue of Research Matters.

Welcome to this quarter's Research Matters.



I'd like to start by thanking Karen Kerr, who for many years represented SRA Scotland on our board, and worked tirelessly organising events and growing the SRA Scotland network. Karen has retired from work this year and also from her SRA role, and so I'd also like to warmly welcome Daniel Stunell who has stepped forward to take her place. Daniel will become a formal member of the board once voted in at our AGM in January. And that's a good opportunity for me to remind members of our AGM which will again be online, making it easier for you to participate. The AGM will be followed by a seminar with an interesting speaker, to thank you for making the time. Details coming soon. We really do appreciate your contribution at the AGM.

Inclusion in our profession

As ever, this issue has lots of interesting and varied articles, including a number that touch on inclusion in our profession. This is a topic that's very important to the SRA, building on the research that we published this summer with the Young Foundation and Kantar Public. Jackie Carter writes about a paid work placements scheme at the University of Manchester, and how access to paid work experience can help to level the playing field in access to our profession. One of our trustees, Dan Clay, writes about the UK Statistics Authority's Inclusive Data Taskforce,

set up in 2020 in recognition of the fact that some of the most vulnerable groups in society distrust government and government statistics, and as a result, are generally under-represented in statistics. This has implications for making decisions and developing policy. This under-representation in official statistics is not a new phenomenon, but as in many other areas, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted inequality in the UK in a new way and has mobilised action to counteract it. The taskforce has just made its recommendations for improving the inclusivity of the data collected and used by national and local government to plan and

...this issue has lots of interesting and varied articles...

direct services. Dan writes about his involvement in research with members of the public who are under-represented in UK statistics, and with civil society organisations representing them, to try to improve understanding of the issue. And for a different take on inclusion, do read the fascinating article by Bobby Duffy and Rachel Hesketh from the Policy Institute at King's College London about people's attitudes to inequalities – whether you're more of a structuralist or an individualist will make a difference to how you view inequality and your views on how it should be tackled. Their work used latent class analysis of online YouGov data and shows that

agreement that there's an inequality problem in society doesn't mean we necessarily have consensus about its causes or how to tackle it.

Methods and data

In this issue we of course touch on methods and data, with Patten Smith reflecting on why high-quality surveys have not all migrated to online mode, and looking at examples where this did happen and the implications for the research. Much has changed in working life and working patterns over the last 18 months, but it seems that quite a lot has stuck too. Ebony Armstrong from the Office for National Statistics introduces the UK Government Data Quality Hub, a new function funded last year to support and promote data quality across the UK Government, with a remit that covers all types of government data and open to helping all government researchers. And my colleague Stephen Miller shares his experience of using novel data sources, not traditionally interrogated by third sector organisations, to quickly understand the impact of Covid-19 on the small community-led businesses funded by charitable trust Power to Change. Lucy Farrow and Clare Palmer from BritainThinks revisit their prediction (made in Spring 2021) that deliberative research practice was going in 'go big' 2021. Did it? Read on to find out!

Thank you

I hope you enjoy reading this issue. Lots of volunteer work goes into collating and publishing it, so my final word has to be thanks to the editorial team.

Why has the pandemic not pushed high quality surveys online?



By Patten Smith, senior consultant at Ipsos MORI

GenPopWeb2 is an ESRC-funded network of UK-based researchers which was set up to share knowledge and stimulate research on online general population social surveys. It ran an event in September – ‘Covid-19 and transitioning to online data collection in social surveys’. The event was to address why the pandemic had generally **not** pushed ongoing face-to-face surveys towards web-based data collection methods; what were the barriers preventing this from happening; and what was there to learn from the experience for future web-based surveys.

The event included five presentations broadly relevant to these questions and which, between them, covered the immediate-term changes actually made to some ongoing face-to-face surveys in response to the pandemic; and some more general research on transitioning surveys to online-led data collection.

Changes to data collection in response to the pandemic were discussed for four face-to-face surveys.

The Health Survey for England (HSE)¹ usually involves a lengthy interview followed by a nurse visit in which physical measurements are made. Fieldwork was abruptly halted in March 2020 and then resumed in 2021 in a modified form – involving both doorstep and postal/web-portal recruitment, a much-shortened interview, telephone interviews and, initially, no nurse visit.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)² usually involving face-to-face interviews, moved to a design whereby previous respondents were re-interviewed, by telephone, every three months (with fresh recruitment via an online portal as a back-up).

The European Social Survey (ESS)³, usually involving 60-minute interviews, postponed fieldwork for nearly a year (meaning that it is still underway) and also allowed seven (of 31 in total) countries to move from face-to-face to sequential online-postal data collection.

