MARCH:2020

SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

research matters

Blurring boundaries and crossing frontiers in social research: SRA annual conference

On 10 December the Royal College of Physicians was packed with 300 delegates at our annual conference. Huge thanks to the presenters whose plenary, workshop and masterclass sessions did so much to make this a useful and worthwhile event. Slides and audio from their presentations are now available on our website.

We had great feedback including:

'This was the first time I had been to the conference – really useful to meet so many people doing interesting work especially from within government. Very friendly atmosphere – and importantly, one where I felt there was no such thing as a stupid question as people were working on such different subjects/methods. It gave me [a] broader perspective and lots of context to think about, as well as some learning about topics I knew nothing about.'

'It was great to feel part of the wider research community and remember how we should be linked across government, academia, charities and other research organisations.'

'I really enjoyed the breakout sessions – they were excellent and informative. I also enjoyed the different work that people displayed in the lunch room and the research gallery – so informative and interesting.'

'I thought the topics and speakers were all extremely well chosen and I feel like I've gained knowledge and understanding that's relevant for my profession. The research gallery was a great success, so much more engaging and memorable than a poster session.'

'The breakout sessions were great – especially the one on sensitive subjects. The most useful thing about the day was the variety of theories, subjects and methodologies discussed – so interesting'!

Many thanks to all those who attended. We hope you found the event valuable and hope to see you again on November 23 for our 2020 conference: **SAVE THE DATE**.

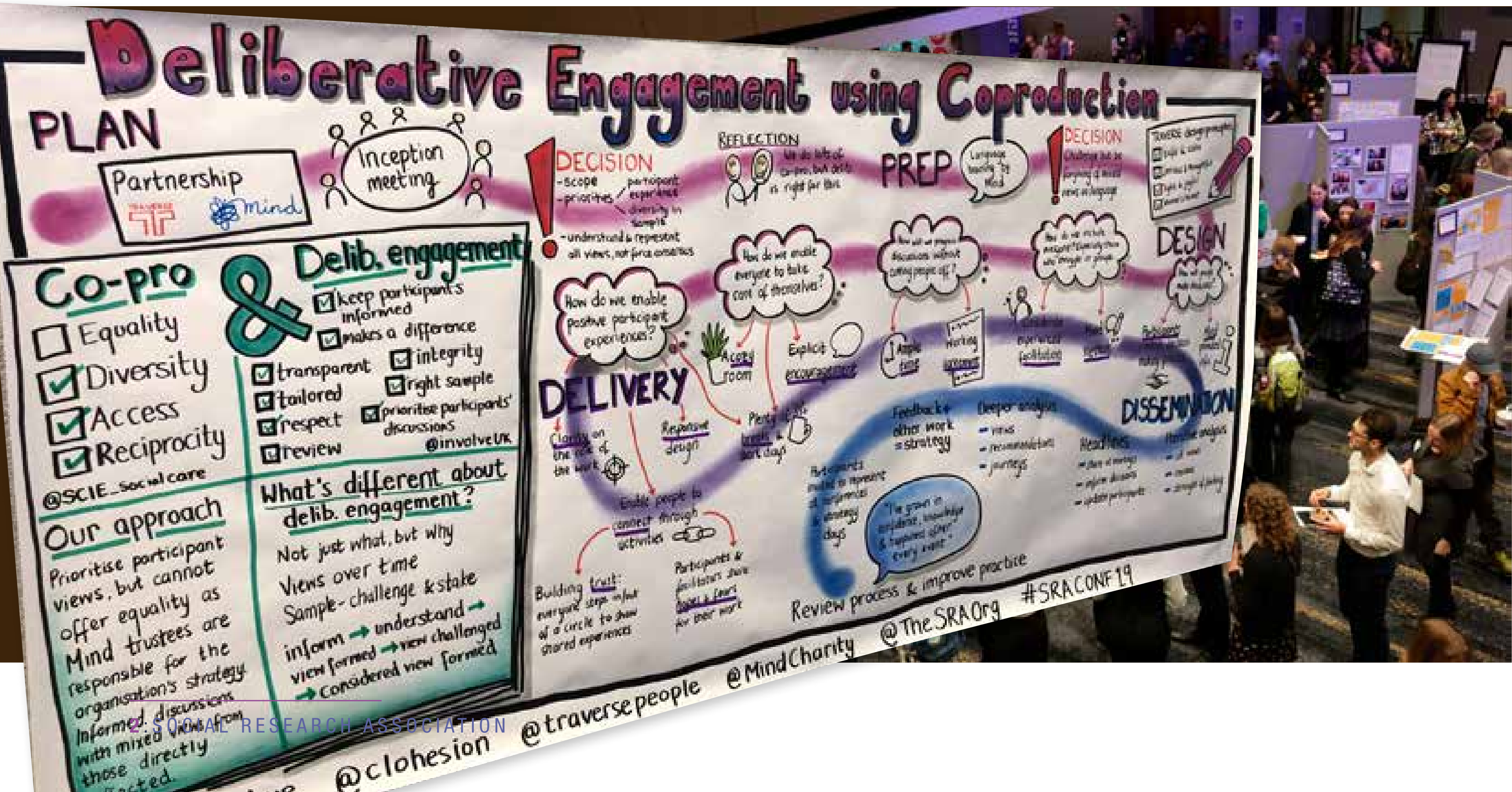
SRA annual conference 2020

Hold the date: Monday 23 November, London

Workshop submissions open: 13 April
Workshop submission deadline: 8 June
Research gallery submissions open: 11 May
Research gallery submission deadline: 29 June

Early bird bookings open: mid-July
Standard bookings open: mid-August

More details at: www.the-sra.org.uk/events



EDITORIAL

On learning

SRA chair, David Johnson, encourages SRA members to keep developing their research skills or the skills that support excellent research.

Welcome to SRA Research Matters, the first of the new decade, with articles on the philosophical underpinnings of research ethics; the creative solving of research problems; intersectionality; ethnic diversity in social research, and more. You'll see from our lead article, that the conference ended the last decade on a high note, and that presentations and audio are online.

