

research matters



ESRC and UK social science funding

By Alison Park, deputy executive chair, Economic and Social Research Council

UK Research and Innovation

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) is the UK's largest public funder of research and innovation, investing £8 billion each year in its mission to advance knowledge, improve lives and drive growth. As well as cross-UKRI activity, key aspects of its work take place within seven disciplinary-focused research councils (including the Economic and Social Research Council, or ESRC, where I am based), with the organisation operating as an arm's-length body of the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT).



UKRI is developing a new five-year strategy to be published later this year. This will describe how UKRI will work with stakeholders and partners to drive research and innovation in the UK, contribute to the delivery of government priorities, and help companies to start, scale and stay.

Where does ESRC fit in?

ESRC's mission is to ensure the greatest public benefit from social science. It achieves this by funding world-leading research, data and postgraduate training in the economic, behavioural, social and data sciences. Project leads on ESRC grants are based within universities, research institutes and independent research organisations, but grants can include co-leads from a wider range of organisations.



Here are some key developments at ESRC of particular relevance to SRA members.

Curiosity-driven research

ESRC's budget for curiosity-driven research is rising from £66 million in 2026/27 to £73 million in 2029/30 as part of UKRI's broader commitment in this area. You may be wondering what I mean by curiosity-driven research. For ESRC, this is about supporting what we call 'applicant-led' social science research ideas generated by researchers. This can cover anything from early-stage exploration of an idea to major research programmes.

ESRC will be refreshing its applicant-led schemes over the next 12 to 18 months, with more details to come soon. In the meantime, current applicant-led (also known as 'responsive mode') opportunities remain open for applications. As part of the refresh, we've already launched two pilot opportunities – React and Connect – that fill gaps in our existing offer. ['React'](#) is aimed at time-critical research to support UK policymakers or frontline practitioners in public services, while ['Connect'](#) will support connections to scope, seed and grow emerging research fields and new areas of inquiry.

World-leading social science data infrastructure

Data infrastructure is a part of ESRC's portfolio that is particularly dear to my heart, as someone whose research career began back in the 1990s working on the British Social Attitudes survey at the National Centre for Social Research. By data infrastructure, I mean major data resources that benefit a wide range of researchers and evidence users across (and beyond) the social sciences. ESRC funds a broad range of key infrastructures that provide access to high-quality data generated through surveys (including

[Understanding Society](#) and the UK's first national birth cohort in a quarter of a century, [Generation New Era](#), administrative records (via [Administrative Data Research UK](#)) and smart data (via [Smart Data Research UK](#)). We are also supporting the development of innovative approaches to data collection and service provision in response to technological advances, including AI.

A pre-announcement about a future ESRC funding opportunity focused on training (both at doctoral level and more broadly) in data-driven research skills has been published with full call details to follow in June.

Research and Development Missions Accelerator Programme

ESRC provides oversight of the [Research and Development Missions Accelerator Programme](#), a cross-UKRI £500 million strategic initiative running until 2030. The programme addresses specific research and innovation challenges across the government's five mission areas, including the safer streets and opportunities missions.

Metascience

Finally, ESRC also hosts the [Metascience Unit](#), in collaboration with DSIT, which uses rigorous experimentation to examine UKRI's processes, and administers a competitive grants programme to identify more effective ways of funding and supporting research and innovation. The unit was established in 2024 with an initial £10 million budget, which has now been boosted to £49 million until 2030.

If you're interested in hearing more, do please look out for my colleague Beccy Shipman (ESRC deputy director of data strategy and infrastructure), who will be taking part in a panel discussion about research funding at the SRA conference this July.

What do you think of Research Matters?

Research Matters is for anyone interested in social research, whether working as a social researcher, using social research or just wanting to learn more about it.

The editorial team is keen to hear from readers what you think about the magazine. Are there any industry sectors, methods, or disciplines you would like to see included more often? Or other features or series you would like to suggest? Or would you like to write a regular column on an industry hot topic? Please email admin@the-sra.org.uk with any ideas. You do not necessarily need to contribute to any future features but are more than welcome to do so if you would like!



Research that listens, connects and looks ahead

Ed Dunn introduces the June 2026 edition of Research Matters

Welcome to the summer 2026 edition of Research Matters. This issue brings together a wide-ranging and thoughtful set of contributions that offer a vivid picture of social research today: outward-looking, methodologically curious, alert to inequality and deeply connected to the practical questions that shape people's lives.



The articles in this edition span funding, participation, climate and health, policy learning, emotional intelligence, ethnicity data, migration research and professional community-building. Varied in topic and perspective, they share a common seriousness of purpose. Each in its own way asks how social research can better understand the world and help improve it.

Several themes run through the issue. One is the value of listening and involving, not just collecting views, and recognising lived experience, professional judgement and community knowledge as essential parts of the research process. That comes through in Anh Ngoc Vu and Loc Duc Nguyen's article on co-constructing climate-health knowledge with informal outdoor workers in Vietnam, which shows what becomes possible when those most affected are treated as knowledge-holders rather than passive respondents. It is there too in Lorraine Simpson's piece on emotional intelligence, which argues that trust, sensitivity and relational skills are not optional extras but core to good evidence. Karen Lumsden's introduction to the Women in Qual research community also speaks to this theme, reminding us that strong research depends not only on methods

and tools but on the support networks that help people thrive in practice. These themes also connect with a conversation the SRA trustees have been having about our own theory of change: how we best support the profession, where we add value, and how we articulate our impact through training, networks, events, publications and advocacy. As this edition demonstrates, that impact extends beyond what the SRA delivers directly to the connections we help create, the standards we uphold, and the space we provide for reflection, learning and professional community. We'll share more as the work develops.

Another theme is the importance of strengthening the foundations of the field. Alison Park's piece on ESRC and UK social science funding is a timely reflection on the environment in which much of our work sits, and on the opportunities and pressures that come with a changing funding landscape. Matthew Flinders and Catherine Durose invite us to look again at the study of public policy, arguing that learning from success, not just failure, can unlock richer, more constructive forms of analysis. Alessandra Gaia and colleagues examine differential monetary incentives in social surveys, tackling a methodological question with practical implications for those concerned about response, representation and ethics. Elsewhere, the Understanding Society team explore how the fantastic study supports high-quality research on ethnicity and migration, while Jabeer Butt and colleagues argue powerfully for a racially just and co-ordinated data ecosystem. These are all, in different ways, articles about our infrastructure: the funding, methods, data and professional habits that make strong social research possible.