In contrast to these three surveys, the British Election Study 2019/20 (BES) **did** make a wholesale transition to sequential mixed-mode web and paper questionnaire data collection, and it did this mid-fieldwork. Furthermore, the transition appeared to be successful (albeit after offering respondents generous incentives). Although the mixed-mode response rate dropped somewhat, the mixed-mode sample was comparable to the face-to-face one on both demographic and key survey variables. [Further information about the 2019 BES study.](#)

The more general presentations on transitioning to online indicated that, although moving a survey from face-to-face to mixed-mode web-led data collection is feasible, such a transition is unlikely to be straightforward. For example:

- ▶ In a pilot⁴ for the Childcare and Early Years Survey response rates were considerably lower than for the main face-to-face survey, and some survey estimates changed substantially
- ▶ A pilot designed to look at the feasibility of using online methods to collect crime victimisation⁵ by means of push-to-web methods indicated substantial problems collecting incident rate data
- ▶ In the ESS sequential mixed-mode pilot, item non-response rates were high for many labour market and education questions (although in other respects the pilot was successful)

One presentation described how the Food Standards Agency (FSA) had transitioned its flagship Food and You Survey from face-to-face to push-to-web data collection and, acknowledging that this may have large (perhaps unmeasurable) effects on trends, had made the prudent decision to accept the discontinuity and simply restart the trends.

To my mind, the FSA's decision to accept the discontinuity was the right one, and gives the clue as to why we have not witnessed a wholesale shift to web data collection in ongoing face-to-face surveys as a result of the pandemic: it is simply that such surveys are commissioned to measure trends and any change of data collection mode is very likely to interrupt these.

I believe that additional contributory factors were:

- ▶ It is harder to collect certain important types of data using web-led mixed-mode methods – such as data requiring linkage consents or nurse visits
- ▶ It is very hard to field long, complex questionnaires in high response-rate web-led mixed-mode surveys without using face-to-face interviewing (disallowed during the pandemic) as a secondary mode – postal questionnaires cannot be made complex enough and telephone methods do not (generally) generate high enough response rates

The question to which the event was addressed was why the Covid-19 pandemic had not pushed ongoing face-to-face surveys towards web-based data collection methods. For the reasons just given, I believe there has never been a good reason for holding this expectation in the first place.

¹ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england>

² <https://www.crimesurvey.co.uk/en/index.html>

³ <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/853545/CEYSP_Mode_Trial_Report.pdf

⁵ [Re-design of Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\) core questions for online collection – Office for National Statistics](#)

ANALYSIS

METHODS

PLANNING

RESEARCH

LEARNING

STRATEGY

Did deliberation actually go big in 2021?



By Lucy Farrow, associate partner, and Clare Palmer, research lead, BritainThinks

In the [March 2021 issue of Research Matters](#), Lucy questioned where deliberative practice (a subset of qualitative that explores complex topics by providing time, resources and facilitation to participants) was going in 2021. At the time, she said that deliberation should go big. As the year ends, she and Clare investigate whether it has.

Working at scale

Earlier in the year we were thinking about 'scale' in terms of **participation**. While we've seen some high-profile deliberation in 2021, and run projects with as many as 200 people ourselves, a quick review of the [Involve Citizens' Assembly tracker](#) shows that few go over 100 people. The Engage Britain people's panel stuck at 100, although introduced much wider participation through its community conversations model.

However, at BritainThinks we've been thinking less about scale and more about **pace**. In our [Net Zero Diaries](#) initiative (a deliberative panel to explore climate policy as it's made), we've been

working to timescales that seem directly contrary to all the advice for good deliberative practice. And, just as we imagined that working at scale would open up new opportunities, so working at pace has engendered creativity. It's not without its challenges, but it has helped us to put more trust than ever in participants and dispense with the over-engineering that deliberative researchers can sometimes be guilty of.

International participation

Arguably, the most ambitious deliberative project of 2021 (so far...) has been the [Global Assembly](#) which sought consensus on climate action by bringing together 100 people from across the world. The sample

was based on global population density (the map below shows where participants were based).

The assembly also produced a toolkit in multiple languages for groups of citizens to run their own version of the process, broadening the process from a magnificent set piece to something closer to a movement.

Technology positive

It may be time to rethink our earlier optimism for integrating virtual and augmented reality tools. We've tried a few platforms over the year but have struggled to find the right balance of simplicity and innovation. Instead, we're looking forward to more hybrid approaches where digital tools are used



for the things they do best – information sharing (particularly multimedia); allowing people to consider issues in their own time; and collecting individual data; while face-to-face helps us build connections.

Radically transparent

We haven't gone quite as far as live-streaming our deliberative sessions yet (although we would love to hear if anyone else has because it's on the cards for January), but we have been delivering our Net Zero Diaries work as openly as possible. We've been sharing our insights in close-to-real time, publishing our findings online, presenting at open webinars, sharing video content, and centring the participant voice by generating media coverage in which participants speak, not us.