This issue highlights the interesting work in thinking about, and deploying methods in, ways that take social research forward as a discipline. For this editorial I want to mention the importance of continuing to develop the skills that support effective applied enquiry: communications, project management, relationship building and leadership. These skills are just as important as excellent technical skills for high quality research. We develop these skills in our day-to-day work but it's also important to take up formal learning too.

That's exactly what I've done by signing up for an MBA apprenticeship in senior leadership. I started the course at the end of January, and so am a short way down the road of a two-year journey. Already though, re-immersing myself in the literature of management theory (which I last studied seriously about 20 years ago), and having the opportunity (because it's a course requirement!) to think about how theory might change my leadership practice, are proving fascinating and challenging. I've also enjoyed speaking to senior people where I work about what they value or don't value in leadership. I've even had to design and run a survey, which I've not done myself for many years!

As you might expect, it's not all plain sailing. Trying to do the same day job in 20% less time has been tough at times, and will, I'm sure, continue to be so. Deadlines for formal assignments loom large. However, challenging myself to work differently; to make the time; to focus on what matters; and to empower my team to step into some of the space that I have had to step out of (with support of course) are all refreshing. It's important to question why and how we do what we do sometimes, and the course is giving me the impetus that I might not have found otherwise.

If you get the opportunity in the coming months to pick up some informal or formal training on research skills, or the skills that support excellent research, I would encourage you to take it.

Until next time, happy researching (and learning)!

Social Research Practice: next issue

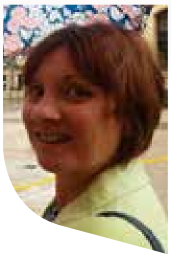
Issue 9, spring 2020, is now available: free to download at: www.the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice

Issue 10 is due in September/October.

The overall aim of the journal is to encourage and promote high standards of social research for public benefit. It promotes openness and discussion of problems. We welcome offers of articles and research notes for future issues. Read the guidelines for authors and download the article template at the link above. If you have an idea of an article or research note but are not sure if it's suitable, please email Richard Bartholomew, the editor: rabartholomew@btinternet.com

The philosophical bases of research ethics: taken for granted or up for question?

By Jane Evans, SRA trustee



People often think that there are some key, but different, philosophical foundations to research ethics. What underpins your research ethics deliberations depends on which of these traditions you, knowingly or unknowingly, draw from. Be aware of this and remember not to be too ethnocentric in the ones you adopt. The philosophical traditions most likely to inform ethical review are discussed below.

Utilitarianism is a well-known moral philosophy developed in the mid-19th century in England by Jeremey Bentham and John Stuart Mill. It is known as a consequentialist moral philosophy as it focuses on the consequences of an action to justify or determine the value of any action, usually expressed as 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. In terms of research ethics this justification could mean conducting research that benefits the greater good but which nonetheless does harm. It can be argued that the use of animals in medical research has good consequences for humanity, but the outcomes for the animals are distressing. In social research some methods such as covert observation could be justified by the benefits of the learning to be gained. Beneficence is often a justification of social research, but who benefits and is anyone potentially harmed in pursuit of this consequence?

Consequentialism gives rise to continual uncertainty as the benefits of the consequences are weighed up against the actions. These uncertainties need not arise if a **deontological** position is taken. Deontology is based on a philosophy of duty and posits absolute rules to decide about right and wrong. It is based on the work of the 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In this view, all human beings are rational and can decide what is their duty. The ends do not justify the means for deontology, and other human beings should not be forced or manipulated into actions that are wrong for them or anyone else. This has implications for gaining consent from research participants with the use of incentives.

Both the above approaches to research are capable of considering and including rights which are often listed in research ethics protocols, for example rights to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. In a consequentialist perspective, one person's rights may need to be balanced against another's, so confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if it might lead to harm for someone else. In deontology, rights must be balanced with duties. So, a researcher may have a duty to report certain crimes or harmful activities even though the respondent may have a right to confidentiality.

Consequentialism and deontology focus on action and the interpretation of the harm or benefits of an action whether judged according to consequence or rules. In **virtue ethics**, the ethics reside in the character and integrity of the person: their virtues. This tradition is based on the philosophy of Aristotle[1] in ancient Greece.

However, virtue ethics are found in other traditions too: notably the Analects of Confucius[2] although these virtues are not commonly referred to when virtue ethics are discussed or applied to research projects conducted in the west. Nor are those from other traditions, such as the yamas and niyamas from Hindu traditions. Islam, which emphasises the importance of good character, also outlines 16 major virtues for its followers. These are more detailed and specific than those proposed by Aristotle or Confucius, including kind treatment of animals and respect for elders for example, so combining a mix of character virtues and the behaviours which lead to right action.

When considering ethical protocols, we need to be aware that the traditions we are drawing on may be culturally specific. Examining the moral traditions of other cultures, apart from the ancient Greek and 18th and 19th century European positions which dominate our deliberations, is helpful for understandng that certain precepts apply to other ethical traditions. Far from being relativistic, it is possible to understand these differences as helpful and supportive for learning about our own ethical assumptions.

[1] Around 18 virtues include courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence and friendliness.

[2] Benevolence, justice, rites or propriety, knowledge, filial piety and so on.

Developing intersectionality-informed research methodologies

By Dr Jenny Douglas, senior lecturer in health promotion, The Open University

Social research methodologies often view variables such as 'race' and ethnicity, alongside class, disability, sexual orientation and gender (among others), as independent, and do not examine their interactions. 'Intersectionality' is an approach that starts from the recognition that these dimensions are not isolated, independent variables that are simply 'additive', but rather that they are interlocking and interactive. We see intersectionality increasingly cited, for example in academia in the Athena SWAN Charter or the Race Equality Charter principles, but its presence seems less obvious in mainstream social research.

Where does 'intersectionality' originate?

The term 'intersectionality' was coined thirty years ago by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1989), and built upon the scholarship of African-American social scientists in response to second-wave feminism, which privileged gender but did not give any significance to 'race' or ethnicity. Crenshaw described how Black women's experiences were marginalised by tendencies to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive and she offered intersectionality theory as a mechanism for examining the complex intersection between race and gender and other determinants (see her 2016 TED talk).

Why does it matter here and now?