This edition also marks an important moment for Research Matters itself. We are celebrating Shirley Henderson as she retires from her role after 25 years of outstanding service to the magazine. Anyone who has worked on the publication will know just how much Shirley has contributed. She has brought care, consistency, judgement and professionalism to every issue, helping to shape the magazine through many changes in the wider publishing and research landscape. Publications like this depend on people whose work is high quality, coherent and trustworthy. Shirley has provided the SRA and Research Matters with that contribution for a quarter of a century, and we owe her a great deal. On behalf of everyone involved, I want to thank her warmly and wish her every happiness in retirement. At the same time, I am delighted to welcome Lamees Nuseibeh into the role and to begin the magazine's next chapter with Lamees at the helm.

My thanks go to everyone who has made this issue possible: our contributors, reviewers, editors and, of course, the editorial board, whose time, care and commitment continue to sustain the magazine. I am also very much looking forward to the [SRA annual conference](#) on 8 July. The conference is always a highlight of the year: a chance to hear new ideas, reconnect with colleagues, debate the challenges facing the profession and be reminded of the breadth, creativity and public value of social research. I hope to see many of you there. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this edition of Research Matters.

Living barometers: co-constructing climate-health knowledge with outdoor workers

By Anh Ngoc Vu, research director and principal investigator, National Centre for Social Research, and Loc Duc Nguyen, director of SocialLife Research Institute

Co-construction is not a decorative gesture. It is a political and methodological commitment to shifting who holds authority over knowledge and whose realities shape policy. This piece describes what that commitment looked like in practice when we worked alongside informal outdoor workers on climate-related health risks across four major Vietnamese cities – Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho – and what this approach surfaced that a standard design would have missed.

Workers as living barometers

Vietnam is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world, with climate impacts already costing an estimated 3.2% of GDP in 2020 and projected to reach 12 to 14.5% of GDP annually by 2050 (World Bank, 2022). Approximately 70% of Vietnam's labour force is employed informally (ILOSTAT, 2023), and informal outdoor workers, including street vendors, construction labourers, porters and motorbike taxi drivers, are among the first to experience climate-related disruptions, yet among the least protected (Weston-Stanley et al., 2026). They experience climate risk not as environmental data but as a daily working condition, a health risk and a determinant of income.

Across all four cities, the research documented a consistent phenomenon we term 'cảm xạ thời tiết', or embodied weather sensing: a systematic capacity workers develop through decades of direct

exposure, reading rain from shifts in wind direction, smelling approaching floods before water rises, sensing temperature changes through the skin. This is real-time climate monitoring with a precision no instrument yet replicates. Workers also register shifts in weather predictability over time. The phrase 'Before, rain had its seasons; now you just don't know how to prepare' appeared consistently across cities and occupational groups.¹ One Hanoi worker captured the bodily precision of this knowledge plainly: 'I can feel it right in my chest when the humidity's too high. It's not something a machine has to tell me.'

Workers described a collective pattern they call 'say nắng mãn tính', chronic heat illness, a condition absent from any clinical classification because the formal health system has never had to name something it does not treat (Vu, 2025). This is what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice: harm done to a person specifically as a knowing subject. The World Health Organization's Special Report on Social Participation in Health and Climate (WHO, 2025) makes the same point at a governance scale: excluding embodied knowledge from adaptation planning costs both equity and accuracy.

What co-construction actually meant

The principles behind co-construction are not new. They have been central to critical development research for decades (Cornwall, 2008). And yet the challenge persists: participatory

methods remain widely promoted but rarely embedded. In our research, this meant a sustained, four-phase practice rather than a methodological label.

The study involved 400 informal outdoor workers across two survey rounds, 43 in-depth interviews, and 141 extended field visits lasting between four and eight hours across Hanoi, Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho between April and August 2024. Workers shaped research questions, tested and revised survey instruments, co-analysed data in group sessions, and reviewed outputs before publication (Vu, 2025), consistent with Cornwall's (2008) distinction between participation as consultation and participation as genuine power-sharing.

One instance illustrates how co-construction improved the research itself. A street vendor observed that childcare responsibilities during heatwaves were absent from our draft survey. She was right. We restructured several items. The instrument improved, and so did our understanding of what we were studying.

Fieldwork followed the logic of extended accompaniment rather than scheduled interviewing. Researchers spent full working days alongside participants: on foot, on motorbikes and at rest stops. The field diary became a methodological tool: a space to register what had not been asked, what had been assumed and what still needed following up.



Three things the method surfaced

The knowledge-action gap is structural, not behavioural. The research found that chronic illness, low income, insecure housing and limited access to health infrastructure are significantly associated with increased susceptibility to climate-related health risks and reduced ability to cope ([Weston-Stanley et al, 2026](#)). Workers knew what protective action looked like, but faced structural barriers that made it unachievable. The economic logic is captured precisely in one Da Nang worker's account of why stopping during heat stress is not a real option: 'If I stop working when I feel dizzy, who will pay for dinner?' What policy frameworks call behavioural choices are in reality constrained decisions, calculated trade-offs between health and survival ([Whitmee et al, 2015](#)).²

Adaptation is collective, not individual. Peer networks function as informal early warning systems, exchanging microclimatic intelligence, providing mutual support and collectively assessing risk. Workers in Ho Chi Minh City described slowing down as a group when one member felt unwell: 'We take turns helping each other. It's not just one person's problem.' These are not coping strategies: they are critical, systematically undervalued components of adaptive capacity that never appear in formal assessments.

Resilience has a ceiling. Workers were not simply enduring; they were exhausted by having to endure. Mental health conditions and lack

of digital access further constrain perceived coping ability, reflecting not only differential exposure but deeper structural constraints on the capabilities required to avoid harm and adapt ([Weston-Stanley et al, 2026](#)). Peer solidarity fills a structural gap that formal protection should occupy, and workers know it.