So, did deliberation actually go big in 2021?

The sector made progress in 2021 towards making deliberation more responsive, inclusive and transparent.

In many respects, we did go big – but there is plenty of room to innovate and to grow, both in our ambition and in our approaches.

Principles

We'd like to share some principles for commissioning deliberative research that we've learned the hard way over the years. Regardless of whether your project calls for a wildly innovative or more traditional approach, four questions you can ask yourselves (and your teams) are:

- ▶ **Is deliberation the right tool for the job?** Deliberation is best for tackling issues that are complex, uncertain, complicated and/or novel for participants – in other words, when participants need to be engaged on topics beyond their current experience or understanding. It is also great for exploring trade-offs.
- ▶ **What type of outputs do you need?** Some of our learning from the more innovative processes

we've tried is that outputs may need to adapt, which only emphasises the importance of knowing your audience and what it needs to see or hear from the research. Do you need an initial exploration of an issue, or do you want to engage participants in making choices, recommendations or co-designing the way forward?

- ▶ **How are you involving stakeholders?** Especially if you are innovating, having strong stakeholder relationships are important – whether it's a 'specialist group' of independent subject-matter experts who can advise on the content, or a partnership with key organisations from the start.
- ▶ **Do you have the right resources available?** There are four fundamental resource requirements for doing deliberative research well: enough time, sufficient budget, an understanding of the relevant information and what is already out there, and stakeholder buy-in.

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Using novel data sources in emergency grant-making

By Stephen Miller, director of impact and learning, Power to Change

Community businesses are run by local people for the benefit of local people. There are over 11,000 in England alone, providing services ranging from community hubs, cafes, shops and pubs through to libraries, lidos, community growing schemes, renewable energy projects, community housing and much more. But their emphasis on trading made them especially vulnerable to the pressures of economic lockdown. Subsequently, many required emergency funding and support to help them coordinate the frontline response.



When lockdown restrictions were introduced in March 2020, the Power to Change Trust – which funds and supports community businesses – mined its bank of primary and secondary data sources to predict the likely impact of these restrictions on community businesses and their neighbourhoods. We wanted to ensure our support was targeted and sufficient, rather than a finger in the air estimate. We also wanted to reduce the participative burden on community businesses, which rightly had other priorities. Here are just two of the more novel data sources we used to inform the design of our emergency support and to understand the impact of Covid-19.

Using financial accounts to estimate the economic impact

We have spent several years working with the data agency MyCake building a database of financial accounts for over 750 community businesses, spanning every financial year since 2013. This has been a manually intensive process

due to the inconsistency in how finances are reported to Companies House, the Charity Commission and the Mutuals Register. The advantages of this approach are that it brings together data from disparate sources and reduces the reporting burden on community businesses. However, the challenges are that the data is often submitted in different styles and forms, which introduces the potential for human error in the data-entry process.

Our analysis of this data in March 2020 suggested that the average community business generates 57% of its turnover from trading. More specifically, 43% of its income comes from venue-based activities (for example cafe, shop, hiring out meeting spaces). By not being able to open their venues due to lockdown restrictions, many community businesses stood to lose an average of £81,254 a year. We also estimated approximately 40% of community businesses were not contributing to their reserves in any given year. Thus, a considerable proportion is vulnerable to economic shocks.

We used this insight to design our response. Within weeks of lockdown being announced, we launched a £12m emergency support package and made our first emergency grant. This was followed by an announcement of an additional £9.4m funding via the National Lottery Community Fund in July 2020, with grants ranging from £4,400 to £100,000. All of this activity meant we delivered more grants between April and September 2020 than we had in the previous two years.

Using commercial data for public purpose

Since 2017 we have used credit and debit card transaction data as another

way to better understand communities. The spending data comes from 20m UK residents via our partners at Reward. Reward buys this data from the Royal Bank of Scotland group, and uses it alongside other data to support retailers with their loyalty card schemes. The use of such data has been standard practice for larger retailers for many years, exemplified by the Tesco Clubcard and Nectar card loyalty schemes. But this data has rarely, if ever, been available to the third sector, due to its cost and the lack of equivalent data processing capabilities.