My particular interest is research on ethnicity and health. It's an area which often fails to reflect the complexity of the lives of minority ethnic groups, and to contextualise them within historic, social and socio-economic circumstances, or power and socio-structural contexts. An intersectionality-informed approach to research allows us to examine the dynamic processes influencing individuals' experiences, and enables a more nuanced examination of their impact on individuals and communities. If we fail to consider power and its role in structuring and reinforcing social categories, we will not understand impacts – for example, on health. These issues are not static: my research has found that as the health experiences of Black men and women change, so do the impacts of inequalities on their health (Douglas and Watson, 2013; Douglas, 2018).

How do we start to take an intersectionality-informed approach?

Back in 2008, it was noted that practice had not caught up with theory, and that researchers were 'struggling to develop effective methodological tools in order to marry theorising with necessary complex analyses' (Denis, 2008: 688). Despite some debate since, challenges remain. To take an intersectionality-informed approach, we need to investigate social groups within and across analytical categories so we can understand how those categories influence and change each other. One approach suggests that researchers ask three questions throughout: 'Who is included in this category? What role does inequality play? Where are there similarities?' (Cole, 2009:172).

But surely there are too many categories or 'intersections' to consider? We should be reassured that: 'Undertaking intersectional research does not mean that researchers can or should account for every possible social position and shifting intersection. However, for work to be meaningfully intersectional, it should address historical and contemporary social/cultural forces through a political lens… [and] address why some levels and dimensions are the subject of focus, explaining what types of analysis might be facilitated and which might be limited as a result' (Rice et al, 2019: 416).

So, intersectionality requires us to consider context at the outset, and throughout, and not add an intersectional interpretation as an afterthought.

References

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GOOD PRACTICE

Ethnic diversity in social research: a persistent problem

By Dr Shivonne M. Gates, senior researcher, children and families team, National Centre for Social Research

Ethnic diversity across the UK is increasing. For example, according to the most recent census in 2011 for England and Wales, 14% of the population identify as Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME). This proportion had doubled since the 1991 England and Wales census, which found that the BAME population accounted for just 5.9% of the population.[3]

It is well-documented that this increasing diversity is not reflected in the workforce. Among people of working age in the UK, 12.5% are from a BAME background, but only 10% of the UK workforce are BAME, and only 6% of top management positions are held by BAME people.[4]

Social research is no different. We do not have aggregate data across social research as a field, but if we look at different sectors some trends emerge from research:

- In charities, only 9% of employees are from BAME groups[5]
- Higher education academic staff are only 9% Asian and less than 2% Black[6]
- For civil servants, 7% are Asian and 3% are Black[7]

These findings are, of course, limited, as we don't know the proportion of BAME researchers in these sectors. Nevertheless, these numbers go some way to illustrating that our workplaces do not reflect the communities we come from, or indeed that we collect data from. But why is this a problem? We're social researchers: we know there are advantages to having a diverse workforce. And if colleagues are open-minded, we should all just be able to fit in anywhere, right?

The impacts of working in White research spaces

When research spaces are predominantly White, BAME researchers face a significant burden accessing, and then maintaining, their position within the organisation. Whether it's altering speech and clothes to fit in, dealing with micro-aggressions, or feeling like you have to educate colleagues about racism (or deal with the repercussions if you refuse), everyday work requires more effort for BAME researchers.

Anecdotal evidence from a recent workshop (run by NatCen Social Research and funded by the Social Policy Association) highlighted how predominantly White social research spaces can be hostile environments for BAME researchers. There can be an assumption that if anyone understands racism, social researchers do. However, understanding racism and being actively anti-racist are not the same thing. This can make being a BAME researcher particularly challenging.

There are also institutionalised barriers that prevent change. A lack of BAME representation, especially in leadership roles, can prevent ethnic minority employees from feeling included, being supported, and progressing within the sector. For example, in the third sector, it's an unfortunate reality that BAME staff often leave early in their careers.[8]

If our workplaces do not change, these problems won't go away. Although ethnic diversity has been increasing) across the country, diversity in many workplaces hasn't.

What can we do about it?

For things to change, agencies and academic institutions must invest time and money in tackling the roots of the problem. Business in the Community[9] suggests five steps that can help increase ethnic diversity:

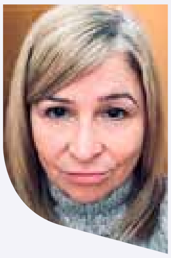
1. Appoint an executive sponsor for race to provide visible leadership on race and ethnicity in your organisation. They can drive actions such as setting targets for ethnic minority representation, briefing recruitment agencies and supporting mentoring and sponsorship.
2. Capture ethnicity data and report on progress, similar to that which organisations have to do for the gender pay gap and, from this year, the executive pay gap.
3. Commit at board level to zero tolerance of harassment and bullying. The Race at Work survey revealed that 25% of ethnic minority employees reported witnessing or experiencing racial harassment or bullying by managers.
4. Make clear that supporting equality in the workplace is the responsibility of all leaders and managers by making sure that performance objectives cover responsibilities to support fairness for all staff.
5. Take action that supports ethnic minority career progression by embedding mentoring, reverse mentoring and sponsorship.

The impetus is on organisations to take action – to improve company cultures; to actively work to improve representation; and to reap the rewards of a more diverse workforce.

[3] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2012-12-11
[4] https://www.bitc.org.uk/race/; https://diversityuk.org/diversity-in-the-uk/race-in-the-workplace/
[5] https://www.acevo.org.uk/2020/01/what-are-the-barriers-to-increased-racial-diversity-within-the-third-sector/
[6] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/23-01-2020/sb256-higher-education-staff-statistics
[7] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/civil-service-workforce/latest#by-ethnicity
[8] https://www.acevo.org.uk/2020/01/what-are-the-barriers-to-increased-racial-diversity-within-the-third-sector/
[9] https://www.bitc.org.uk/race/

What is the value of official statistics?

By Angela Potter, external research manager, Office for National Statistics



We now live in a world awash with data and people can look up almost anything they want. But what gives 'official' data its unique competitive edge?

The data produced at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is underpinned by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics and the UK's Code of Practice for Statistics.

This means that our statistics shine out in comparison to what can be low quality data from more questionable resources, and can be held up as impartial, robust, good quality, trustworthy – and as addressing the key information needs of people in the UK.