From co-construction to co-design

Workers co-developed the survey instrument, which we came to call the 'living barometer' tool, reflecting their capacity to sense, record and interpret climate-health data through their bodies and experience. They also collaborated in building the Intelligent Climate Alert Network, a geographic information systems-enabled mobile app delivering localised weather-health alerts, identifying critical features, testing prototypes and shaping functionality. Many became regular users and peer promoters, an outcome that illustrates how knowledge co-production yields tools that continue to serve the communities involved ([Vu, 2025](#); [Palmeiro-Silva et al, 2026](#)).

Workers also participated as co-interpreters alongside government and civil society actors in a series of deliberative roundtables, covered by local media in a country where this kind of horizontal policy dialogue is rare. This reframing, from workers as research subjects to workers as knowledge authorities, is precisely what the Belém Health Action Plan calls for through its emphasis on democratic dialogue and bottom-up approaches to climate-health governance ([WHO, 2025](#)).

Practical lessons

- ▶ **Build in more time than the timeline allows.** Our most important methodological insights came from the eighth hour of a field visit, not the first.
- ▶ **Treat discordant data as a signal.** Not all workers wanted to participate in network-building activities, a finding in tension with the study's participatory optimism. We kept it in because honesty about limits is part of the method.
- ▶ **Name epistemic injustice as a policy problem.** No existing data mechanism in Vietnam currently captures what workers' bodies are registering as input for climate planning. That is a systematic gap in the governance architecture, not a gap in the knowledge itself.
- ▶ **Informal workers do not need to be empowered.** They are already adapting, analysing and organising. What they need is recognition, redistribution and policy designed with them rather than for them.

Further information:

www.climate-health-vietnam.org

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- ¹ Nguyen, D.L., and Vu, N.A. (forthcoming) Sach Xanh 2026/Green Book 2: climate change and informal outdoor workers in urban Vietnam. SocialLife Research Institute.
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METHODS



PUBLIC POLICY

Beyond blunders: why public policy needs to 'walk on the bright side'

By Matthew Flinders, professor of politics and public policy, University of Sheffield, and Catherine Durose, professor of public policy, University of Liverpool



Across many countries, including the UK, there is a widespread sense of democratic despair, as public trust and confidence in democracy have declined to worrying levels. One driver of this 'doom loop' is a growing sense that democratic government is failing, struggling to learn from its failures and unable to deliver successful policies. But is there a problem in looking at UK policymaking only through this lens of dysfunction? And is there an alternative?

Recent work from leading UK policy scholars calls for us to consider how to chart a more 'positive' future direction and look 'beyond blunders'.

A focus on failure

Even a cursory analysis of the literature on 20th-century UK politics, from Suez to the omnishambles of Brexit, reveals a dominant negative framing around a failure to manage or cope with crises. Across the study of public policy and administration, failure also provides a unifying theme. This work is important and reflects a core concern of political science: asking critical questions about power and how it works in order to support transparency and demand accountability.

But such is the dominance of failure-focused studies of UK politics that 'governing incompetence' has arguably become the 'self-evident truth' and a foundational assumption of the discipline. And yet, as Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom (2000) argued, the 'danger of self-evident truths' is that they are often wrong, or at the very least can cast an oversimplistic shadow on a complex reality.

Does this negativity-bias risk creating an intellectual form of path dependency in which examples of successful public policy are rarely acknowledged, let alone studied? In a context of democratic challenge, does a focus on failure fuel populist pressures?

Walking on the bright side: a focus on success

In adopting this dominant focus on failure, have UK political studies unwittingly overlooked successful public policies?

The emerging international subfield of 'positive public policy' (PoPP) would argue 'yes'. PoPP has its roots in the work of Elinor Ostrom, who encouraged scholars of public policy to seek out policy arrangements that work and then explain them, arguing that what works in practice can work in theory.

Building on existing work on positive psychology, the positive turn in policy studies is about better understanding how and why particular policies work and deliver valuable social outcomes, and how understanding this can improve policy learning.

PoPP is dedicated to the balanced analysis of policy success and failure and provides a rich and novel body of scholarship to test in the context of British politics, where it has so far been conspicuously absent.

Mapping successful public policy

In 2009, British political scientist Philip Cowley presented a three-part BBC Radio 4 series called 'Where did it all go right?', exploring three examples of what were widely hailed as successful

public policy (making seat belts in cars compulsory, inward investment into the Japanese car industry, and the introduction of the minimum wage).

Indeed, once we start looking for successes in UK policymaking, we can see them. Think of the smoking ban, the sugar tax and auto-enrolment in pensions. Focusing on success also brings analytical depth and new questions to the study of public policy. Where do policy successes begin? How do they travel and scale? Under what conditions is success more likely? Who benefits from policy success? Is success immediate, or can success emerge from failure?

The politics of policy success

Positive public policy is also catching on in government. In December 2024, cabinet minister Pat McFadden placed the analysis of policy success at the core of the government's new 'test and learn' strategy for public service reform: 'Let's take some encouragement from some things that have gone right.'

By highlighting the existence of a dominant and intense negativity bias within the discipline, PoPP makes a potentially transformational argument about the past, present and future of political studies in the UK.

It argues that identifying and learning from success – alongside failure – could not only increase the scientific range and rigour of UK political studies but also its relevance at a time of democratic turbulence.

A full version of the 'beyond blunders' approach is available [online](#).

Differential monetary incentives in social surveys

By Alessandra Gaia, Matt Brown and Lisa Calderwood, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, and Gerry Nicolaas and Curtis Jessop, National Centre for Social Research



Survey response rates continue to decline and budgets are increasingly tight. Monetary incentives have become an important tool for improving survey participation, but offering everyone the same payment may not be the most effective use of limited resources. Could offering higher incentives to particular population subgroups improve both participation and representativeness without breaking the budget?

This is the central question behind a project led by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, in collaboration with the National Centre for Social Research, and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the [Survey Futures programme](#). The project examines 'differential monetary incentives', in which the amount offered varies between participants, and asks how these should be targeted, how their cost-effectiveness can be assessed and whether they can be justified ethically.

What we know so far

Our review of both published and unpublished work, carried out with direct input from survey managers and practitioners, highlights a striking gap between practice and evidence. While differential incentives are widely used in the UK, robust experimental evaluation remains limited.