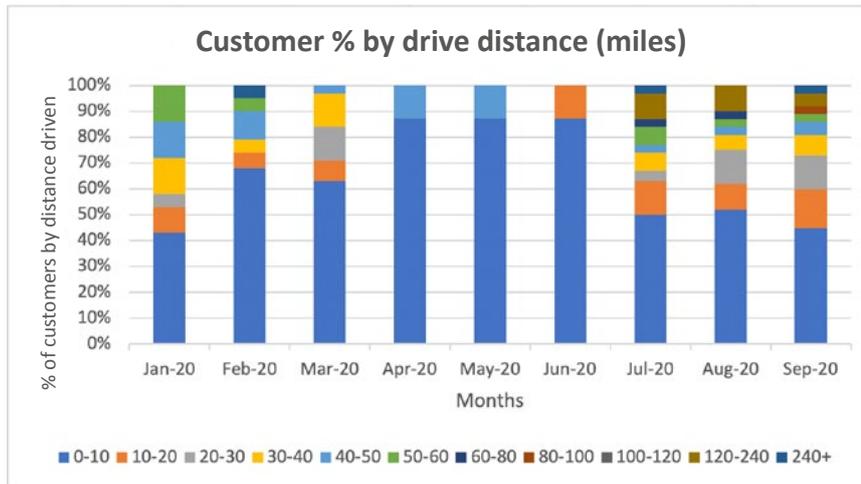
While this data is anonymised and aggregated to maintain confidentiality and the integrity of Reward's business model, Power to Change seed-funded the establishment of a third-party social enterprise – Impact Information Company – to act as an intermediary and data processor.

The advantages of this data are that it provides granular, real time, regularly refreshed and detailed information on the local economy in each place, and how it is performing, through analysis of the merchant IDs of all local businesses – including community businesses.

The challenge, however, is that it does not provide complete coverage, with cash transactions notably absent. When Covid-19 struck, we used this data to improve our understanding of the impact of lockdown restrictions on community businesses, without having to ask them for additional data.

The figure below illustrates this, showing where customers arrive from for a community-owned pub. It shows both the impact of lockdown on total income, as well as an increased localisation of customers.

Figure 1: Percentage of customers for a community-owned pub by distance driven (miles)



A final thought

Caution is required when referring to novel datasets. They provide a snapshot only of what is happening at any particular time. They are not sufficient, on their own, to evaluate the impact of a grant or a community business. But, during the early days of the first lockdown, they provided an invaluable resource for estimating the impact and shortfall organisations faced more accurately. This enabled us to adopt a more nuanced and targeted approach, that we believe ultimately prevented organisations from closing unnecessarily while also freeing them up to deliver urgent support in their communities. We hope others draw inspiration from this approach.

A new way to advertise – and win – government research contracts

The UK Government has set up a new web-based system, the 'Low Value Purchasing System', which deals with letting and awarding contracts worth less than around £123,000. This is an opportunity for smaller research providers, who find it impractical to compete with large suppliers on the UK Government's research marketplace system, to be considered for smaller government contracts.

The system is available to two types of user:

- Buyers in government, who wish to advertise suitable contracts in the system
- Suppliers outside government, who wish to be considered for these contracts

Buyers are government departments, while suppliers can be SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) and VCSEs (voluntary, community and social enterprises).

It's worth noting that some contracts awarded through this system may not be subject to competition – customers may be able to instead make a direct award.

The link to register is: <https://supplierregistration.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/organisation/register>

There are three filters to complete: the service heading for goods/service (you should choose 'research'); the postcode radius in which you can supply the goods/services; and your SME/VCSE status. For your chosen service heading of 'research' you must provide a brief description of your offering (in no more than 400 characters).

There is no space to discuss pricing in detail, but you can refer to it – price on application, or time/materials and so on.

You cannot include website links nor any reference to your current clients.

Applicants must abide by the terms and conditions of the agreement (Crown Commercial Service (CCS) supplier contract and also buyer supplier contract).

There is a 1% levy on all invoiced work obtained under the agreement.

Join a [webinar](#) on 15 December to find out more.

Hello from the Government Data Quality Hub



By Ebony Armstrong, senior data specialist, Government Data Quality Hub, Office for National Statistics

Now, more than ever, it is essential that we have confidence in our data, and this starts with understanding the quality of our data and managing it well.



Knowing whether our data is fit for its intended purpose will allow us to make good decisions.

The UK Government [Data Quality Hub](#) (DQHub) is a new function funded in the 2020 spring budget to support and promote data quality across the UK Government.

We are based at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) within the methodology and quality directorate. However, we have a much wider remit than statistics: we cover and support all types of government data. We are a multidisciplinary team, with the skills and resources to provide support across the data life cycle. This spans data collection activities and data analysis through to publication.

What we do

Our purpose is to establish and maintain world-leading approaches to data quality. We are building a collaborative community working towards common quality objectives. Our team works with other UK Government departments and organisations to bring together best practice in data quality and to establish

more proactive and effective data quality management. We aim to set direction across government on quality, and to build capability on measuring, communicating and improving quality. We also develop and improve guidance to support the implementation of data quality practices and support those across government with their data quality management.

Our products and services can support you in understanding and improving the quality of your data. Whether you want to share a piece of our guidance with your team or use it to challenge the way things are done in your organisation, our products are available to you

Although we work directly with those in government only, the products we publish (for example standards and guidance) can be used and applied by anyone working in data. Our products and services can support you in understanding and improving the quality of your data. Whether you want to share a piece of our guidance with your team or use it to challenge the way things are done in your organisation, our products are available to you.