Demonstrating the crucial role and value of official data, however, is not an easy task. But it is a vital one. ONS has been working closely with United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) taking charge of an extensive international engagement exercise to bring like-minded countries together looking to achieve the same goal in assessing the value of official statistics.

The exercise has been an excellent opportunity for us to engage with other national statistical institutions around the world, share the work that we do and lead the way forward.

Achieving this shared goal helps to show why what we do matters to society – and if we understand the value of what we do, we can do more of the right things when producing and communicating statistics, and better support decision-making.

ONS is now leading this international taskforce with the UNECE to test a framework with a set of measures which strives to show this crucial role of evidence. The work began with a very successful two-day event in London in September 2019, hosted by ONS. The days consisted of some inspiring presentations and gave an insight into the value of what we do, some of the work being developed and the challenges faced. Amongst the attendees were Sir David Norgrove (chair of the UK Statistics Authority), Ed Humpherson (director general for regulation), Catherine Hunt (head of insight and evaluation, Government Communication Service at Prime Minister's Office), John Pullinger (president of International Association for Official Statistics, previous UK national statistician) and Jonathan Athow (deputising) national statistician.

ONS is working together with 26 countries and will be sharing challenges, experiences and the development and testing of methods as we gather and quantify evidence.

The focus is on looking at measures that are:

- Objective (reflecting the use of official data)
- Subjective (information derived from surveys on trust and satisfaction)
- Monetary valuations (including impact)

ONS is now reaching out across the government to capture value on UK stats, to look for case studies that can contribute to show evidence on value, benefits and impact or ideas of methodology to develop for the three measures above. We want to gather examples of how statistics are used, where official data shows value, how statistics serve people, and guide decisions, choices and understanding. This may not just be for policymakers but all of us in our daily lives to show how important statistics are and the value that ONS provides.

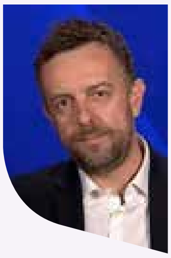
ONS is working together with 26 countries and will be sharing challenges, experiences and the development and testing of methods as we gather and quantify evidence

Undoubtably there are challenges with conducting monetary valuations. Some attempts have been made but not all to great success. We are testing the suggested approaches in the framework and each has strengths and weaknesses. We are certainly interested in case studies that look to estimate value in monetised terms. But equally important and useful are case studies that gather subjective views of users (for example, through surveys) and objective measures of use: for instance, downloads, engagement rates and use in policy documents and in the media (social and traditional).

ONS will be reporting on progress at the Conference of European Statisticians at the plenary session, in the summer of 2021. If you have any ideas or if you are working on something that could contribute to the assessment of the value, benefits or impact of official statistics then please get in touch at: Angela.potter@ons.gov.uk

Working across boundaries: the role of multi-disciplinary analysts in government

By Hugh Stickland, deputy director of strategy and engagement (and professional economist), Office for National Statistics



Most of the time analysts are asked to provide answers to complex questions: the best answer that data, analysis and statistics (amongst other things) can give. Most of the time, Ministers and decision-makers aren't so bothered about the methods, techniques or processes behind such answers. There is an inherent trust that analysts have thought carefully, appraised options and followed best practice to come to the answer. But in the ministerial meeting or on the submission is not the time or place for methodological critique.

There are few policy questions that can be answered by simply looking at a single data source or research paper. There are few that are the pure domain of a single profession (be it economics, social research or data science). There are increasingly few that fit into one policy domain or one Whitehall department's sole responsibility.

Rather, as a group of analysts… (collective noun anyone?) we need to work together, across professional boundaries, across departments and wider, with academia, civil society and the public, to understand some of the big problems of the day. How do we address climate change? How do we best help places to 'level up'? How can public services deliver opportunity with efficiency?

Step forward the Analysis Function

The vision of the Analysis Function is to integrate analysis into decision-making and delivery to help improve outcomes. The function provides a real push on multi-disciplinary working, using the best from each profession, and admitting none have all the best answers or a monopoly on the truth.

Presenting trends, spotting opportunities, identifying failures to be corrected: analysts play an important role in presenting the evidence for and against decisions and receiving commissions directly from Ministers and decision-makers. Analysts support monitoring and evaluation so policies can be expanded, changed or stopped, based on value for money and outcomes for citizens. Analysts are most effective when they are confident communicators, setting out complex issues in common language. They also need to interpret wider policy and operation interests into specific analytical lines of inquiry. By working together, analysts are better placed to provide comprehensive advice, challenge and insight based on evidence to help government deliver improved outcomes.

Here at the ONS, I am fortunate to lead a team of analysts. We are social researchers, statisticians, economists, operational researchers and data scientists working across government.

We have helped Number 10 set out the evidence base for the loneliness strategy, establishing indicators of loneliness across all ages. We've developed new techniques to analyse data for towns and high streets for Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government funding. We've also worked with the Centre for Homelessness to better measure the factors that influence homelessness in the UK, such as housing, poverty and relationships.

Not only is it hugely important work but it is also fascinating, engaging, capability building and hopefully (most of the time) fun. By working with a diverse team across professional boundaries, I am lucky enough to work with some brilliant people: great minds, professionally adept and committed to excellence. Working across boundaries means we are not limited by our individual expertise, but instead can learn from each other and develop innovative ways to answer the questions that matter to society, focusing on the public good.

Want to learn more?

There are over 15,000 analytical professionals across government who work on projects that make a difference to the public. You can find about opportunities as an analyst in ONS (and the wider Civil Service) via the civil service jobs website, or by following ONSjobs on Twitter.

SHARING PRACTICE

Solving research and policy problems creatively

By Genna Kik, director, IFF Research

We live in increasingly uncertain times. As well as problems as a society, most of us encounter additional challenges in our day-to-day research work. Having the skills, ability and confidence to solve these problems effectively is key to both our performance and our wellbeing.

As part of IFF's biannual seminar series, we brought together a cross-sector group of research professionals from the public and private sectors to discuss 'solving research and policy problems creatively'. This article shares some of the tips and insights from speakers.

Context and perception

Our first speaker was performance psychologist Pete Lindsay who has worked with some of the country's most high-profile and high-performing athletes, as well as a wide variety of businesses.

