Brexit: it cuts both ways

With the upcoming Brexit referendum, we wanted to know what lessons were learned from the 2015 election polling; how social research has influenced the referendum campaign; and, of course, the predicted result. So, we asked three experts and this is what they told us…

*Professor **Patrick Sturgis**, director, ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, University of Southampton*

LESSONS LEARNED

Politicians and the public do not assess the performance of the opinion polls in terms of their statistical error properties. Rather, they judge success or failure by whether the polls correctly predict the future party (or parties) of government in their final estimates. While this is rather unfair on the pollsters – whose job is to estimate the national vote (not seat) shares – it does cut both ways; inquiries are not launched when the polls over-estimate the size of a landslide. Be that as it may, the polls leading up to the 2015 election have been roundly criticised for suggesting the wrong result, and pollsters will be crossing every available digit that the EU referendum does not represent another nadir for the industry.

The inquiry into the failure of the 2015 polls concluded that the primary cause of the errors was 'unrepresentative samples'. How pollsters constructed and adjusted their samples simply left them with too many Labour voters and too few Conservatives. So, what methodological changes can be made to reduce the possibility of the same problem being repeated in the run-up to 23 June? Because all polling in the UK currently uses quota sampling as the methodology for inference, there are really only two broad strategies. One is to change the variables for specifying quota and weighting totals, the other is to increase the diversity of the respondents recruited into weighting cells. The first strategy will be less difficult and costly to achieve than the second, and I imagine that, initially at least, that is where the pollsters will focus attention. At least two British Polling Council members I am aware of have already experimented with weighting samples by a measure of political engagement, and this seems to have been effective in reducing the usual tendency to over-estimate Labour in the May Scottish parliament election [see more on this below]. It remains to be seen how effective these adjustments will be for the EU referendum, as people's views on this tend to cut across party lines. But that, of course, is one of the many great things about elections – they allow pollsters to validate their methods!

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH ON THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

I haven't seen many claims on either side referencing social research studies as yet, which is disappointing though not perhaps surprising. In terms of the methodological tools of social research on the other hand – surveys and focus groups – these have undoubtedly been key to the campaign strategies of both camps.

PREDICTED RESULT

Based on a reading of the polling evidence and the tendency of electorates to swing toward the status quo option in referendums, I'll go for 54% 'remain'.

Will Jennings, *professor of political science and public policy, University of Southampton*

LESSONS LEARNED

The experience of May 2015 has led pollsters to be a good deal more wary about the composition of their samples and the methods used for adjusting likelihood to vote. While likelihood-to-vote adjustments turned out not to be the major factor in the polling miss at the general election, turnout is likely to be more important in predicting the outcome of the referendum vote. Indeed, the EU referendum polling could get it right for the wrong reasons: if there are still too many politically interested and engaged people in samples, this could more accurately capture the mobilised referendum voters. More generally, there is now awareness that agreement in the polls does not necessarily mean they are right – and that taking a naïve average of all polls (the 'poll-of-polls' approach) may overlook important mode differences, such as between internet and telephone polls – though this gap appears to have been narrowing.

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH ON THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

While there has been rather more caution about the reliability of the polls in the wake of the general election, survey research has played an important part in the referendum campaign.

It is striking that Nigel Farage has been side-lined, seemingly as a result of research showing that he is a polarising figure among non-UKIP voters. Polls have suggested that President Obama's intervention did not sway voters, if anything the reverse. That said, it is noticeable that a large amount of this research relies either on *self-reported* evaluations of influence, which are problematic, or survey experiments for which the external validity of any effects must be treated sceptically. We can't be sure if these factors will play a substantial role on polling day. The British Election Study's post-referendum survey will be crucial in discovering, after the dust settles, what really influenced people's vote choice.

PREDICTED RESULT

At 10.03pm on May 7 2015 I declared that I would be retiring from forecasting [https://twitter.com/drjennings/status/596420072664637440]. I remain nervous about getting back into the prediction business. The outcome of the EU referendum is even more difficult to predict than a general election – as the vote cuts across party lines and the events of the campaign will play an important part as voters make up their minds. Public opinion seems fairly evenly divided, and polling modes are still sending somewhat mixed messages. My gut tells me that 'remain' will sneak it, given what we know about the social psychology of loss aversion and the status quo bias observed in referendums held elsewhere. But there is so much uncertainty about where public opinion currently stands, and how it might change before the vote, that any prediction surely has to acknowledge that victory remains possible for both sides.

Nick Moon, *director, GfK NOP Social Research*

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the biggest difficulties not just in polling general elections but also in trying to interpret the future relevance of the performance of the polls in the last election, is that each election tends to be sui generis, with its own conditions, background and circumstances, some of which serve to make polling more difficult. The case of the infamous Shy Tories in 1992 is an obvious case in point. In 1992 it made sense that some people felt guilty about voting for the Nasty Party, especially one led by such a mocked leader. It is superficially tempting to argue that the same Shy Tories must explain the failure of the polls in 2015 as well, but given the almost universal tone of the print media – which was inevitably picked up by the broadcast media as well – it should have been Labour supporters who were too shy to admit they had voted for a buffoon who couldn't even eat a bacon sandwich. With some reservations round the edges, I agree with the British Polling Council-sponsored inquiry that the failure of the polls in 2015 was principally down to a simple matter of their samples containing too many Labour supporters and not enough Conservative ones. But the circumstances that led that to happen may have disappeared or even reversed by 2020, and may be entirely irrelevant in the case of a Europe referendum as opposed to a general election. The one point that I think may well carry over is that of turnout. My own view – and that of many far more knowledgeable than me – is that the main risk to the 'Stay' camp is a low turnout. Brexiters are, for the most part, far stronger in their beliefs (I have heard the word rabid used) and so far more likely to vote. Referendums worldwide tend towards the status quo, not least because the undecided often end up keeping 'ahold of nurse, for fear of finding something worse'. If the polls contain a lot of people who say they will vote to stay but then don't vote at all, they will be in for an embarrassing time again.

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH ON THE REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN

The fact that both campaigns have been fought at a remarkably low level of debate, with wild claims bandied around by both sides, has, to my mind, made it almost impossible for social research to get a word in.

PREDICTED RESULT

53% 'remain'.

Light or heat? Polling and the 2016 Scottish election campaign

*By **Mark Diffley**, research director, and **Rachel Ormston**, associate director, Ipsos MORI*

As expected – and predicted by all recent polls – the SNP won a convincing victory in the Holyrood election, giving the party an unprecedented third term as Scotland's government and Nicola Sturgeon a clear mandate as First Minister.

But the election was not without drama, talking points and surprises. As the election drew closer, polling increasingly detected rising support for the Conservatives and Greens[1], hinting that they could replace Labour and the Liberal Democrats as the second and fourth largest parties respectively.

And although this is exactly what happened once the votes were counted, the number of seats which the Conservatives won in constituency contests was a surprise; the party finishing with 31 seats, seven ahead of Labour.

All of which meant that the SNP failed to secure a second overall majority, falling two short at 63 seats. The level of expectation before the election means that this was an anti-climax for the party, even if it remains far and away the dominant force in Scottish party politics.