Evidence on which socio-demographic groups respond most strongly to incentives is inconsistent across countries and time. US research suggests that, in longitudinal studies, offering higher incentives to previous wave non-respondents can improve participation. In the UK, as far as we are aware, experimental evidence is limited to one study ([Next Steps Age 32](#)), which found little support for targeting based on prior participation.

Two other approaches show promise. Early-bird incentives, which reward respondents for participating in the first weeks of fieldwork, have improved early response, boosting fieldwork efficiency and increasing the share of interviews completed online, even if final response rates often converge with those of standard approaches.

Non-response conversion incentives, involving additional payments offered to sample members who have not participated by a set date, have shown promising results, for example in the Early Life Cohort Feasibility Study, though again, UK evidence remains limited.

New experimental evidence from the UK

Targeting higher incentives at specific subgroups is more straightforward in longitudinal studies, where researchers already hold information about participants. In cross-sectional surveys, it is considerably harder. Most samples are drawn from the Postcode Address File, which contains only addresses and no socio-demographic information, such as income, education or ethnicity. As a result, targeting is usually based on area-level information linked to postcode, most commonly the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which tends to correlate with response rates.

We are currently evaluating this approach using experimental data from the 2025 British Social Attitudes survey, where people living in higher-deprivation areas were offered a higher incentive (and vice versa) for a random half of the sample, while the same incentive was offered across all groups in the other half of the sample. Results on representativeness, data quality and cost efficiency will be published on the Survey Futures website.

Are they ethical?

Differential incentives raise genuine ethical questions. Is it fair for some participants to receive more than others for completing the same survey? How should researchers balance equality, treating everyone the same, against equity, where incentives are adjusted to reduce barriers faced by particular groups? And how can differential payments be communicated in ways that preserve trust, protect dignity and ensure participation remains voluntary?

Further questions arise around survey burden: should incentive levels reflect differences in time commitment or mode of data collection? In longitudinal studies, where incentive strategies may need to change across waves, how can these decisions be managed transparently and consistently?

At present, there are no widely adopted ethical guidelines for using differential incentives. This project aims to develop a practitioner guide with clear, ethically grounded principles to support consistent ethical decisions and reduce uncertainty for applicants and review committees.

Building on a prior ESRC-funded project ([SRA Research Matters September 2024](#)), we convened a workshop with research ethics committees, survey sponsors and survey providers. The resulting guidance will be published on the Survey Futures website.

The project's evidence and recommendations were presented at a survey practice workshop held in June for agencies, government stakeholders, funders and principal investigators.

Why emotional intelligence matters in social research

By Lorraine Simpson, founder and MD, The Lines Between

Technical competence underpins excellent social research, but it is not the only requirement. Social skills and emotional intelligence are core professional competencies that shape how evidence is generated, interpreted and used. Research is more credible and influential when researchers build trust, exercise sound interpersonal judgement and communicate clearly.



At Lines Between, we treat these competencies as integral to research design and delivery. High-quality research depends not only on robust methodologies but also on effective engagement with participants, clients and stakeholders.

In social research, social skills and emotional intelligence extend beyond basic courtesy or interpersonal ease. Such skills are applied capabilities: facilitating participation, establishing trust, managing group dynamics and using accessible, non-judgemental language.

Emotional intelligence includes self-awareness, recognition of personal biases, sensitivity to power relations and the ability to respond with empathy while maintaining boundaries. These are not secondary or 'soft' attributes but integral to ethical practice and research quality. Researchers must be curious without becoming intrusive and warm without compromising boundaries.

These competencies are particularly important when researching seldom-heard communities. Effective approaches require collaboration and sustained engagement to build trust and establish credibility.

Our work with MECOPP (Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project) on gambling harms within Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland illustrates this. Trust was a precondition for

meaningful engagement. We partnered with MECOPP to train their team to gather data through a credible process grounded in community knowledge.

A similar principle underpins our approach to research tool development. We routinely pilot research questions with participants to test language and framing. This improves evidence quality, reduces misunderstanding and respects participants' perspectives.

Social skills and emotional intelligence directly impact data collection quality. Without them, research may meet ethical requirements but fail participants. Interviews can remain surface-level, consultations may feel extractive, and findings may struggle to resonate beyond the report.

In sensitive or emotionally charged research, methodological competence alone is insufficient. Researchers must recognise verbal and non-verbal cues, judge when to reframe questions and create psychological safety for open responses. When participants feel rushed or misunderstood, accounts are often partial or shaped by discomfort.

These capabilities also matter during dissemination. Poorly communicated research can limit uptake regardless of analytical quality. Judgement is needed about how different audiences engage with evidence. Community audiences may need concise summaries or visual formats, while academic audiences require technical reporting. The skill lies in calibrating communication without compromising accuracy.

Social skills and emotional intelligence can be strengthened through practice, reflection and supervision. At Lines Between, we develop these competencies through organisational and methodological support.

Early career development involves observation and guided practice. Our induction process includes shadowing interviews and reflecting on boundaries,

power and listening, reinforcing the importance of excellent engagement alongside technical execution.

At mid-career, the focus shifts to professional judgement in complex settings. Researchers manage emotionally intense interviews, facilitate discussions across power imbalances and engage with senior stakeholders. These demands require self-reflection and adaptability. Researchers also mentor others, modelling ethical sensitivity and analytical rigour.

At senior levels, leaders ensure support structures for teams working on emotionally demanding topics. We provide quarterly supervision with a clinical psychologist and daily team meetings to share challenges.

Specialist training, such as cultural awareness and trauma-informed practice, reinforces preparation, reflection and support structures. While these arrangements reflect our context, principles like supervision and recognition of emotional labour are adaptable across research settings.

Academic institutions and professional bodies must treat these competencies as core standards. Social skills and emotional intelligence are interdependent with technical competence in real-world research.

Our partnership with Edinburgh Napier University's master's programme in social research bridges formal training and relational realities. Social research training must prepare researchers to navigate power, trust and professional boundaries with care.

Social skills and emotional intelligence are integral to professional practice. They shape whether research is trusted, participation is meaningful and findings influence policy and practice. These capabilities must be visible in training, supervision, recruitment and assessment – not treated as informal virtues outside professional standards.