He spoke of the importance of adaptability in problem solving, citing it as the most important predictor of performance, and noted two key elements that impact on our ability to adapt:

- Everything is about context: people behave differently in different contexts. With the ability to adapt inherent within us, we just need to understand and interpret the context effectively
- The importance and impact of perception in that interpretation: our account of the world differs based on our experience.

He concluded that we can use our interpretation of the context and understanding of perception to change our default reactions. And it's that choice which is at the heart of adaptability and performance.

Focus on the problem not the potential solution

Next, Damon Gibbons, director for the Centre for Responsible Credit (CRC) explained that fundamentally it comes down to how we look at a problem: focusing on the problem, not the potential solution. He described how thinking differently about the problem and framing the question differently can offer a better outcome. Using an example from CRC, he described the thought process of the planning stage asking, 'What if it wasn't about how can we reduce the cost of credit for people on lower incomes, and we asked instead how we can reduce the need to use high-cost credit?' By changing the emphasis of the question CRC focused not on cost, but rather on the drivers of credit use. He concluded by also stressing the importance of learning from the past when trying to solve present and future problems, balancing current and likely future needs.

As part of IFF's biannual seminar series, we brought together a cross-sector group of research professionals from the public and private sectors to discuss 'solving research and policy problems creatively'

Underlining context and perception

Lastly, Naomi Sharon, strategy lead at Sport England discussed the focus on 'doing it differently' in local delivery pilots aimed at increasing activity levels. With one in four of us not moving to a level that raises our heart rate once a week, Sport England needs to be creative to address the challenge. Reiterating Pete's point about perception, Naomi used the example of the word 'sport' – and how that evokes different memories, emotion and reactions from us all. For some it evokes positive memories and emotions, for others these are more painful.

She highlighted that technology and innovation in society remove effort from our lives. The idea of encouraging people to inject effort, therefore, goes against this cultural context. Individual motivation depends on other contextual factors such as the amount you see others exercise; whether it's the norm for your family and friends; whether your physical space feels safe; and whether there are appealing opportunities for activity.

Thinking creatively about alternatives to the word 'sport' and understanding the contextual factors linked to activity motivations have helped Sport England to develop its work by being 'stubborn on the vision, flexible on the detail'.

This is helpful advice for all of us in facing day-to-day problem solving in a research context. Presentations from the conference are available.

An interview with a social researcher working in academia

Andrew Phelps, commissioning editor of Research Matters, asks Tracy Anderson, assistant professor at Bocconi University in Milan, about her experience and top tips.

Q. Can you tell us a bit about what you do: when did you start in research, and what sort of research do you now do?

A. I started working in research after graduating from LSE in 1999 with an MSc in social policy and planning. I worked for couple of social research institutes over the course of the following 15 years, with a short stint in market research. I decided I wanted to move into academia in 2014. I am now an assistant professor at Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. My current research explores how features of modern employment, like collaborative working or working as an independent contractor, shape the careers of knowledge workers and managers.

Q. Why did you decide to make a move into academia?

A. Throughout my social research career, I had been answering research questions that were of interest to policymakers but my own interests had been diverging from this as time went on. I wanted the opportunity to investigate the topics that were of most interest to me personally. Moving into academia seemed like the best way to do that. I was also at a level where I was doing less research myself, and spending most of my time managing other people doing research. I was excited to actually do research again rather than simply manage it.

Q. What have been some of the benefits?

A. There have been so many. I feel I have been incredibly fortunate. As a PhD student and now in my job as a professor, I have a great deal of autonomy and flexibility. This allows me to really explore topics that trigger my imagination and resonate with my own experiences as an employee and manager. I have the time and resources to develop research I am excited by, and have had the opportunity to present my work all over the world. It really has been a great journey so far, and one that I am still enjoying!

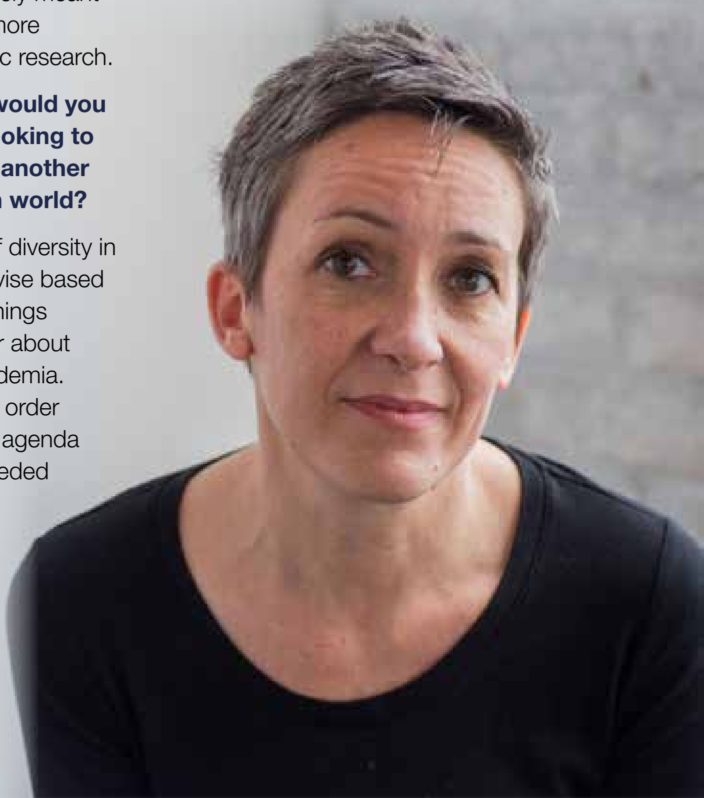
Q. What have been some of the challenges?

A. Leaving a well-established career and full-time job to go back to school and do a PhD (15 years after my MSc!) was definitely a little scary. I have to admit to feeling overwhelmed when I first started. I had to change my mindset to engage with theory rather than policy. That meant trying to learn a lot of new ways of thinking very quickly, as well as changing how I write about and present research! This transition did require me to start again in some ways – but having many years of research experience behind me definitely meant that I was equipped for the more practical aspects of academic research.