All public opinion measurements before the election pointed to a clear SNP victory. As well as voting intention data, the popularity of the First Minister, the strength of party identity and attitudes towards key devolved public services showed a consistent pattern. With a satisfaction rating[2] of around 66%

during the campaign, Nicola Sturgeon far outscored the other party leaders, continuing a trend evident since she became First Minister. Meanwhile, satisfaction with the Conservative Ruth Davidson's leadership increased between February and April 2016 while that with Labour's Kezia Dugdale slipped, suggesting that leadership may also have been a factor in the battle for second place.

One of the most telling polling findings throughout the campaign was whether or not people knew what each party stood for[3]. Ipsos MORI's final pre-election poll showed that only 45% thought they knew what Labour stood for, compared to 80% for the SNP and 63% for the Conservatives – an indicator of Labour's difficulty in communicating its policies and vision effectively.

And on the key public services[4], polling indicated that the SNP was in a dominant position; in particular on the issues of the NHS and education, the party held a lead of over 30 percentage points on the other parties, giving further credence to the scale of its victory.

There were just ten published polls during the 2016 Holyrood campaign – fewer than the 12 conducted before the 2015 general election or the 19 in the month of the September 2014 independence referendum alone. Although this reflects the unique nature of the referendum vote, it is also likely to reflect the sense that the SNP's victory in the Holyrood election was seen as somewhat inevitable.

Despite that, the polls did help inform much of the debate, not so much in voting intentions terms (although as noted above, they did point to the possibility of the Conservatives coming second, something few would have believed possible until relatively recently) but in their contribution to the wider debate. They were important for assessing voters' attitudes to the different proposals put forward by parties on the new powers coming to the Scottish Parliament. Polling on attitudes to how the Scottish Parliament should use its tax varying powers[5], for example, indicated that while voters might support higher taxes for the wealthiest in society, they remain sceptical about other measures that would result in different tax rates in Scotland and England.

As the fifth session of the Scottish Parliament begins, new questions arise: how will the performance of the SNP be assessed as it enters its third term in government? Will Scottish Labour regain any of its lost support? Will the Scottish Conservatives be affected by their party's internal disagreements over the upcoming European Referendum? Opinion polls will continue to be keenly scrutinised for clues to the answers.

[1] www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3730/SNP-set-to-win-election-while-Conservatives-and-Greens-make-progress.aspx

[2] www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/scotland-opinion-monitor-april-2016-charts.pdf

[3] www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/scotland-opinion-monitor-april-2016-charts.pdf

[4] www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Scotland/scotland-opinion-monitor-august-2015-charts.pdf

[5] www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3716/Voters-priorities-in-Scottish-Election-2016.aspx

Hearing home truths

SRA chair, Patten Smith, encourages SRA members and others to 'eradicate sloppiness' through frank but constructive exchange of views.

For several years I was involved in a training session for new Government Social Research researchers. In this, a panel of four senior researchers with experience of working as contractors for government departments described to an audience of early-career researchers what sorts of client behaviour they found to be helpful and constructive and what sorts they found to be less so. The experience was (of course) enjoyable (one is rarely offered the chance to point out one's client's faults free from the fear that one's future prospects will be somehow jeopardised) and hopefully helpful to the audience. But the exercise was also extremely helpful for me: inevitably, during the panel discussion, participants would describe sloppy contractor behaviour which betrayed a lack of will or ability to do a job well, sometimes even coupled with an unjustifiable sense of financial entitlement. As someone who cares about social research, I want to see such sloppiness eradicated as much as my clients do. And as someone who works as a contractor, I am in a rather better position to do something about it than they are.

In this issue of Research Matters, we include the first of an occasional series of articles expressly intended to foster just this kind of frank but constructive exchange of views. We start

> As someone who cares about social research, I want to see such sloppiness eradicated as much as my clients do. And as someone who works as a contractor, I am in a rather better position to do something about it than they are

with a contractor's take on client behaviour only because it was a contractor who came up with the idea! We are now very keen to receive an article giving the client's view of contractor behaviour in order to redress the balance – so if you are a client and have things you want to say about contractors please contact the editorial committee.

You will see that we have allowed the author to remain anonymous. We believe that if people are to feel confident in giving their views honestly without fear of personal or financial repercussions allowing anonymity is essential (after all we offer respondents no less in our research). Of course with anonymity comes a responsibility to engage in a civilised dialogue. So we insist that all comments should be empirically based, constructive in intent and accompanied by suggestions for redress.

We are starting with contractors' views of clients and clients' views of contractors but there are many other things people might want the opportunity to talk about without fear of repercussion. So, if you have something you want to say please come to us with your ideas.

So what does the secret researcher think? Find out on page 14.

## Social Research Practice: contribute to our new journal

We are inviting submissions for our journal 'Social Research Practice' by early September for issue 3 to be published in December. We're looking for short articles, maximum 4,000 words, of interest to applied practitioners and research users. Journal articles cover:

▶ All methods: qualitative, quantitative, mixed
▶ Mainly methodological issues
▶ Practical issues rather than theoretical debates
▶ Research impact on policy and practice
▶ Innovative and traditional techniques

The overall aim of the journal is to encourage and promote high standards of social research for public benefit. It promotes openness and discussion of problems.

It is available on the SRA website free for everyone at: www.the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice

If you have an article idea, but want to check it with the editor, Richard Bartholomew, email us at: admin@the-sra.org.uk
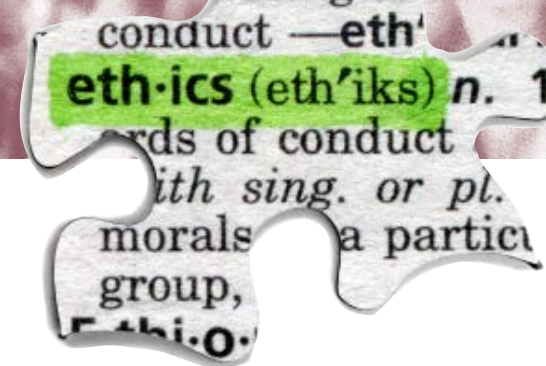
Ethics in social media research

By *Helen Kara, SRA trustee*

In March I was at the Academy of Social Sciences for a conference on social media and social science research ethics run by the New Social Media, New Social Science? (NSMNSS) network, and sponsored by NatCen, SAGE Publishing and the SRA.

First, Professor Susan Halford, University of Southampton described how social media research disrupts research governance systems. Formal ethical review processes make several assumptions that do not fit with social media research. For example, the governance system assumes that researchers are seeking approval to generate data which they will then own and control, whereas the data which social media researchers seek to use is already being generated independently and its ownership is spread around between individuals and corporations. Also, the ethics regime assumes that data sets are discrete: interview data is separate from survey data, which is separate again from focus group data, and so on. However, in social media research, a link to a Facebook page may be embedded in a tweet; someone may post the same information on Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr; you can find a YouTube video to teach you how to make YouTube videos; and so on. To address these kinds of discrepancies, we need less bureaucracy and more contextual reflection from our research governance system – and, ultimately, more support for researchers.

Then there were parallel sessions from people doing research using Twitter, Facebook, Tinder and Tumblr, as well as sessions on topics such as blurring between researcher and participant in social media research (you can, quite literally, turn up in your own data) and how to define and share best practice in social media research ethics.

As this was a social media conference, there was a lot of tweeting, with people joining in from all over: Australia and the Netherlands, Germany and Canada, Ireland and America. There was some interesting discussion on the back channel about the role of lurkers (people who read social media but don't contribute) in research. Also, people who were at the conference passed questions raised on Twitter to presenters and tweeted back the answers.