Enhancing Understanding Society's potential for research on ethnicity and migration

Alita Nandi, associate director (Outreach) for Understanding Society and Tiago Nascimento, survey data officer at the Institute for Social and Economic Research; and Lucinda Platt, professor of social policy and sociology, LSE

Understanding Society and research on ethnicity and immigration

[Understanding Society](#), the UK Household Longitudinal Study, has, since its inception in 2009, explicitly facilitated [research into issues relating to ethnicity and immigration](#). These have included differences across ethnic and immigrant groups in labour market and health outcomes, patterns of family formation, wellbeing and wealth, and social and political behaviours, as well as religiosity and identity. It has achieved this through oversamples of ethnic minorities and immigrants, and through dedicated content, which was the subject of extensive consultation in 2007/08 and ongoing engagement with the academic and policy community since.

Review of ethnicity and immigration content ahead of Wave 20

In anticipation of a proposed ethnic minority boost in Wave 20 (the 2028/29 survey round), which will refresh the sample, add respondents and enable the future long-term study of salient topics, we embarked on a thorough review of ethnicity- and immigration-related content. This will help ensure the study continues to provide its more than 4,000 annual users (46,598 data users from 2009 to 2024) with the ability to address contemporary and long-term consequential issues, without increasing respondent burden.

The aims of this exercise were threefold: 1) to highlight questionnaire content with a view to cutting it, and by these means, 2) to reduce the overall length and respondent burden, while 3) allowing some scope to identify

important (new) areas not currently covered, or not effectively covered, which could be incorporated from Wave 20. This involved the following steps.

First, we drew on the study's [publications library](#) (manual searches were supplemented by the AI tool Elicit) to measure the frequency of use of each question or variable, and we flagged for possible cutting all questions and variables that had been used two or fewer times.

Second, we initiated an [open online consultation in 2025](#), inviting views on the proposed cuts, including correcting the record where any of the flagged questions or variables had been used more often than we were aware of, and plans for future use.

Third, we held targeted consultations in early 2026 with groups of both academic and policy/practitioner users of the study to better identify the current and future research interests the study was aiming to meet, and to gather further targeted feedback on proposed cuts and possible additions.

Key findings

Through this process, we identified a number of important issues to take forward:

- ▶ The full range of relevant content was not always well known – and, in some cases, requests were made for content that was already carried; this exercise therefore helped to advertise the richness of the ethnicity and immigration data already carried in the first 16 waves of Understanding Society and, we hope, to encourage further use for insightful, policy-relevant analysis of topics relating to ethnicity and migration



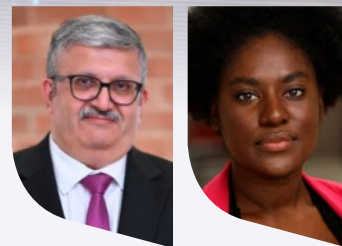
- ▶ We were helpfully alerted to existing use of the data by organisations for their internal reports that we had not previously been aware of; for example, around [remittances](#), where Understanding Society provides a unique resource
- ▶ We were able to clarify some of the reasons why content that seemed promising was, in fact, unable to deliver insightful results – largely as a consequence of applying only to small samples – such as questions on [blocked promotion opportunities](#)
- ▶ Finally, and most importantly, we gained a much clearer idea of changes in the research landscape and new priorities as the political and legal environment changes

Reflections on the consultation process

While the online consultation was a useful stepping stone, response rates were low, and it was the targeted, invited consultation meetings that proved the most fruitful. While the former remains an important strategy in terms of transparency and reach, the latter provides valuable opportunities both to communicate the existing research potential offered by the study and to ensure that it continues to meet users' needs into the future.

We are grateful to all those who participated in the consultation.

Building a racially just data ecosystem



Jabeer Butt, chief executive; Lauren Golding, communications and public affairs manager; Halima Cooper-Stubbs, policy officer; and Shreya Banerjee, communications and events officer at the Race Equality Foundation

Systematic ethnicity data collection and use are key to identifying structural inequalities, how to address them, and holding institutions accountable for advancing racial equity. However, persistent challenges around quality, completeness and availability still hinder these efforts.

[Research by the Race Equality Foundation](#) explored the current state of ethnicity data design, collection, access and use as part of the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Insight Infrastructure programme](#). The findings highlight the need for a more inclusive, co-ordinated and racially just data ecosystem.

Design: balancing standardisation with lived identity

A persistent challenge in ethnicity data collection is striking a balance between the need for standardised, comparable datasets and the complexity of racial and ethnic identity. Inconsistent categorisation across datasets can reduce analytical usefulness and limit the ability to track inequalities over time.

Many of our research participants called for stronger alignment with the 2021 Census categories to improve comparability. At the same time, concerns remain that rigid standardisation of ethnicity and racial categories can lead to feelings of exclusion or erasure, particularly for individuals whose identities do not comfortably fit predefined categories.

Designing ethnicity data with a clear analytical purpose, rather than as a compliance exercise, helps ensure the data captured reflects lived experience, supporting inclusivity. Our research points towards a balanced, purpose-driven approach: combining standardised tick-box categories with free-text fields allows datasets to remain comparable while capturing nuance.

Collection: trust as a prerequisite for participation

Reluctance to disclose ethnicity remains a barrier to high-quality and complete datasets. Participants highlighted widespread distrust about how ethnicity data will be used, shaped by historic and ongoing extractive, stigmatising or harmful data practices.

Building trust requires transparency and competence. Researchers and institutions must communicate why ethnicity data is being collected, how it will be used and how it will contribute to addressing racial inequalities. Mandatory and regularly updated racial literacy training for those collecting data is key.

Trust can also be built through equitable co-design. Working alongside peer researchers and community organisations ensures data collection is relevant, respectful and grounded in existing relationships. This approach improves participation and research legitimacy.

Access: removing barriers to effective use

Even when high-quality ethnicity data exists, access barriers often prevent it being used to advance racial justice. Paywalls, licensing restrictions and specialist technical skill requirements can make datasets effectively inaccessible.

Voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations are often best equipped to understand and respond to community needs, but they face prohibitive costs, with some datasets carrying licensing fees exceeding £15,000. This limits their ability to evidence inequalities and design effective services.

Addressing this requires data democratisation. Policymakers and data holders must remove financial and technical barriers through free or subsidised access, user-friendly data

portals and clear ethical pathways for community organisations to use ethnicity data. The [Insight Infrastructure programme](#) demonstrates how accessible, collaborative data can strengthen community-led policy engagement. This approach can be applied to the development of racially just policy interventions and legislation.

Looking forward: building capability for long-term change

Fewer than a third of organisations in our survey provided training on how to access, use and analyse ethnicity data for staff responsible for collecting it. This is a missed opportunity: a racially just and co-ordinated data ecosystem requires researchers and analysts who are confident and competent in carrying out inclusive collection and analysis.

The research highlighted that limited racial literacy and insufficient ethical guidance on collecting ethnicity data can lead to poor communication with service users, low completion rates and an overuse of 'Other' categories – all of which weaken data quality. Mandatory, ongoing anti-racist data training should therefore be a core component of high-quality data practice.

Conclusion

Making siloed changes to design, collection or application is not enough. Advancing racial justice requires interoperability alongside cross-sector co-ordination and alignment. Through collaboration, intentionality and co-design with affected communities, a more inclusive and racially just data ecosystem is within reach.

Introducing the Women in Qual (WIQ) research community

By Karen Lumsden, director of Qualitative Training, founder of WIQ and SRA trainer

In March this year, I launched the **Women in Qual (WIQ) research community**. It was clear from discussions with other qualitative researchers that there was a need for a community space that is more than a professional network: one that provides its members with the opportunity to share knowledge and skills, support and mentor one another, keep up to date with important trends in the field, access expert advice and guidance, network, and share and promote opportunities.



Women in qualitative research and training

I've been fortunate to deliver qualitative training for the SRA for over eight years. During this time, I've observed a consistent pattern on my training courses – the vast majority of attendees are women. Often, in spontaneous moments and conversations during training sessions, attendees will share their experiences of working in research, the challenges they encounter, and the questions they have about qualitative research, professional development and jobs.

They might be conducting qualitative research in a largely quantitative (and/or male-dominated) space and not have colleagues or networks to turn to with their questions or challenges. They might be early in their research career and journey, and have more specific questions about the practicalities of, for example, data collection and analysis, and/or their future professional development. Or they might be working remotely on their own, as a solopreneur

or freelancer, and not have a community or mentors to turn to with their questions or challenges.

Qualitative research can be emotional and brings up unique, context-specific challenges

Qualitative research and its related methods and approaches often require deep emotional engagement, close interaction with participants and reflexivity. WIQ is a community that can also support researchers with the emotional and practical challenges of research, and answer questions we often don't fully explore in training courses because of their context-specific nature (for example, how to practice reflexivity, how to improve interviewing skills, support participants and so on).

Qualitative research is also rooted in understanding human experiences, stories and social contexts. Women have played a central role in shaping these approaches, bringing perspectives that emphasise empathy, relational ethics and nuanced interpretation. Despite these contributions, many women researchers still face structural challenges, such as underrepresentation in senior roles or limited access to mentorship, and are balancing professional and personal responsibilities. As it develops and grows, WIQ will help explore and contribute to ways we can address these gaps.

A community for connection, networking and mentoring

The community aims to promote connection and networking: opportunities for members to share their work and struggles, provide feedback

to each other and discuss research challenges. Because qualitative research (including its methods and design) is so context-dependent, a community that facilitates problem-solving and experience-sharing in this way will be invaluable.

Inclusivity in communities

Inclusivity is a guiding principle for the community. We recognise diversity within the membership, including across race, ethnicity, geography, career stage and methodological approach. By actively fostering inclusive practices, the community will ensure that a wide range of voices and perspectives are represented and valued.

The community also aims to empower its members so they can thrive as professional researchers, practitioners or scholars. Research does not need to be done or experienced in isolation, but rather in conversation with others.

How to get involved

We already have over 500 members in the community from across the globe. WIQ is open to women, non-binary and transgender researchers from all research industries and organisations, and at any stage of their qualitative research journey (that is, PhD students, apprentices and postdocs, through to professional researchers at various levels of industry and research leaders). It is also open to qualitative researchers working in consultancy, as freelancers or as solopreneurs.

If you'd like to join the community, you can subscribe to the WIQ newsletter to receive details of our next free monthly virtual networking meeting [here](#).

You can also follow the [WIQ LinkedIn page](#).



The Research Matters interview: Shirley Henderson

Where did those 25 years go?

Shirley Henderson has been the technical editor for Research Matters for 25 years and is now retiring. We can't thank Shirley enough for her dedication, enthusiasm and professional skills in keeping the SRA magazine on the rails for so long. Happy retirement, Shirley!

Q. Tell us a bit about yourself

A. I set up my business in 1996 specialising in clear writing and editing for voluntary and public sector organisations. I also worked as a senior consultant with Blake Stevenson Ltd which led to me applying for the contract with the SRA.

My work included training lawyers in plain writing techniques and being seconded to the Scottish Government to assist with materials for its national training strategy on violence against women. Latterly, I became an advanced professional member of the Chartered Institute for Editing and Proofreading. Although, for the SRA, my job was primarily copyediting, a friend described my general role as 'syncretic' (I had to look it up too), with what I learned in one job (content and process) beneficial to other clients. It's hard, even for me, to condense almost 50 years of paid work into a paragraph.

Q. How long have you been involved with RM and what's your role been?

A. I began editing what was the 'SRA News' in 2001. The role was to help the SRA publish its quarterly magazine by editing the text (not the content/subject matter) and managing the design and print process.

Q. How has your role changed over the years?

A. It's stayed much the same: working between the commissioning editor and the designer/printer.

The publishing process has changed and so too the SRA and the purpose of the magazine which, in 2001, was one of the few benefits for its 600 members. Over time, the SRA developed a news bulletin, a research methods journal, a training programme and a website.