Q. What practical advice would you give to someone who is looking to move into academia from another part of the social research world?

A. There is a huge amount of diversity in academia, and I can only advise based on my experience, but two things spring to mind. First, be clear about where you want to be in academia. I wanted to be a professor in order to develop my own research agenda unencumbered. For that I needed a PhD and the time and resources to intellectually engage with the topics that interested me. A PhD is quite a commitment but there are many other opportunities to work in research in academic settings that do not require this, so speak to people in the type of work you are interested in to find out what is necessary.

Second, you have to be incredibly self-directed as an academic – at least, as a professor in my field. You need to be able to come up with your own research ideas, set your own deadlines, and manage your own time – there is not a client or project manager watching over you in the same way as in other research settings. For me, this is a benefit of the job, but I have seen others struggle with this aspect of academic research. Once again, speak to people in the field that interests you to get a sense of how much you will be working alone versus as part of a team; and how much support and/or structure there is. As with any job, you need to figure out the extent to which it is a good fit for you!



Linking survey and Twitter data

By Curtis Jessop, research director, The National Centre for Social Research

Why link?

The social sciences have seen increasing interest in the use of social media data in research. Researchers may, for example, be attracted by large sample sizes; the ability to reach rarer populations; the quantity and richness of data; or the speed and accessibility of data that some platforms may offer. However, as with any research methodology, the use of social media data has its challenges. For example, social media data are not created for research purposes: people may not produce content on the topic a researcher is interested in, or key analysis variables may be missing. There are also concerns about the representativeness of social media data: are social media users representative of a wider population? Are the data biased towards the most vocal? And how do you ensure a sample only includes the target population (for example adults in the UK and not Russian 'bots')?

Along with researchers from Cardiff University and the University of Essex, I have been looking at the feasibility of linking survey and social media (specifically Twitter) data to enhance both data sources and to address some of these challenges. As with other forms of data linkage, survey data can benefit from additional data covering areas not included in the original questionnaire, perhaps because of their complexity, because they were not initially a topic of interest, or due to space limitations. At the same time, social media data can benefit from the structure and direction of survey data. For example, if we are confident about the quality of our survey sample, we can be confident that our social media data are also from our target population. We can also begin to analyse how the social media data vary between different groups of interest – such as different age or income groups – assuming that information is collected in the survey. The linked data also provide the opportunity to improve existing approaches – social media researchers can use a linked dataset to help validate classification algorithms against 'ground truth' survey data, while longitudinal survey researchers can use the data for inter-wave measurement or non-response adjustments.

Feasibility and practicalities

So far, we have collected consent to link data for two different nationally representative surveys: Wave 10 of the UK Household Longitudinal Study Innovation Panel (UKHLS IP) and the July 2017 wave of the NatCen Panel, which respectively use sequential mixed-mode web/face-to-face and web/telephone fieldwork designs. In both cases, all participants with a Twitter account were provided information in the survey about the data we would like to collect and why, and what we planned to do with it; they were also asked if they would give their consent for us to collect their Twitter data and link it to their survey data and their Twitter handle. With informed consent and their Twitter handle, participants' publicly available Twitter data can then be linked to their survey data.

Collecting informed consent is a key methodological challenge. Striking a balance between providing enough information so that consent is 'informed' while not overwhelming participants is a challenge for all studies requiring consent for data linkage. We have found that consent rates have been relatively low (compared to, for example, government administrative records). Only 27% of Twitter users on the NatCen Panel and 31% on the UKHLS IP agreed to their data being collected and linked. This can limit statistical power, and risks introducing non-response bias into the sample, although our initial analysis suggests that few sociodemographic characteristics consistently impacted consent outcomes.[10] However, other studies have achieved consent rates as high as 90%, suggesting that this can be addressed.[11]

Another practical issue is how to analyse the data securely. In their raw form, Twitter data (and any survey data they are linked to) are identifiable even when pseudonymised; Tweet text can be searched online to identify an individual, but its anonymisation would undermine its utility. Instead, we recommend focusing on the systematic processing of the data, using data reduction, controlled access and data deletion to ensure its security.[12]

Next steps

Our research so far has demonstrated the feasibility of linking survey and Twitter data, overcoming some challenges but also finding new ones. Looking ahead, we will continue to explore the value of this approach to social researchers as part of our ESRC-funded project, 'Understanding [offline/online] society: linking surveys with Twitter data'. We aim to explore the issues and concerns people might have about these data being linked for research purposes, as well as investigating how datasets can be securely archived and made available to the research community.

So far, although we have conducted some simple analysis of election data to demonstrate the approach,[13] few studies have applied this approach in a substantive context. As part of this project, we will be applying the methodology in a study of public attitudes to minority ethnic groups to demonstrate the potential of the approach, as well as 'live testing' the theoretical approaches we have developed.

Looking further ahead, we want to move 'beyond Twitter'. Twitter's open API (application programming interface), relative popularity and 'public broadcast' nature make it well suited for analysis, but it forms only part of many people's digital lives. Including other social media platforms, apps, websites and devices would give a more holistic perspective. In addition, we shouldn't assume that Twitter will continue to exist in its current (or any) form in the future. As such, the work we are doing should be viewed as part of broader methodological research combining survey data with publicly available, identifiable data.

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[10] Al Baghal, T., Sloan, L., Jessop, C., Williams, M. and Burnap, P. (2019). 'Linking Twitter and survey data: the impact of survey mode and demographics on consent rates across three UK studies'. Social Science Computer Review.

[11] Wojcik, S., Hughes, A. and Cohn, S. (2019). Sizing up Twitter users. Pew Research Centre.

[12] Sloan, L., Jessop, C., Al Baghal, T. and Williams, M. (2019). 'Linking survey and Twitter data: ethics, consent, anonymity, archiving and sharing'. Journal of Empirical Research on Human Ethics.

[13] http://natcen.ac.uk/events/past-events/2017/november/what-can-social-media-tell-us-about-society/

What is qualitative longitudinal research?

Bren Neale

Bloomsbury, 2019

Reviewed by Jess Harris, King's College London

This introduction to qualitative longitudinal research (QL) is aimed at researchers and (I would suggest advanced) students looking to roll up their sleeves and undertake QL. This deceptively slight book packs a lot in, both in food for thought and with references to take you elsewhere, as it introduces an approach to researching and responding to 'dynamic processes through an in-depth qualitative lens'.