The parallel sessions in the afternoon covered archives, youth juries, blogging, hashtags, and visual methods in social media. Something that came across quite strongly was the sheer amount of data being generated on social media: every day there are millions of new blog posts; tens of millions of images uploaded on Instagram alone; hundreds of millions of tweets. This 'data deluge', as Susan Halford described it, is both mindboggling and a social researcher's ultimate fantasy. Presenter Gill Mooney was asked why she chose to use Facebook to research social class when it poses far more ethical and practical challenges than conventional research techniques. Her answer was that Facebook yields an enormous amount of 'boring detail', the minutiae of people's lives, which researchers could not find out about in any other way.

Steven Ginnis and Harry Evans from Ipsos MORI ended by asking, 'where next for social media research ethics?' They used the real-time polling app Meetoo to involve those of us with laptops, tablets or smartphones in giving immediate feedback on a variety of 'ethics applications' in a game of 'play your ethical cards right'. This was both fun and instructive, weighing up different priorities to decide whether we would grant or withhold ethical approval – and then seeing what everyone else decided.

There was a general consensus from the day that just because something is technologically possible and legally allowed, it is not necessarily ethically and morally defensible. Perhaps the closest we got to a conclusion was that ethics in social media research needs more time, thought and care than it currently receives. Though it is perhaps arguable that the same applies to ethics in all social research – but that's a discussion for a different column.

> To address these kinds of discrepancies, we need less bureaucracy and more contextual reflection from our research governance system – and, ultimately, more support for researchers

What's the obsession with numbers?

By *Ivana La Valle, SRA trustee and editor of Research Matters*

When I come across qualitative research findings which have been 'quantified', I start having serious doubts about the robustness of the research. In my methods book, quantifying qualitative data means having a poor understanding of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Yet the practice is common. For example, I have recently worked on a qualitative study with a children's social care expert. Throughout the reporting stage, I had to explain why I thought it was a bad idea to say 'the majority of respondents said…' and to compile bar charts with data collected from qualitative case studies of looked-after children. The report was peer-reviewed by a respected children's social care researcher. Her feedback on substantive issues was extremely valuable, but less so on reporting the findings: she advised us to explain what proportion of children from our purposively selected sample of 16 had done x, y and z.

I have yet to hear a persuasive and methodologically defensible argument for quantifying qualitative research findings, but as the practice is common, it seems right to have a debate about it. Below I set out my arguments against the 'quantification of qualitative research' and I hope there will be a response from those who argue in favour of it.

Qualitative research encompasses various approaches and different ways of doing qualitative research but some of its key features are summarised as follows[1]:

◗ Qualitative research captures the perspective of those being studied and understands social life as a process rather than static

◗ Qualitative research involves naturalist inquiry in the 'real world', and research methods that are flexible and sensitive to the social context (for example observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups)

◗ Qualitative data analysis aims to: reflect the complexity, detail and context of the data; identify emergent categories and theories; respect the uniqueness of each case; and provide explanations of meaning

◗ Qualitative findings aim to: provide detailed descriptions and rounded understandings based on the perspectives of research participants; map meanings, processes and contexts; and answer the 'what is', 'how' and 'why' questions

The above description of qualitative research, based on an extensive review of the methodological literature, does not mention measuring prevalence, and I have never come across a research methods textbook that has described the purpose of qualitative research, in any of its incarnations, as providing measures of prevalence. Indeed, the opposite is very strongly argued in the methodological literature: 'By the term qualitative research we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification.'[2]

Not only is the purpose of qualitative research **not** to quantify its findings, but any measures of prevalence derived from qualitative research are meaningless because qualitative sampling approaches and data collection methods do not comply with the criteria required to produce reliable measures of prevalence:

Sample selection	
Qualitative samples are purposely selected to ensure there is sufficient data to explore key topics and sub-groups of interest	Quantitative samples are designed to be representative of the population for which statistical estimates are required

Sample size	
Qualitative samples are smaller, as you soon reach 'saturation point', when analysis of additional cases does not tell you anything new	Quantitative research requires larger sample sizes, with size driven by the level of precision required for the statistical estimates

Data collection	
Qualitative data collection methods are flexible, adapted to the social context and responsive to individual cases	Quantitative data collection is highly standardised: the way a study is introduced to participants, incentives to encourage participation, how questions are asked and answers categorised must be standardised

What all this means is that if I say that two thirds of respondents in a qual study said x, I have no way of establishing whether the proportion will be the same or similar in the research population as a whole, and if I can't have that certainty, what's the point of reporting that figure? I would argue that quantifying qualitative data is at best useless, at worst harmful, as meaningless measures of prevalence may be used to inform policy or practice. It is also harmful because it is a distraction and distortion of the purpose of qualitative research, which, with its insight into people's lives and deep understanding of society, can play a fundamental role in social policy research.

1 Ritchie J. and Lewis J. eds (2003) Qualitative Research Practice. London: Sage Publications.
2 Strauss and Corbin (1998) quoted in Ritchie and Lewis eds (2003).

Urban data captured through survey, sensors and multimedia

By *Dr Catherine M Lido*, *Prof Mike Osborne*, *Prof Vonu Thakuriah* and *Dr Mark Livingston*, *Urban Big Data Centre, University of Glasgow*

The Urban Big Data Centre (UBDC) at the University of Glasgow is a research resource funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and accessible to all – researchers, local government policy makers and public citizens alike. It is part of the UK drive to harness big data to target urban challenges and develop interventions addressing inequality, for instance, in educational access, achievement and lifelong learning engagement. The UBDC's first data product was gathered by the integrated Multimedia City Data (iMCD) project. This project is an example of combining survey data and novel technologies to examine the links between forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning and successful life outcomes, such as employment, health and wellbeing within the city context of Glasgow. iMCD data yields a three-dimensional picture of people's daily activity, mobility, education demographics, and participation through three major data collection strands. The iMCD data strands are:

◗ A representative n=1500 household survey
◗ Tracking of urban sensors (including GPS and lifelogging cameras)
◗ Internet-based visual and textual media capture

The concept of the iMCD draws on 'digital mobility information infrastructure' (DMII) in urban areas proposed by Thakuriah and Geers (2013)[1]. UBDC houses data from the 1,500 households which took part in the iMCD survey, following stratified random postcode sampling (measuring demographics, housing, transport, ICT, education and cultural/civic participation). The educational place and disadvantage team has initially examined the predictive relationship of age, and other key variables to learner engagement in the City of Glasgow, particularly examining low levels of participation by older adult learners.

After completing the survey, participants were asked to take part in the sensor strand of the project, with 403 individuals agreeing to carry GPS for one week and 265 carrying a lifelogging camera for two days (to collect images of their daily journeys).

Again the team has initially examined GPS sensor differences in older adults engaged in various types of learning, allowing us to visualise 'who' the learning-engaged older-adults in the city are; 'where' they are going; and 'what' they are doing and seeing within their urban environment.

UBDC is now acquiring data to provide context for the iMCD (for example satellite data, STRAVA cycling data and LiDAR data for urban planning). More challenging, however, has been the attempt to link iMCD participant data to administrative datasets. We have had approval to link to ScotExed pupil census and SQA attainment data for the participant households for which we have permission. Likewise, we are obtaining higher education data as context for Glasgow, but we are also attempting to link Higher Education Statistical Agency data to the relevant iMCD participants who have progressed to higher education during the relevant time period.