What's available

In December 2020 DQHub published the [Government Data Quality Framework](#), in collaboration with the Government Digital Service and wider government. It was approved by UK ministers and sets out the principles and practices to enable the UK Government to understand, communicate and improve quality.

In September 2021 we ran a cross-government consultation to establish what training and guidance people need on the topic of data collection. We received over 180 responses, and are beginning to plan what products we develop. We will be sharing anything we create on the [Government Data Quality Hub](#) – keep an eye out for any updates.

How you can work with DQHub

If you work in government, please get in touch if you'd like any free consultancy advice or support with your work.

If you want to work with us on a specific challenge you are facing, or have suggestions for areas of guidance, please email us at DQHub@ons.gov.uk or tweet [@DQHubUKGov](https://twitter.com/DQHubUKGov).

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Are you a 'structuralist' or an 'individualist'?



By Bobby Duffy, director, and Rachel Hesketh, research associate, the Policy Institute at King's College London

Is how well people do in life mostly down to their own efforts and talents, or are people held down or helped up by their circumstances?

Our analysis for [our chapter on attitudes to inequalities](#) for the Institute for Fiscal Studies' Deaton Review suggests that how we answer this question is key to understanding how fair or unfair we consider societal inequalities – and how worried or angry we are about them.

Through latent class analysis of 2,226 responses to a dedicated survey of attitudes towards inequalities via the YouGov GB online panel (summarised in our earlier report [Unequal Britain](#)) we found three roughly equally sized groups in Britain. Membership of these groups was determined based on responses to seven questions on inequalities and fairness.

'Structuralists' see factors beyond an individual's control as vital in whether they get ahead – for example, whether they come from a wealthy family or had access to a good education.

'Individualists' strongly reject the idea that coming from a wealthy family, or a particular race or religion, affects life chances, and generally do not consider factors beyond the individual's control to be that important.

The third group is 'in the middle' in two senses. They see outcomes as a mix of individual and structural drivers, but also don't have strong views on many aspects of inequality – nothing is 'very' fair or unfair.

These distinct world views shape how we see many key issues. For example, 65% of structuralists think that discrimination is one reason Black people are more likely to be

unemployed than white people, while only 33% of individualists agree.

Structuralists are also much more worried about the impact of the pandemic: 63% think the crisis will increase inequality, compared with 31% of individualists.

This difference in how we see the world explains many of the key divisions we see in Britain today, from which political party we support, to our views on 'culture war' issues such as the causes of racial inequality

This is not to say that structuralists believe that individual effort is unimportant. In fact, there is a very high level of belief across all three groups in Britain that hard work and ambition should be rewarded – it's just that structuralists think this is not sufficient to succeed.

This difference in how we see the world explains many of the key divisions we see in Britain today, from which political party we support, to our views on 'culture war' issues such as the causes of racial inequality.

It also helps explain some apparent contradictions in our attitudes. For example, all the way back to the early 1980s, a large and stable majority of around 80% of us have agreed that income gaps between rich and poor are too large in Britain. But, over that same period, only around 40% of us have agreed that the government should redistribute income from the better-off to the less well-off.

This gap between agreement that there's an inequality problem and support for action will be tied up in how we see its causes. If we see inequality as largely down to personal effort rather than factors the individual can't control, we'll be much less likely to think it warrants government intervention.

There is, then, no one attitude to inequality in Britain, which makes consensus difficult, and explains why we so often seem to be talking past each other.

But there are a couple of areas of common ground to build on. First, the experience of the pandemic has opened a space for discussion about how we support people in circumstances beyond their control. For example, even among Individualists, four in ten agree that the experience of Covid-19 strengthens the case for government playing a more active role in the economy in the future.

And, second, reducing the gap between prosperous and struggling areas is a rare unifying aspect in our attitudes to inequality. When we ask which types of inequality are most serious in Britain, inequalities between more and less deprived parts of the country come at or near the top for all our groups.

The UK Government's 'levelling-up' agenda, therefore, really chimes across the spectrum, promising to tackle an issue people are concerned about, irrespective of their wider views about inequality and fairness. Our collective aversion to 'postcode lotteries' extends well beyond health services and school catchment areas – whether we're a structuralist or an individualist, we're in agreement that where you live shouldn't determine your life chances.

Do social researchers emerge fully formed? Do they have any other life for that matter? In this series, we check out the backstories of some of our social research colleagues. What's your hinterland? Do you have an interesting story to tell? Let us know!

Researcher hinterlands



Nick Gilby

Nick is research director in Ipsos MORI's Probability Surveys Unit. His book, *Deception in high places: a history of bribery in Britain's arms trade* is published by Pluto Press.