Originally, I was sent (by post) various disparate bits of paper with news and minutes and so on which I had to type out into one document and edit, and which then went to a typesetter/printer (a person not a machine). There was a lengthy process of approvals as the proofs had to be posted to me (snail mail) so I could mark them up and post them back. There were several iterations before it went to print (hard copy) as PDFs hadn't been invented and email was limited. Making changes was difficult and the process took a while.

Over time, changes included moving away from hard-copy printing, improvements in software and communications, and proofing changes marked directly onto PDFs and emailed. Text could be cut while in design, and it became easier to fit content onto 16 pages through adding design elements.

Q. Any changes to the magazine?

A. The magazine went from what now looks like a pretty amateurish effort on cheap paper to a quality production. Now it's entirely digital. There's more scope for including images and hyperlinks. It doesn't have to fit on multiples of four pages, and costs have been cut by not printing or posting it. That's better

for the environment too. It no longer carries 'news' because that would be out of date before we'd even started. There are few 'internal' reports of SRA meetings or research findings, and more on methods and the social research profession.

Q. How has the SRA changed?

A. The SRA was run by a voluntary committee with help from a part-time administrator. At one point, it nearly folded. A small team kept the association going, professionalised it and appointed a CEO to oversee it. It had to be reliably income-generating with more focus on increasing membership through its popular training courses and other features. This included redesigning SRA News to become Research Matters with an improved look and content.

Q. And what about social research?

A. I'm a writer/editor and not a social researcher. But, early on, there seemed to be debates about 'qual v quant'; then everything became 'evidence-based'; and more recently there has been much discussion about how to collect that evidence, for example through online methods and participatory approaches, with more awareness of equality, diversity and inclusion and how that affects who is doing social research, how, why, where and with whom.

Q. What's been the highlight of your time with us?

A. I suppose in leaving, it's good to hear that Research Matters 'runs like a well-oiled machine'. It's a great team effort and I'm pleased to have been part of that.

Q. And what's next?

A. No screens on lovely summer days. More hillwalking, cycling, reading and fun with grandchildren.

Beyond belief: how evidence shows what really works

Helen Pearson

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2026

Reviewed by Tina Haux, chief executive, SRA



I approached this book with particular interest, as Helen Pearson has previously written an excellent book on the British birth cohort studies, [The life project](#).

[Beyond belief: how evidence shows what really works](#) is about the power of evaluating programmes, specifically the ability to judge whether an intervention works or not based on randomised controlled trials (RCTs). I heard Helen talk about her book at an event recently, where she argued that she used the history of RCTs to tell a story. And she does that effortlessly by focusing on individuals such as Iain Chalmers, arguably the grandfather of RCTs (or should that be Archie Cochrane – you decide), who was surprised by the range of advice given to pregnant women for the same problem to the extent that one of his first questions to a new patient became who the treating doctor was. He went on to pursue medical research, conducting systematic reviews of medical trials to establish which treatments were effective, which were not and which potentially caused harm. Alongside figures such as Archie Cochrane and James Lind, Chalmers pushed for more medical trials and for basing medical decisions on evidence rather than eminence. The combined efforts of many scholars led to the establishment of the Cochrane Collaboration, bringing together evidence from trials worldwide. This became the model for the Campbell Collaboration, focusing on the social sciences.

After setting out the evolution of RCTs and systematic reviews to form the new evidence base in medicine, Pearson draws the reader's attention to their applications in other fields such as international development, policing, education, parenting and the use of evidence during the pandemic. This journey takes in the relatively enthusiastic adoption of RCTs and systematic reviews in international development, particularly in poverty reduction, as well as greater hesitancy and implementation barriers in other fields, such as policing.

The chapter on parenting discusses the quality of evidence on the merits or otherwise of banning smartphones and social media for young people. Here Pearson recounts discussions with her own teenage children, demonstrating – if any more convincing was needed at this stage – that policy interventions touch all our lives. The question of whether there is a causal link between the increase in mental ill-health and social media use among young people today is particularly relevant to the UK, given the current debate about banning social media for young people. In this instance, there are no trials to fall back on and their absence is keenly felt by politicians, educators and parents trying to make decisions in this area.

In the final chapters, Pearson sets out how to join the evidence revolution and suggests what is needed to adopt RCTs and systematic reviews more widely.

In particular, more needs to be done to:

- ▶ Embed an evidence culture across sectors such as schools, NGOs, the police and businesses
- ▶ Translate the findings into practice through better communication and improving the accessibility of systematic reviews
- ▶ Combine evidence with local knowledge by paying attention to community values and practical constraints
- ▶ Carry on innovating – particularly relevant in the UK following publication of the updated Magenta Book – and be willing to admit when we don't know

Overall, Pearson combines storytelling with a solid grasp of the history and technical details, yet brings a contemporary lens to the subject matter. She is a compelling advocate for evidence production and applications while well aware of the challenges of conducting RCTs in the social world. Based on over 500 interviews, the book shows deep learning about evidence while wearing that knowledge lightly.

I enjoyed this book as someone who is familiar with much of the history and technical detail it discusses. However, I have no doubt that a broader readership, such as funders and commissioners, will find the book similarly entertaining as it sheds light on the development of RCTs and their applications across different fields of study and regions of the world.

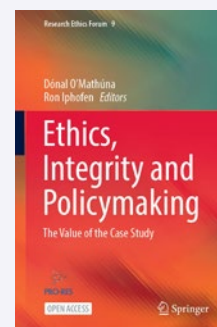
Ethics, integrity and policymaking: the value of the case study

Research ethics forum series: volume 9

(ed. with Dónal O'Mathúna, Ron Iphofen)

SPRINGER, 2022

Reviewed by Ross Goldstone, research manager, the Health Foundation



'Ethics, integrity and policymaking: the value of the case study' is an open-access edited book that showcases ethical issues related to the use of evidence in policymaking. It aims to encourage critical reflection through a diverse range of context-rich case studies.

The book provides several examples of ethical issues that are diverse in disciplinary focus, national context and topic of interest, with chapters covering research into semiconductor technology, AI, space exploration and violent conflict. Alongside this disciplinary diversity, the book explores cases that represent key and complex ethical dilemmas. These include challenges

to research integrity, from tensions between legal obligations of disclosure and confidentiality to covert research and researchers performing illegal acts.