UBDC and iMCD data challenges in the area of education have included:

1. Access issues, as application processes are often long and there is little standardised documentation for operationalisation of variables and years from which data will yield valid comparisons

2. Licensing issues for onward supply. ScotExed data is for specific project use within the centre. However, higher education (HE) data providing progression to HE study within and beyond Scotland, will be available for onward use

3. Controlled data storage as the centre's facilities house secured data storage. For identifiable/controlled data we are brokering the services of eDRIS and the Safehaven and contracts are under negotiation

Key outputs of the UBDC are to develop and target interventions addressing urban problems. This opens possibilities for how big data can be explored, not just by academics, but also by practitioners in other sectors, to improve the lives of citizens (such as engaging older adult learners), not just in Glasgow, but in urban environments worldwide. At UBDC Glasgow, datasets continue to be gathered about people's daily living in and around Glasgow, and we are linking administrative data (such as school and higher education records) and transport (cycling and satellite) data to the iMCD survey participants. For more details, and to use our data or research resources, please submit an expression of interest on our website at **www.ubdc.ac.uk**

[1] Thakuriah, P. and Geers, G. (2013) Transportation and information: trends in technology and policy. Series: Springer briefs in computer science. Springer: New York.

Do you want to Shut Up and Write!?

By Annika Coughlin, PhD student, UCL Institute of Education

The concept of Shut Up and Write! started in the San Francisco Bay area, where creative writers met at a pre-arranged time at a café, wrote for an hour and then spent some social time sharing their successes, challenges and generally building a support network to help keep up the motivation to write regularly. With the help of social media, the concept has spread and is becoming popular amongst research students.

Once a week I co-facilitate a Shut Up and Write! group of around ten people at my university. Our sessions are longer than an hour and are based on Rowena Murray's structured writing retreats model. However, I like the phrase 'Shut Up and Write' more than 'retreat', because the problem most of us have in the group is procrastination, so we think the discipline and peer pressure reflected in the phrase is just what we need! We book a group study room from 10am to 5pm, and for the first ten minutes or so, we plan what we want to achieve in the session. We break it into stages, thus planning what we want to achieve by the first tea break, by lunch and then by the end of the day. Then we start and write for about one hour, stop for a 15-minute break, then follow this pattern until the end of the day. We have a full hour lunch break which is an important time for us to chat, share our common issues, troubleshoot and just have a laugh.

I also participate in the Shut Up and Write Tuesdays! network on Twitter @SUWTUK. Once a fortnight at 10am a facilitator greets anyone who joins in using the hashtag #SUWTUK; asks what goals you have set; and then for 25 minutes we get on with our writing; stop for a five-minute break; and continue for another 25 minutes. You can also initiate your own beyond the one hour by putting out a call out using #DIYSUWT

As a member of the SRA and its official 'tweeter' (say hi via @theSRAOrg), I wondered if SRA members would benefit from some form of writing group, face-to-face or virtually. As many SRA members are independent researchers, or the only researcher in an organisation that does not quite understand or value what on earth it is you do, getting together once in a while to work together in silence, or online, might be of benefit, just as it is to me and my student colleagues. You don't have to write; you can shut up and read, or analyse or transcribe!

If there is enough interest, it is perhaps something the SRA could support as an occasional face-to-face event, or I can facilitate an SRA Shut Up and Write!-style network via Twitter.

I hope, at the very least, this article will inspire you to check out the references below and start your own writing groups at work or elsewhere, and join in the online network on Tuesdays.

If you have any thoughts on an SRA writing event or online group, please email me: annika.coughlin@gmail.com

FURTHER READING

Detailed blog post on the Shut Up and Write! concept, how to run a session and also includes a map of 'writer friendly' cafes around the world: https://thesiswhisperer.com/shut-up-and-write/

Shut up and Read! blog post: https://helenkara.com/2015/06/17/shut-up-and-read/
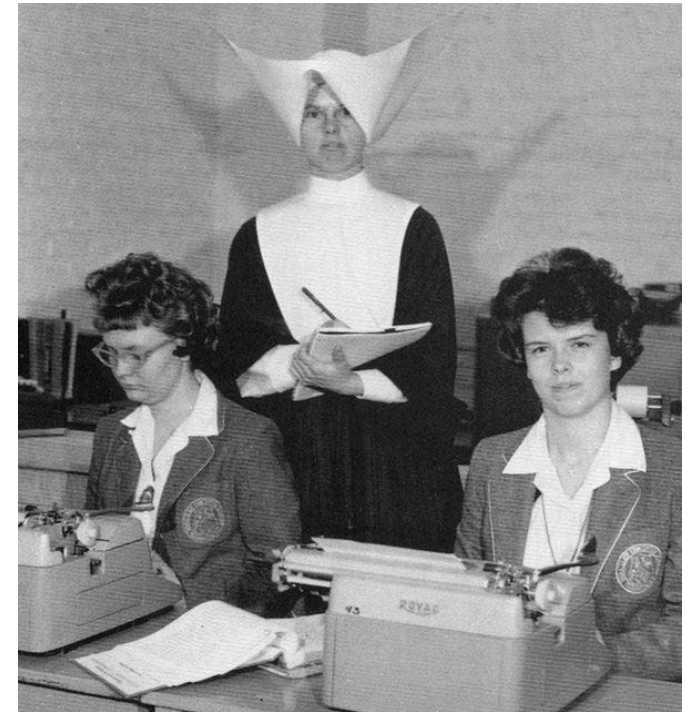
After Shut up and Write! you will have avoided temptation and will feel virtuous. Photo from Patricksmercy on Flickr (reproduced with permission)

Shut up and Write Tuesdays: a virtual writing workshop for academic folk: https://suwtuesdays.wordpress.com/

Rowena Murray's structured writing retreat model – use this as a guide to adapt for yourself and follow up the references: www.rowenamurray.org/

Petrova, P. and Coughlin, A. (2012) Using structured writing retreats to support novice researchers. International Journal for Researcher Development, Vol. 3 (1). www.researchgate.net/publication/235309680_Using_structured_writing_retreats_to_support_novice_researchers This article gives practical tips on how to run writing retreats and has lots of references to follow (if you can't access it but want to have the published rather than the pre-published version, feel free to email me for a PDF).

1 Hart, D., La Valle, I. with Holmes L. (2015) The place of residential care in the English child welfare system. London: Department for Education.

How to give your survey a nudge

By **Tabetha Newman**, *Timmus Limited*

Last year I increased the response rate of an annual staff survey from 25% to 49% without changing the survey content at all. I did it by using some behavioural insight strategies – aka nudge tactics – in the communications surrounding the survey.

The previous surveys had a response rate of just over 20%. The client was, therefore, unsure whether the data they were using was a genuine reflection of staff opinion, and they wanted to increase reliability of the data as it was going to be used to inform budget spending.

I was asked to improve the survey response but I was not allowed to change the questionnaire itself because it was a nationally standardised benchmarking survey. So I focused my attention on the email invitation, the introductory page, the reminder email, the thank-you page and the method of contacting participants.