Current research role

I have worked as a social researcher for two decades, most of that time on surveys which use random probability sampling. My motivation was not a fascination with statistics (which I don't have) but a desire to be sure the results of my work are valid and hopefully also useful.

During the pandemic I have been the day-to-day director of the REACT-1 study: measuring the prevalence of Covid-19, along with our partners Imperial College, for the Department of Health and Social Care. It has been a career highlight.

Hinterland outside work

I have always been interested in how the world really works, and perhaps it's unsurprising that I chose to study history at university and then social research as a career. I have always enjoyed reading books presenting hidden or secret histories.

In 2003 the Guardian newspaper alleged that British Aerospace (BAE) used corrupt methods to win huge deals in Saudi Arabia. I suspected that there was a long backstory and decided to visit the National Archives at Kew in London to see what I could find. I soon found there was a much bigger story to be unearthed.

During what became regular Saturday visits I found documents suggesting a very senior Saudi (now deceased) had engaged in dubious deals decades ago. Many documents were censored, and I asked to see them. I followed the process to an information tribunal, naively not realising what I was letting myself in for.

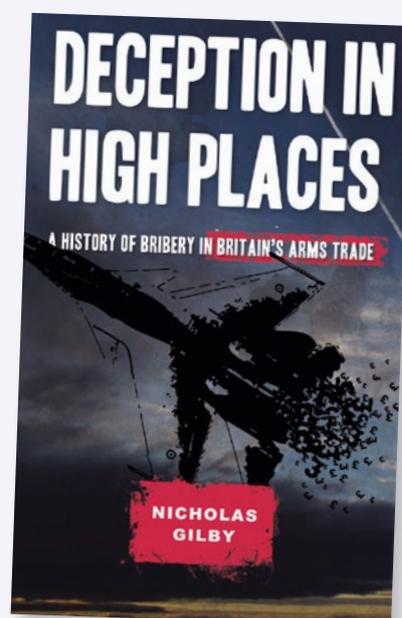
In 2003 the Guardian newspaper alleged that British Aerospace (BAE) used corrupt methods to win huge deals in Saudi Arabia. I suspected that there was a long backstory and decided to visit the National Archives at Kew in London to see what I could find. I soon found there was a much bigger story to be unearthed

I was fortunate, with excellent legal support, to prevail against the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which appointed senior barristers to oppose me and summoned the ambassador to Saudi Arabia to give evidence. The documents revealed a tale far more sordid than I had imagined. BAE was later heavily fined in the US for its conduct in Saudi Arabia.

By now I had enough documents to write a book about bribery in the UK arms trade, eventually published in 2014. I never thought things would turn out this way ten years earlier!

I still occasionally visit Kew, and recently discovered documents showing that a top-secret British propaganda operation helped incite massacres in Indonesia in the mid-1960s that left hundreds of thousands dead. I contacted two journalists about my discoveries, and I was able to publish with them a special feature in the Observer about these terrible events.

Along the way I learned a huge amount useful to my real job, particularly about preparing and arguing a case, dealing with daunting situations with confidence, and summarising hugely complex information in a readable way, as well as how to get published.



Ensuring everyone counts



By Dan Clay, managing partner, Basis Social

Radical. Ambitious. Sustainable. Inclusive

These are the four key principles that will underpin the work of the UK Statistics Authority over the next four years, the last of which led to the creation of an Inclusive Data Taskforce in 2020. The taskforce has just made its recommendations for improving the inclusivity of the data that is collected and used by national and local government to plan and direct services. In support of this work, Basis Social was commissioned by the Office for National Statistics to carry out research¹ with members of the public who are under-represented in UK statistics, and with civil society organisations representing them.

A call to action

Some of the most vulnerable groups in society – those most in need of support – distrust government and government statistics. This leads to a lack of engagement in research, resulting in under-representation in statistics, mis-informed decision-making and a cycle of distrust.

We should be proud of the quality of the data infrastructure within the UK, and how data is used and shared to inform policy and service provision. But we can and must do better. We all have a role to play in this. I would urge SRA members to read the taskforce recommendations² and to think about what they mean for your practice as social researchers. There

are implications for recruitment processes, research methodologies, participant communications, organisational partnerships and more broadly for how we – as a sector – encourage diversity in our own organisations.

How can we possibly expect research data, and the evidence and insights that are generated from this data, to reflect the diversity of our weird and wonderful society if those involved in shaping, collecting and interpreting that data are themselves not representative of this society?

There is much to do in ensuring that everyone is counted. This is a challenge which we all have a responsibility to address.