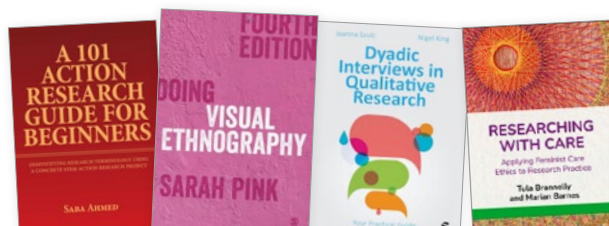
Consequently, the book offers a useful introduction to some of the core concepts in research integrity and ethics, including an informative chapter on the origins of responsible research and innovation (RRI) in Europe. The range of topics covered is undoubtedly a strength of the book. However, this is slightly tempered by its demand for background knowledge in research ethics and policymaking, which may render it inaccessible to some audiences. Likewise, the case studies presented are highly descriptive.

This limits the analytical potential of each chosen case study to connect the practical examples with broader relevant concepts. It also undermines the book's objective of demonstrating 'the value of the case study'.

Nonetheless, the book offers much to a range of audiences, including those interested in research governance and standards setting, the internationalisation of RRI, and the application of research integrity principles to new technologies such as AI. Overall, the book makes a useful contribution to understanding the complex link between research ethics and policymaking, an area of interest to researchers and policymakers alike.

REVIEWS

Titles for review



We are always looking for reviewers (SRA members only) to write a short review for us. 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 publications are available as eBooks only. Book reviews need to be submitted within 10 weeks of you receiving the book. Here are the titles on offer:

A 101 action research guide for beginners: demystifying research terminology using a concrete STEM action research project

Saba Ahmed
Peter Lang, 2024

Doing visual ethnography – fourth edition

Sarah Pink
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

Dyadic interviews in qualitative research: your practical guide

Joanna Szulc and Nigel King
SAGE Publications Ltd, 2024

Researching with care: applying feminist care ethics to research practice

Tula Brannelly and Marian Barnes
Policy Press, 2022

SRA training

Unless otherwise stated, all courses are run online using Zoom. In-person courses are held in London or Edinburgh. Online courses run over one day or two half-days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

New dates and courses are being added all the time (and only courses with space are shown below). So for latest info please visit www.the-sra.org.uk/training or contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Costs: **online**: SRA members: one day or two part-days: £190; two days or three part-days: £380. Non-members: one day or two part-days: £245; two days or three part-days: £490; **in person**: SRA members: £230; non-members: £300.

If you have any queries, please contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Full details of all courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Evaluation

2 & 3 July (2 mornings): Theory-based evaluation: options and choices, with Professor David Parsons

6 & 7 July (2 mornings): Building and using a theory of change, with Professor David Parsons

9 July: Research and evaluation project management for project leaders, with Professor David Parsons

10 July: Management for commissioned research and evaluation, with Professor David Parsons

Qualitative

1 July: Writing up qualitative data, with Dr Karen Lumsden

21 July: Introduction to participatory action research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

30 July: AI-assisted qualitative data analysis, with Dr Christina Silver

26 August: Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

9 & 10 September: Focus group design and moderation, with Dr Karen Lumsden

10 & 11 September (2 afternoons):

Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

29 September: Introduction to qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

30 September: Introduction to focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

1 & 2 October (2 afternoons): Creative data analysis, with Dr Nicole Brown

6 October: Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

7 October: Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

Quantitative

3 July: Introduction to R for social researchers, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

18 September: Introduction to sampling for social surveys, with Dr Alexandru Cernat

22 & 23 September: Questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

Other research skills

14 July (in person, in Birmingham): Ripple-effect mapping with Sophi Ducie and Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn

7 & 8 September (2 mornings): Using AI responsibly in social research, with Reema Patel

10 September: An introduction to behavioural science, with Bev Bishop

10 & 11 September (2 mornings): Introduction to deliberative methods, with Sophie Reid

21 September: Consultancy skills for social researchers, with Professor Simon Haslam

23 September: Introduction to equity-based trauma-informed research, with Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis

30 September: Applying equity-based trauma-informed research in practice, with Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis

6 October (in person, in Leeds): Creative and inclusive workshop design for power sharing, with Skye Curtis and Sophi Ducie

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

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

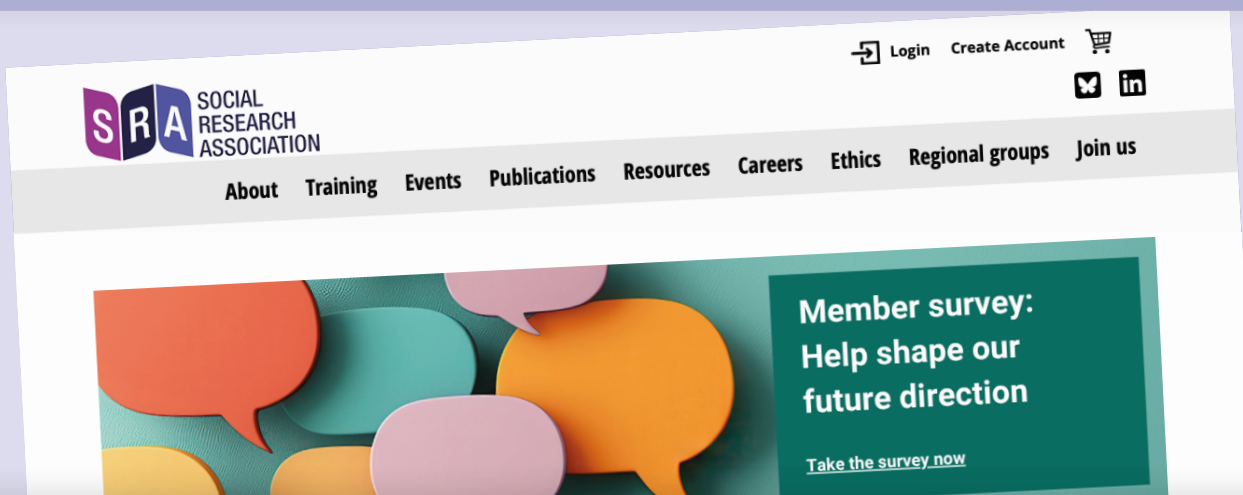
www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics

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.

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