First, I found out about how the last survey results were used to tell staff about these changes – my hypothesis was that if people could see how their survey responses influenced their workplace, this would nudge them to complete the survey. I listed the positive changes that came about thanks to staff participation in previous surveys, and used persuasive 'nudge' language that asked people to unite with their colleagues – so supporting a 'herd mentality' (for example 'join your colleagues in completing this survey...').

> **I was asked to improve the survey response but I was not allowed to change the questionnaire itself because it was a nationally standardised benchmarking survey**

I then identified the senior manager most known to staff (not some faceless person from an unknown division of the company). They agreed to send email invitations from their account, which personalised the invitation – hopefully another nudge.

I obtained permission to use staff emails so I could track who had and who had not completed the survey (so avoiding sending them more emails once they had completed it). I used the BOS survey system[1], which allowed me to personalise the emails with participants' names, which gave another important personal touch and nudge to promote participation.

The two reminder emails continued this strategy, but also included information about the live survey ('40% of staff have already sent us their opinions – please join them and help to influence ...'). They also received a carefully worded thank-you email once they had participated, with information about next steps and a commitment to inform them about headline findings from the analysis.

Survey invitation timing was crucial – the best time of day tends to be late morning (after urgent emails are answered) and avoiding Mondays and Fridays. I opted to send the email invite on a Thursday at 10.30am, because I knew all staff took a tea break at 11am, which could give them time to either discuss or complete the survey.

I reduced the live survey period from two months (used in previous years) to just under four weeks. I hoped that staff would feel compelled to answer sooner rather than leave the invite in their inbox – another chance to nudge them into action sooner rather than later.

Finally, 5% of the staff population were randomly selected and offered a £5 Amazon voucher to take part in the survey. The random sub-sample achieved a 79% response rate, and analysis showed that answers were not statistically different from those of the rest of the survey sample.

The strategy led to a substantial increase in the response rate, with 49% from a population of 1,500 taking part – sufficient for us to make robust assumptions about the population. The client ended up with a reliable data set, and actionable metrics which they could use to influence future strategic planning. And all this without touching the online survey content in any way!

> **The strategy led to a substantial increase in the response rate, with 49% taking part**

Statistical research in the House of Commons Library

By *Oliver Hawkins, statistical researcher, House of Commons Library*

When you hear an MP stand up in parliament and cite a statistic, there is a good chance they got it from the House of Commons Library. The library is the confidential and impartial research service for MPs and select committees. If you've never heard of it, that's not surprising. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot, once said the library was the best kept secret in the British constitutional architecture. We exist to help MPs from all political parties understand and argue the subjects of current political debate.

There are eight sections in the library's research service covering all areas of policy. Each section has 12 to 15 researchers from a range of backgrounds, including lawyers, economists, statisticians and social scientists. There are two statistical sections: one covers economic policy and statistics, while the other covers social and general statistics (where I work).

Researchers in the library publish briefing papers, which are available for anyone to read on parliament's website[1], but most of our time is devoted to answering confidential enquiries from MPs. An enquiry is a question, or a set of questions, on a particular subject which an MP is trying to understand. The information may be needed for a speech, a media appearance, or to help with constituency casework. Both the MP's questions and the library's response are treated as private correspondence, although an MP may choose to publish work the library has produced for them in order to illustrate a point they want to make.

Work tends to focus on draft legislation and topics in the news. MPs can ask what they want, when they want, and by whatever deadline they need. With 650 customers, demand for our services is high and can surge unexpectedly. The library answers around 30,000 enquiries a year, and around a third of these involve statistics.

The information the library provides to MPs is often used in fierce political arguments, so it must be accurate, valid and comprehensive. The library is expected to be right 100% of the time and at a moment's notice.

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That is a daunting challenge, which involves making difficult judgements about the nature of statistical claims. Faced with this pressure, it is tempting to be cautious and to resist the urge to reach conclusions. But while epistemological caution is vital, research is not useful to politicians unless it helps them make decisions. So the challenge is to derive as much useful information from the available data as it is valid to infer, *but no more*.

To give one example, I was recently asked what proportion of people migrating into Europe across the Mediterranean are refugees (the enquirer needed to know within a few hours). Not all migrants arriving in Europe by sea are recorded; their reasons for migration are not surveyed; and we do not know whether their circumstances qualify them for refugee status.

For these reasons it is not possible to say, with any precision, what proportion of those arriving are refugees.

On the other hand, the available data does allow for some broad conclusions. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reports the nationalities of those migrants arriving by sea that it is able to record, and detailed data is available on the outcome of asylum claims by nationality in EU countries. By multiplying the success rate for asylum claims by nationality in EU countries with the distribution of arrivals by nationality, it is possible to produce a *very crude* estimate of the proportion of migrants arriving into Europe who may qualify as refugees. This method is of course far from perfect (because not all migrants go on to claim asylum) but the results show that a large majority of these migrants are from countries with high recognition rates for asylum.

Using quantitative data in this way requires a degree of trust between the library and its customers. We aim to provide information to MPs that is both useful and true, and we trust them to evaluate it correctly, taking into account the context and the caveats we provide. Sometimes those are lost in translation, but usually not for long. Providing analysis to MPs from across the political spectrum ensures that the library's work, and the way it is reported, are constantly being tested in the arena of public debate.

NatCen and the future of the social research industry

In his first interview since taking up his post as NatCen chief executive officer, Guy Goodwin shares his vision for NatCen and his predictions for the future of the social research industry.

WHAT IS YOUR VISION FOR NATCEN SOCIAL RESEARCH?

I want us to be **the** UK's National Centre for Social Research, so in some ways, the 'social' equivalent of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, having an influence on making lives better and the place to come to ask about all aspects of our society. To achieve that, we need to have a broader range of partnerships and cover a broader range of topics and markets so, if you think you can help, please do get in touch. We also need to make our field and telephone operations more accessible to our partners.

Good examples of our current excellence are in health, diet and nutrition, where we are recognised as a leader in the field; our qualitative research across all social topics; our evaluations and the work we do on social attitudes (we have run the British Social Attitudes Survey since the 1980s). We also have a strong presence in Scotland through ScotCen.

We want to grow that base. So, we will be harnessing the incredible people we have at NatCen – our 100 or so social scientists, supported by top-class field, telephone and web operations – to provide the highly relevant research needed more widely to inform the key decisions for the UK and its constituent countries.

> Technological change will mean we need to welcome and respond to the opportunities ahead. Big data is an example. Let's be passionate about its potential. Disseminating big data quickly has risks but that's where we can bring real value in treating and making sense of new data sources

HOW DO YOU THINK THE SOCIAL RESEARCH INDUSTRY WILL CHANGE OVER THE NEXT TEN YEARS?

It will evolve into something different from what we see today, and boundaries across research disciplines will become more blurred. Most change is being driven by advances in technology and increasing globalisation. We need to embrace those changes and keep up to date. But I also believe that many of our customers will continue to pay a premium for highly relevant, good-quality evidence to inform their decisions. There will continue to be a need to argue and win the case that good methods underpin good outcomes.

Technological change will mean we need to welcome and respond to the opportunities ahead. Big data is an example. Let's be passionate about its potential. Disseminating big data quickly has risks but that's where we can bring real value in treating and making sense of new data sources.