¹ <https://www.basisresearch.com/social-news-hub/inclusive-data-taskforce-launches-report>

² <https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/publication/inclusive-data-taskforce-recommendations-report-leaving-no-one-behind-how-can-we-be-more-inclusive-in-our-data/>

SRA REPORTS

SRA Cymru

By Rachel Hughes

We've got some more events planned over the forthcoming months, so please keep an eye out for those on the [events tab](#) on the SRA website. We're keen to re-establish the SRA Cymru committee to support the SRA's work in Wales. If you're interested in helping out or indeed have any ideas, please do get in touch – either at Cymru@the-sra.org.uk or Direct Message us on Twitter [@sracymru](#). Diolch.



SRA Scotland

Check latest news from SRA Scotland online or email Scotland@the-sra.org.uk and keep in touch [@SRA_Scotland](#).

SRA North

By Jenni Brooks

SRA North members have been busy working on a variety of projects, and we are planning two events for the next few months. One will be a response to the SRA's diversity and inclusion research report, which identified that researchers from marginalised groups often do not feel supported in their workplace. The event will focus on routes into the sector, and support within it. We are also planning a second event on using archives in social research. If you would like to be involved in planning either of these, or with the SRA North committee more generally, please do get in touch. Email: north@the-sra.org.uk Twitter: [@SRANorth](#)



Creative writing for social research: a practical guide

Richard Phillips and Helen Kara

Policy Press, 2021

Reviewed by Ruthi Margulis, independent researcher

This book is aimed at all social researchers who are interested in learning how to use creative writing to collect, analyse and disseminate data and findings, but who do not have creative writing skills or training. A wide variety of methods are discussed, in a way that makes them accessible and relevant to social researchers at all levels. It also provides advice about reading other people's work, diary-keeping and editing, which are crucial elements of the creative writing process.

The authors believe that social research should have an element of creativity, and point out that creativity itself is a social practice and relational. They show how these two disciplines can

overlap and enhance each other. As both a social researcher and creative writer, I was delighted to come across this book, as storytelling is an element I try to use in my research to engage the reader and elicit an emotional response, with the aim of facilitating social or policy change. This is comprehensively discussed in chapter three, and backed up with contributions from researchers, making the processes and perspectives presented in the book real and accessible.

The text is well written and engaging. The introduction is broad and inclusive, and provides plenty of references and examples to show how creative writing has been used, so that the reader can

jump into the topic immediately. While this is a long book comprising only four chapters, these are divided into sub-sections so that the reader does not lose their way.

I would recommend this book to all qualitative social researchers, particularly those working in areas such as disability, equality, inclusion, diversity and marginalisation. These topics require a deeper understanding by policymakers and the public, and stories help to contextualise statistical data by illustrating the experiences of individuals and communities.



Titles for review



We are always looking for reviewers (SRA members only). 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. Please note that most publications are available as e-books only. Book reviews need to be submitted within 10 weeks of you receiving the book. Here are a few of the titles on offer:

Bias interrupted: creating inclusion for real and for good

Joan C Williams

Harvard Business Review, 2021

Creative research methods in education: principles and practices

Helen Kara, Narelle Lemon, Dawn Mannay and Megan McPherson

Policy Press, 2021

Critical realism for health and illness research: a practical introduction

Priscilla Alderson

Policy Press, 2021

Material methods. Researching and thinking with things

Sophie Woodward

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019

Researching in the age of COVID-19 – Volume I: response & reassessment

Helen Kara and Su-Ming Khoo

Policy Press, 2020

Researching in the age of COVID-19 – Volume II: care & resilience

Helen Kara and Su-Ming Khoo

Policy Press, 2020

Work placements, internships & applied social research

Jackie Carter

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Training courses in research methods

Currently all courses run online, in live sessions, with small groups of attendees (between nine and 16).

We intend to put on some face-to-face courses from April 2022. The majority of courses will continue to be run online. Please keep an eye on our website for future courses.

Our courses are designed to help you learn the practical application of research methods, and are led by experts in their field.

COSTS: SRA members: half day: £82.50; one day or two part-days: £165; two days or three part-days: £330. Non-members:

half day: £110; one day or two part-days: £220; two days or three part-days: £440.

Standard courses run over one day or two half days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

If you have any queries, please contact Lindsay: lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk

Full details of all courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk/training
All of the courses are still being run online using Zoom.