In six chapters the book provides an overview of QL from theory to practice: the first outlines historical developments, concluding, delightfully, that 'QL researchers are consummate bricoleurs'. The second considers theoretical understandings of 'time' and 'the reader is taken on a short journey though time' which slightly blew my mind but, whilst a dense read, prompted useful insights that will stay with me. The third focuses on how to craft longitudinal design and sampling, emphasising the creative rather than prescriptive nature of QL. The fourth explores participant recruitment and retention, in QL aiming to be 'walking alongside' rather than 'tracking' people, and the ethical implications of this. The fifth outlines and evaluates tools and techniques to generate and analyse QL data, processes which are a 'cyclical and cumulative journey' and crucially need to balance continuity and flexibility. The concluding chapter weighs up the strengths and challenges of QL and looks to the future. It challenges the criticism that 'in a fast-moving policy world, longitudinal enquiry simply takes too long to be of value'.

The book asks, amongst other questions: 'How does time as a social construct feed into research design, practice, ethics and analysis?' It won't simply hand you the answer for your particular research project but it will give you lots of material to help you face down the question. Chapters end with 'concluding reflections' rather than summaries or checklists that might be useful to refer back to, but this book is an intense, thoughtful, sometimes wordy read, and not a 'quick guide' that allows you to bypass the reflective processes of QL. I'm very glad I took the time.

What is quantitative longitudinal data analysis?

Vernon Gayle and Paul Lambert

Bloomsbury, 2018

Reviewed by Dr Fiona Hutchison, honorary research fellow, University of Exeter Business School

The 'What is?' series introduces a range of research methods. This book gives an overview of quantitative longitudinal analysis for a generalist audience. Concise chapters explain the logic behind analysis, terminology used by different disciplines, and appropriate analytical tests. In addition, the advice in the last chapter, on the importance of understanding your data set and capturing workflow, is applicable to any type of researcher conducting any form of analysis.

Longitudinal research involves analysing observations spread out over time, for example, large-scale social surveys that administer surveys to the same research participants as they age.

Just as the authors intended, reading this book whetted my appetite for the rich portfolio of quantitative longitudinal data available in the UK. This book bolsters the argument that large-scale social surveys, with their temporal data, are justified societal investments. Gayle and Lambert highlight the main datasets available, pitfalls to avoid, and common analysis techniques to consider. Strong referencing and bibliography enable the reader to look further into influential approaches, specific data sources like the British Household Panel Survey, and data analysis techniques including the Cox regression model.

The authors explain their preference for Stata in analysis of longitudinal quantitative data and provide key commands. Do not disregard this book if you do not have a preference, or indeed access, to that software.

The one vignette in the book is intended to illustrate the way longitudinal data can reveal sequences of events. However, the fictional example the authors give on how the home situation of a young boy and his mother fluctuates made me uneasy. As Criado-Perez points out,[14] examples in textbooks matter as they can reinforce gender stereotypes. This is my only criticism of an otherwise excellent and accessible publication.

As well as giving a broad overview for students of social science, it is useful to consult this series at the early stages of devising a research plan. This book urges a researcher to explore whether existing data sets contain relevant variables for analysis. I will recommend it to my colleagues in the public and third sectors. After all, quantitative longitudinal analysis helps collaborating researchers, practitioners and policymakers better understand macro trends in society and the life courses of individuals over time.

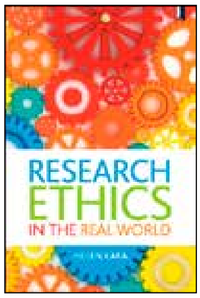
[14] https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1113605/invisible-women/9781784706289.html

Research ethics in the real world

Helen Kara

Policy Press, 2018

Reviewed by Nilam McGrath, knowledge management and open access consultant



In ‘Research ethics in the real world’, the author states upfront that she is ‘primarily writing for Euro-Western researchers’ and that her aim is to set ‘side by side’ ethical considerations embedded in Euro-Western and Indigenous research methods.

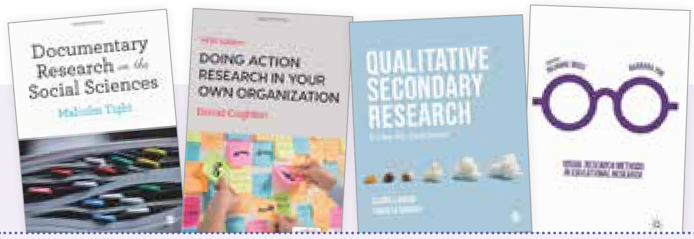
Part 1 is about the context of research; predominantly the difference between Euro-Western and Indigenous research methodologies. Several definitions of Indigenous research methodology are presented, the most helpful of which are from Lambert who defines Indigenous research as ‘…[flowing] from a place, a tribe, a community’, and Kovach who ‘calls for the non-Indigenous scholar to adjourn disbelief and, in the pause, consider alternative possibilities’. The contrast between Euro-Western and Indigenous ethical guidelines are particularly well illustrated in the guidelines produced by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. This section also touches on elements that make Euro-Western research colonial, for example, the internalisation of Euro-Western methods into global curricula and the near-universal adoption of technical guidelines.

Those familiar with community participation techniques, conducting research in the international development sector and cross-cultural research methods may read the comparison of Indigenous and Euro-Western methods and think ‘does that mean I’ve been using Indigenous research methods?’. The author makes it clear that unless you have been operating ‘within a fully Indigenous research framework led by Indigenous people’, then the answer is likely to be ‘no’. I am pleased there is a nod to decolonising research in this section, but this is not fully explored, perhaps because decolonising research is an entire discipline in itself. Nevertheless, the connection between Indigenous research and the decolonising research debate is important and warrants further exploration not least because we, as Euro-Western researchers are conferred power whether we like it or not; decolonising research means understanding the nature of our power – subtle or otherwise – and striving to create an equal research environment, or indeed relinquishing our power altogether. Understanding Indigenous research methods may therefore help Euro-Western researchers understand their ‘place’ as researchers.