The space we work in over the next decade will become ever more crowded so how we position ourselves and how we collect data and disseminate and communicate our results become essential. We should expect more 'instant' social research, opinion polls and consumer research collected from respondents using their latest communications device. The challenge for the social research industry is to embrace what it sees, bringing much needed expertise and methods.

HOW CAN WE ENGAGE THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN SOCIAL RESEARCH?

This is about how you disseminate your findings to different audiences. The best way to engage the public in social research is to provide them with something they are interested in, in plain English, at the right level of knowledge, in the way that they want to receive it. We still tend to believe if we've done a serious piece of social research, it warrants a long written paper or dissertation to set out the findings, rather than a visualisation. Let's change that view because social researchers can be self-serving if their main goal is to get an article published in an academic journal.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO ASPIRING RESEARCHERS?

Never underestimate how far you can influence policymakers with a bit of boldness. One of the frustrations for researchers is when they do an important piece of work and then nothing happens. My advice would be to identify who should have an interest, pick up the phone or visit them, tell them what you're doing, what you've found and ask whether you can help. It doesn't work every time but you'll be surprised how many influential people will listen.

WHO WOULD PLAY YOU IN A FILM OF YOUR LIFE?

Someone like Ben Whishaw as 'Q' in the James Bond films, developing into Desmond Llewelyn as I get older?!

What makes a good life?

By Dawn Snape, head of evidence and analysis, What Works Centre for Wellbeing

'I think it is absolutely vital that in every decision that we take, every policy we pursue, every programme that we start, it is about giving everyone in our country the best chance of living a fulfilling and good life and making the most of their talents. That's what this government is going to be about.' That was PM David Cameron's message to the new cabinet in May 2015. But what makes a 'fulfilling and good life'? And what can government and people themselves do to create such a life?

These are important questions for us at the What Works Centre for Wellbeing[1], an independent organisation and member of the What Works Network[2]. Our aim is to make it easy to access and use robust evidence on wellbeing, enabling decision-makers to take action to improve it. Our work focuses on broad topics such as community wellbeing and wellbeing throughout the life course, as well as more targeted areas such as how participation in cultural activities, sports, work and adult learning affect wellbeing. We are also developing new approaches and tools for wellbeing measurement and evaluation.

WELLBEING PUBLIC DIALOGUES

To ensure the centre's priorities are informed by the things people think matter most to wellbeing, we have spoken to a wide range of people and organisations in the past year. In a joint project with the Cabinet Office and Public Health England, we also held wellbeing public dialogues[3] across the UK to understand what contributes to wellbeing in people's own experiences and how best to communicate with the public about wellbeing.

We worked with public dialogue specialists, Hopkins Van Mil[4], and received funding from Sciencewise[5] to develop facilitated workshops in Belfast, Bristol, Cardiff, Falkirk, London and South Tyneside. These included periods of deliberation and reflection as well as contributions from experts. We asked people how communities can work for wellbeing, and how work, learning, culture and sport contribute to wellbeing.

112 people from many backgrounds took part in the first set of workshops, and 103 returned for the second round. Participants also shared their views of participation in the dialogues in videos[6] with responses suggesting that our approach to consultation was wellbeing-enhancing in its own right.

LAYING WELLBEING FOUNDATIONS

Although we asked about wellbeing in different areas of life, the same responses started to emerge. According to participants, the essentials of a good life include feeling safe, good health, sufficient money, access to healthy food, and feeling loved. These were described in different ways depending on the context, but recurred throughout and seem to represent our wellbeing foundations.

Things that were considered to hinder wellbeing focused on deficits such as lack of time and energy, confidence, money, information, social support and work/life balance.

In describing what helps us to thrive, people highlighted the importance of choices and opportunities, a sense of personal control, recognition and appreciation of what we do, fulfilling activities and ongoing personal growth. Happiness, enjoyment and fun also featured.

HOW CAN WE BUILD GOOD AND FULFILLING LIVES?

Participants were clear that people generally want to and should look after their own wellbeing and take an active role in promoting wellbeing in their families and communities. We need, therefore, to start by building strong wellbeing foundations and equipping people with the tools to promote their own wellbeing.

The role of government could be seen as creating equitable access to the right conditions for wellbeing to develop. Participants also thought that government can encourage the flow of information about how to improve wellbeing; provide support for carers who look after the wellbeing of others and for the most vulnerable in society; and encourage employers to consider the wellbeing of the people who work for them.

The dialogue findings have helped to shape the centre's work plans and will feature in learning events, including a wellbeing dialogues toolkit with practical guidance for those interested in using the approach.

1 https://whatworkswellbeing.org/
2 https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network
3 https://whatworkswellbeing.org/evidence-program/public-dialogues/
4 http://www.hopkinsvanmil.co.uk/
5 http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/
6 https://whatworkswellbeing.org/evidence-program/public-dialogues/community-wellbeing-for-uk-people/

Data linking and the evaluation of the Troubled Families programme

By **Lan-Ho Man**, *principal research officer, local policy analysis, Department for Communities and Local Government*

The Troubled Families programme aims to transform the way services work with families addressing fundamental issues including the cycle of intergenerational problems.

We were asked by the Troubled Families team to design an evaluation of its programme and to collect nationally-representative data. To gather good quality data for a robust estimation of impact we considered several options, including a face-to-face survey and asking staff in local authorities to provide data. We decided our best option was to use nationally-held administrative data. Despite some limitations, such as the data being collected for a different purpose and missing some outcomes, this data would provide the main information policy colleagues needed; reduce the burden on local authorities; and provide historical and objective data on a large number of people.

In 2012 we started discussions with Ministry of Justice, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and Department of Health to find out whether this was feasible. We worked through legal, ethical and data security issues with analysts, lawyers and data security experts and the Information Commissioner's Office.

It was essential that robust data security measures were in place to maintain stakeholders' confidence in the project and retain the anonymity of families. We had to be particularly careful as we wanted the ability to link data from different sources to understand more about the outcomes of families, in particular how factors interacted, and knew that linkage could make the dataset more disclosive.

After long negotiations, we got agreement from Ministry of Justice, Department for Work and Pensions, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and Department for Education to carry out our ambitious data-linking project. We also established data-access agreements with local authorities and provided them with information about how the project would work, the measures put in place to meet legal and data security requirements, as well as guidance for issuing privacy notices to families (to inform families about how their data was being used, as they were not asked for informed consent).

Once all data-sharing agreements were in place, local authorities provided personal information on the individuals and families they had assessed for the programme (those treated as well as those who had not made it onto the programme) to our trusted third-party contractor so that this could be linked with national administrative datasets and the outcome data pseudonymised[1].

The data provided by local authorities included data on families who did not start the programme to provide us with options for a comparison group. The wealth of historical data meant we could use propensity score matching to measure the impact of the programme, a statistical technique to control for differences in pre-programme characteristics between the treatment and comparison groups.

The design of this project is seen as a great success, providing information to measure the impact of policies, and it is paving the way for data-linking across Whitehall. For the data share carried out in Autumn 2015, around 20,000 families and 63,000 individuals were successfully matched to at least one of the three administrative datasets[2].

It has not all been easy and plain sailing. We learned some lessons; in particular, the importance of data quality at all stages as well as the need to engage, consult and feedback to stakeholders along the way. This project relied on the support and contribution of colleagues across government and in local authorities, and without them, it would not have been possible.