Evaluation

(All with Professor David Parsons)

20 January: Foundations of evaluation **FULL**

9 February: Impact evaluation (advanced) **FULL**

11 February: Research and evaluation project management

15 & 16 February: Theory-based evaluation: options and choices

8 March: Foundations of evaluation

10 March: Impact evaluation (advanced)

Qualitative

18 January: Digital qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

18 & 19 January: Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

20 January: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden **FULL**

25 to 27 January (3 part-days): Analysis of qualitative data, with NatCen **FULL**

26 January: Ethnographic methods, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

27 January: Reporting qualitative data, with NatCen

28 January: Grounded theory, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

2 February: Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly **FULL**

3 February: Narrative analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

3 & 4 February: Introduction to qualitative research, with NatCen

4 February: Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

8 February: Smartphones in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

9 February: Qualitative interviewing, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

10 February: Conducting online focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

10 & 11 February: Creative data analysis, with Dr Nicole Brown

17 & 18 February: Depth interviewing skills, with NatCen

24 & 25 February: Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research, with Dr Nicole Brown

2 March: Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

4 March: Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

15 March: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

25 March: Narrative analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

Quantitative

21 January: Introduction to sampling for social surveys, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

27 & 28 January (2 mornings): Questionnaire design, with NatCen

28 January: Understanding statistical concepts and essential tests, with Dr Valerija Kolbas

1 to 3 February (3 afternoons): Advanced questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

4 February: Introduction to R, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

22 & 23 February (2 mornings): Introduction to evidence reviews, with NatCen

25 February: Data management and visualisation with R, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

22 to 24 March (3 afternoons): Regression analysis using R, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

29 & 30 March (2 afternoons): 21 ways to test your survey questions, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

Other research skills

19 January: Data visualisation and infographic design, with Nigel Hawtin **FULL**

23 & 24 February: Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

1 & 2 March: Managing challenging interviews, with NatCen

15 March: Data visualisation and infographic design, with Nigel Hawtin

30 March: Introduction to participatory action research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

Spotlight on SRA activity

Training

www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Many qual, quant and evaluation courses are online.

Events

www.the-sra.org.uk/events

Blog

www.the-sra.org.uk/blog

Topical posts on researching.

Journal

www.the-sra.org.uk/journal

Read back issues and find out how to write an article for our free journal.

Resources

www.the-sra.org.uk/resources

Good practice guides and more.

Ethics

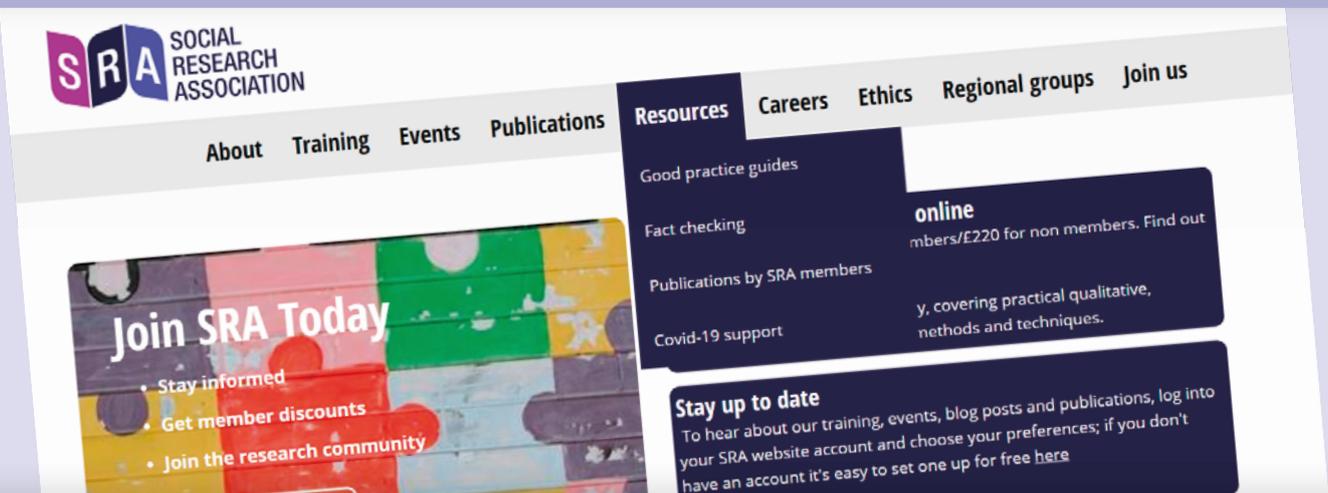
<https://the-sra.org.uk/Ethics>

An expert forum for members' queries, good practice guides and more.

Member resources

Log in, go to www.the-sra.org.uk then see 'members' section.

Free access to 5,500+ social science journals, data science training at a third off, and more.



research matters

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

Publication dates 2022

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Copy deadlines for 2022: **4 February** (March issue); **29 April** (June issue);

15 July (September issue); **7 October** (December issue).

Editorial team

- Andrew Phelps**, ONS (commissioning editor) • **Imogen Birch**, Citizens Advice
 • **Emma Carragher**, Home Office • **Andy Curtis**, Paul Hamlyn Foundation
 • **Jess Harris**, Kings College London • **Fiona Hutchison**, Diffley Partnership
 • **Eileen Irvin**, Ipsos MORI • **Patten Smith**, Ipsos MORI

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