Part 2 is a belt and braces overview of research ethics, from designing your research and contextual planning, through to researcher wellbeing; a good portion of this is procedural and in line with Euro-Western ethical guidelines.

Overall, the book would be useful to researchers needing an introduction to ethical practice for all stages of the research cycle, and it provides a springboard for diving into additional literature on Indigenous research methods should one choose.

Titles for review



We are always looking for reviewers. Write a short review for us and you get to keep the book. All books up for review are listed below. If you are interested, please email admin@the-sra.org.uk and we’ll send you guidelines. Here are a few of the titles on offer:

Documentary research in the social sciences

Malcolm Tight

SAGE, 2019

Doing action research in your own organization

David Coghlan

SAGE, 2019 (5th edition)

Qualitative secondary research: a step-by-step guide

Claire Largan and Theresa Morris

SAGE, 2019

Visual research methods in educational research

Julianne Moss and Barbara Pini

Palgrave MacMillan, 2016

SRA Scotland

By Karen Kerr

As part of the Festival of Social Sciences 2019, SRA Scotland and the University of Edinburgh organised an event entitled 'Scotland's population surveys: how do the findings change people's lives?' The event was well attended, with over 70 participants taking part in a lively and interesting session on Scotland's three large-scale cross-sectional surveys: the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey; the Scottish Health Survey; and the Scottish Household Survey. Thanks are due to Dr Rebekah Widdowfield (chief executive of the Royal Society for Edinburgh) for her excellent chairing, and to all the speakers and panel members for their contributions on the evening. You can read more about the event on the SRA blog. If you would like to get involved with the SRA Scotland committee, please get in touch with karen.kerr@sds.co.uk or **07584 470028**. We are always keen to welcome new committee members and would love to hear from you. To keep up to date with SRA Scotland news follow us @SRA_Scotland.

SRA Cymru

By Faye Gracey

Our next event is being delivered jointly with the Market Research Society on 28 April. We are really looking forward to hearing how IFF Research redeveloped one of the largest business surveys in the world, informing public policy and supporting business. We hope to see lots of you there. SRA Cymru continue to refine our plans for 2020/21. We are always pleased to hear from researchers interested in getting more involved in the organisation of our activities, or simply sharing ideas and feedback. Do follow us @SRACymru to hear our news first. See the-sra.org.uk/events/ for details of events. If you want to get more involved with our organising committee, do get in touch: faye.gracey@gov.wales or **03000 257459**.

SRA North

By Jenni Brooks

SRA North held a busy and successful seminar on participatory methods just before Christmas, hosted by Boxclever in Leeds. We're now working towards a joint event with SRA Scotland in late May. We're experimenting with an exciting 'virtual event' format, so participants will join in online, and we'll look to have a small number of institutions to act as hubs, where people can watch and join in together. Do keep an eye on @SRANorth for more details, and if you have experience of organising this type of event, we'd love to hear from you. As ever, if you have any questions, ideas for events, or want to get involved, please get in touch @SRANorth and sranorth@gmail.com.

SRA Ireland

See the SRA website for further details of events. Email us on SRAIreland@the-sra.org.uk or follow us on Twitter @SRAIreland.

The weird and wonderful side projects of SRA members

In the December 2019 edition of Research Matters, we learned that as well as having distinguished careers in social research, Pam Campanelli and Liz Spencer are both also skilled at jewellery making, with Pam also being a published music composer, and Liz planning to run jewellery design workshops.

Research Matters is interested about other 'hinterlands' of SRA members, whether that be as an artist, photographer, author, comedian, musician or anything else you think is of interest. Please get in touch with us by emailing admin@the-sra.org.uk to tell us about your side projects!

SRA TRAINING 2020

Because of UK Government advice about the Coronavirus, we've had no option but to postpone courses due to run in March and April. These bookings will be moved to future courses as these are arranged.

We are actively working on providing courses online, and will keep you updated about this in the coming weeks.

CARDIFF

29 June	Understanding statistical concepts and essential tests	Dr Valerija Kolbas

EDINBURGH

2 June	Conducting focus groups	Dr Karen Lumsden
3 June	Qualitative interviewing	Dr Karen Lumsden

LONDON

1 May	Impact evaluation: options, choices and practice	Professor David Parsons
6 May	Conducting focus group	Professor Karen O'Reilly
7 May	Qualitative data analysis – **FULL**	Professor Karen O'Reilly
15 May	Introduction to qualitative research	NatCen Learning
18 May	Smartphone video production for social researchers	Mark Saunders and Michele de Laurentis
20 May	Introduction to data visualisation	Nigel Hawtin
8 June	Research with children and young people	Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham
8 June	Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research	Dr Karen Lumsden
9 June	Narrative analysis	Dr Karen Lumsden
12 June	Introduction to evidence reviews	NatCen Learning
15 June	Consultancy skills for social researchers	Dr Simon Haslam
18 June	Theory-based evaluation: options and choices for practitioners	Professor David Parsons
18 June	Foundations of qualitive research: design and sampling	Professor Karen O'Reilly
19 June	Qualitative interviewing	Professor Karen O'Reilly
19 June	Survey pretesting methods	NatCen Learning
22 June	Qualitative data analysis	Professor Karen O'Reilly
23 June	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Professor Karen O'Reilly
24 June	Ethnographic methods	Professor Karen O'Reilly

SRA TRAINING 2020

LONDON		
1 & 2 July	Analysis of qualitative data	NatCen Social Research
3 July	Introduction to sampling and weighting	Dr Alexandru Cernat
7 July	Questionnaire design	Dr Pamela Campanelli
8 July	Creative methods in qualitative data collection and analysis	Dr Nicole Brown

MANCHESTER		
14 May	Foundations of evaluation	Professor David Parsons
15 May	Impact evaluation: options, choices and practice	Professor David Parsons
28 May	Questionnaire design	Dr Pamela Campanelli
30 June	Introduction to participatory action research	Dr Karen Lumsden

Members: £202.50 a day.

Non-members: £270 a day.

To get your SRA member discount, make sure to use your promo code.

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Full details of all SRA courses and booking at: www.the-sra.org.uk/training

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research matters

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Copy deadlines: **1 May** (June issue); **20 July** (September issue); and **5 October** (December issue).

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