> It was essential that robust data security measures were in place to maintain stakeholders' confidence in the project and retain the anonymity of families

[1] The Administrative Data Taskforce defines pseudonymised data as: 'Such data cannot directly identify an individual as the personal data have been removed, but they include a unique identifier that enables the person's identity to be re-connected to the data by reference to separate databases containing the identifiers as identifiable data. The unique identifier allows datasets to be linked together without knowing the identity of the person.' Administrative Data Taskforce (2012) The UK Administrative Data Research Network: Improving access for research and policy. Report from the Administrative Data Taskforce. December 2012.

[2] Around 87% of individuals were matched by Department for Education; 70% were matched by Department for Work and Pensions; and 13% were matched by Ministry of Justice.

The secret researcher: an agency view

Anon
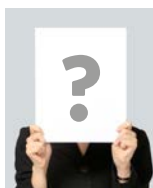
Being a researcher in a busy, medium-sized agency can certainly have its moments. There's the joy of winning major studies, the excitement of unearthing genuinely interesting results and the feelings of respite when studies are finally completed. Obviously it is not always like that – we all know that projects don't always run to plan and, in amongst what is a genuinely fascinating job, there can sometimes be frustrations.

Work in the industry for any length of time and you'll easily pick up your fair share of stories about 'nightmare' clients – those who sign off reports without having read them properly; try to double the length of topic guides; or follow arcane reporting guidelines. However, while the majority of complaints tend to be the sort of gripes you get in any industry, and don't necessarily suggest any systematic problems, there are some issues with clients repeated fairly often by agency staff.

The first issue is the project creep that tends to set in with many studies. However clearly you agree project parameters and responsibilities with the client, fairly soon in the process you'll be asked to do something additional, such as more background research or providing extra documentation. If you're unlucky, this can become a steady drip of unexpected, additional tasks. As none of the requests appear to be hugely time-consuming on their own, you feel churlish raising the possibility of additional costs or discussing contractual obligations. Moreover, you don't want to seem unreasonable or pedantic to a client on whom you may rely for future work. If you're a small agency in a competitive environment where you have to really cut your margins to win work it's hard not to feel undervalued.

The second main issue is budgets. Of course, you're hard pushed to find industries where people don't feel financial pressure, and social research is no different. However, what seems to be slightly different nowadays is not so much the extent of cost pressures but their nature, with more frequent attempts to shoehorn a range of different methodologies into one, tiny budget. Sometimes, there will be fairly clear suggestions in tender documentation as to what approaches should be prioritised but equally often, guidance is non-existent or so vague that it is effectively useless. While most of the time you can take a fairly educated guess given your knowledge of the client or sector, you can't quite shake off the feeling that an important part of the tendering process has been reduced to a slightly bizarre and rather dull guessing game.

Finally, the reporting process tends to run fairly smoothly but that's not always the case. It is relatively rare, but not unknown, for clients to put particular scrutiny on more negative findings in a report, asking them to be caveated in a way which they tend not to do for more positive results and perhaps skewing interpretation of results. Of more concern is that once your report is finally published, the joy of finally completing the project may be all too quickly overcome by the nagging worry that the findings you've carefully drawn together and caveated may be accidentally misrepresented by any Tom, Dick or headline writer. Relatively positive results may be overspun (even by the client); more negative statistics may be 'accidentally' released when media attention is elsewhere; or we may simply have to watch as commentators criticise a report they don't like on entirely spurious grounds, most commonly by wrongly using the magic phrase 'small sample size' to try and induce fear in the population at large.

Despite these issues, it's not hard to find experienced researchers saying that relationships with clients tend to be conducted on a far more professional basis now than they were in the past and certainly, as agency workers, we know only too well that we are not perfect ourselves. However, one possible way of further improving how agencies and clients work together would be for more clients to follow standard agency practice and provide feedback forms at the end of projects. Surely being able to learn from honest, transparent assessment can only be positive?

We have kept the contributor's details anonymous. Patten Smith explains in his editorial on page 4. Please let us know if you'd like to contribute an article for this series.

> However clearly you agree project parameters and responsibilities with the client, fairly soon in the process you'll be asked to do something additional, such as more background research or providing extra documentation

When it pays to work for free

*By **Hannah Grene**, independent social researcher, Barncat Consulting*

The greatest advantage of freelance working is in the way I get to approach the work itself. I have the luxury of concentrating fully on the research topic at hand, spending days in libraries or reading publications online, conducting interviews and drafting reports, without the background chatter of a busy organisation. But this comes at a price – when you hand in the report, you have no further power to influence how or whether it is used.

For most of us working in social research, we research not (just) for the intellectual pleasure of it, but because we care about policy issues. Too many excellent reports end up on the shelf of a policy chief who thinks the work is probably very important but just doesn't quite have time to read it.

I started by thinking that it would be a good idea if research contracts included an allocated day for follow-up, some 12 months after the research was completed, to see how – and whether – the research had made a difference. However, this poses a funding problem. Research is often completed in a specific funding round, or on an earmarked budget, and a fee for an extra day in the following year's budget just causes headaches for finance departments.

So, I decided to offer a day's work free of charge on each of my major projects, to be taken up by the contracting organisation after the completion of the project. I kept the terms for this *pro bono* day open – in the case of an evaluation, it could be used to see which of the recommendations had been implemented and with what results, or in the case of a policy research piece, to analyse whether any change to policy measures or public opinion had occurred.

LESSONS LEARNED

I have been offering this *pro bono* day for five years, and here are some of the things I have learned. Firstly, I quickly realised that I needed to be clear about when the day could be taken up – it is tempting for managers to treat it as an extra unpaid day for completing a larger-than-anticipated project. I therefore specified that the day should be taken up six to twelve months after completing a project. Exceptions can be made, however, when there is an immediate policy need related to, but distinct from the research piece. For example, I used the day for one client to help them draft a submission to a government consultation on childhood literacy, drawing on my recently completed review of their literacy project.

Secondly, it has proved to be a good business investment. The evidence from the follow-up helps me to demonstrate the impact of my research in bids for new work, and I have been told by organisations that the *pro bono* day helped my tender stand out from the crowd. When work is quiet, I will proactively follow-up on outstanding *pro bono* days. This is an excellent way to maintain relationships with previous clients, and often leads to further paid work, as I am now back on their radar – and showing how committed I am.

Thirdly, and most importantly, it does seem to work for its primary purpose – tracking the impact of the research and enhancing its effectiveness. Following-up puts the researcher back on the radar, but also the research, reminding organisations of their commitment to use the research finding to influence their work. It is important to maintain a bit of perspective – in large organisations, priorities change and personnel move on. However, if you are prepared to spend money on commissioning research, it should be worth your while to reflect on its impact, a year on.

So, I would urge independent social researchers to consider adding a *pro bono* day to their offers – and I would also urge commissioning managers to ask their consultants whether they would be willing to provide it.

> Too many excellent reports end up on the shelf of a policy chief who thinks the work is probably very important but just doesn't quite have time to read it

SRA Scotland update
Report by Sophie Ellison

Graeme Beale stepped down from the committee; we'd like to thank him for all his contributions over the past few years. Our next seminar on 27 June, in Edinburgh, takes a methodological look at SALSUS (Scottish Schools Adolescent Lifestyle and Substance Use Survey). Other seminars to look out for between now and September, likely in Glasgow, are on the BeST complex intervention RCT (comparing early assessment and intervention services for young children) and on social marketing and social research. We hope to see you there!

For details of training and events in Scotland, or to receive updates and stay in touch with us, visit the SRA website, or engage with us on Linkedin (**http://tinyurl.com/oh9aoh4**) or Twitter (**@SRA_Scotland**).

SRA Ireland update
Report by Noelle Cotter

Our 'Programme evaluation in practice' seminar is proving very popular. We have a waiting list, and we will likely run the seminar again to meet demand. Please email **sra.ireland@gmail.com** if you would like to register (provisionally) for this repeated seminar. More at **http://the-sra.org.uk/home/sra-ireland**

We are partnering with the Irish Social Policy Association for a conference on 1 July. To find out more, submit your abstract and attend see: **www.ispa.ie/conference**

Three SRA events are scheduled for Belfast later in the year. Find out more on our web page. We advertise all events on the SRA website, on Twitter and through our mailing list. To join our mailing list, email sra.ireland@gmail.com. Or follow us on Twitter: **@SRAIreland** for events, conferences and job listings.

SRA Cymru update
Report by Faye Gracey

Great to see lots of new faces at our seminar on assessing gypsy and traveller needs and our afternoon social. Look out for our forthcoming seminars on visual methods, childhood obesity and an enhanced training programme in Wales.

Do keep an eye on the SRA website, Twitter (**@sracymru**), and **LinkedIn Group (SRA Cymru)** for details. **Faye.Gracey@wales.gsi.gov.uk**

Annual conference
Making the links: new directions for social researchers

Full-day event at the British Library in London, 6 December 2016: HOLD THE DATE

Now more than ever, social researchers need to build strong connections outside the industry. Traditional boundaries between research methods have softened as researchers and funders recognise the value of combining approaches. Hard and fast divisions between academics, practitioners and policy researchers are blurring. Researchers are increasingly collaborating with other professionals in fields such as bio-tech and engineering. And new opportunities arise as technology redraws the limits on data collecting, data sharing and research dissemination. What challenges does this new landscape bring and what can we learn from those who have already been 'making the links' in new directions?

Come and hear:

- **Sharon Witherspoon**, acting director of policy, Academy of Social Science
- **Gareth Morell**, head of research, Madano
- **Siobhan Campbell**, deputy chief scientific advisor, deputy director of research, Department for Transport
- **Tony McEnery**, director of the ESRC centre for corpus approaches to social science
- **Peter Jackson**, professor of human geography, University of Sheffield

Call for workshop papers: **www.the-sra.org.uk/events**

Summer event

The SRA summer event at the LGA was not able to take place on 30 June as originally planned, due to unforeseen circumstances. The events group is working on the topic and format, so we'll let members know the outcome soon. Apologies if you were holding the June date.

Mixed methods in health sciences research: a practical primer

Leslie Curry and Marcella Nunez-Smith
SAGE Publishing, 2015
Reviewed by David Nelson, Macmillan research fellow, University of Lincoln

Written by internationally-recognised health research experts, Leslie Curry and Marcella Nunez-Smith, this book aims to show researchers and students in the health sciences how to design, conduct, review and use mixed methods. Given the increased use of mixed methods in the health sciences, this text is timely and unique in that it offers a discipline-specific focus that is both relevant and practical.

The book has a logical structure and is broken down into four parts: (1) an overview of mixed methods designs, their application and appropriate use (2) getting mixed methods research funded (3) design and implementation and (4) disseminating findings.

It is written so that it can be read from beginning to end, or the reader can select the part they want to read. Each part is broken down into smaller chapters filled with excellent resources, tables and figures which accompany cases and real-life examples. Each chapter finishes with a short summary, exercises to encourage the reader to apply their learning and a useful reference list. The authors' clear and concise writing style make it accessible to different audiences.

Of particular interest was the chapter on managing mixed methods teams, which explores the challenges of team working and the factors contributing to their success. The final section on getting mixed methods research published provides useful recommendations about what to include in manuscripts and strategies for identifying journals and working with editors.

In summary, an excellent and valuable resource for all health researchers using mixed methods, regardless of experience.

Using research evidence: a practice guide

Jonathan Breckon
NESTA/Alliance of Useful Evidence, no date
Reviewed by William Solesbury, visiting senior research fellow, Kings College London

The Alliance for Useful Evidence is an initiative of NESTA (the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts).

This guide is one of a series of practice guides developed by its Innovation Skills team and is available online at **www.nesta.org. uk/publications/using-research-evidence-practice-guide**. It runs to 55 pages organised round five questions: what is evidence-informed decision-making, and why focus on research? When can evidence help you? What evidence should you choose? Where should you look for evidence? How should you communicate your findings?

Each question gets a section in the guide, drawing on relevant research, experience and opinion (of which there is now much: the guide has 123 references given at the end), with diagrams and case studies used to illustrate its arguments and key messages restated at the end of each section. So far, so good.

But detailed reading reveals some of the limitations of its approach. In the context of the ongoing debates about evidence, policy and practice, the guide takes up some very particular positions. In the first line of the introduction, it states: 'Research evidence can help you understand what works, where, why and for whom. It can also tell you what doesn't work…' Well, yes, but it can also help you to understand the nature of the problem that policy might address.

In the section on the strengths of research as a source of evidence, the guide recognises that other sources, notably professional judgement, can play a role but it asserts that research has 'the advantages of greater rigour, relevance and independence when compared with other types of evidence'. Greater rigour perhaps (though it depends on sources and methods), but always greater relevance or greater independence?

In addressing the question of how to judge the quality of research, it puts most stress on peer review and chosen methods, giving support to our old friend, the hierarchy of evidence, with randomised control trials and systematic reviews in privileged positions. These are examples of the guide's limitations.

However, it does introduce the reader to some interesting recent contributions by others to thinking about research and policy. For example, a table of common 'cognitive biases' in judging the value of evidence or an overview of the pros and cons of alternative research methods or a DEFRA analysis of types of evidence helpful to different policy actions. So, the document can serve as a source book for some (not all) ways of relating research to decision making. But it is not the definitive practice guide that it aims to be.

Books for review

We are always looking for reviewers. Write a short review for us and you get to keep the book. All books up for review are listed online at http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/bookreviews

Here are some of the titles on offer:

Digital ethnography principles and practice
Sarah Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis and Jo Tacchi, SAGE, 2016
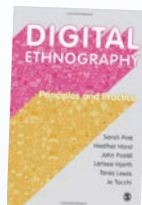
Interpreting qualitative data: fifth edition
David Silverman, SAGE, 2015

Ethnography for the internet: embedded, embodied & everyday
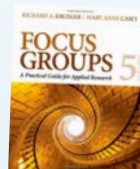**Christine Hine, Bloomsbury, 2015**

Qualitative online interviews: strategies design & skills: second edition
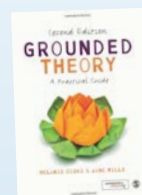**Janet E. Salmons, SAGE, 2015**

Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research
Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey, SAGE, 2015

Understanding narrative inquiry: the crafting and analysis of stories as research
Jeong-Hee Kim, SAGE, 2015

Grounded theory: a practical guide: second edition
Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, SAGE, 2015

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

Social research training for your staff

Holding a training day 'in-house' is an increasingly popular and effective option. If up to 15 of your staff have a specific training need, why not arrange for an SRA trainer to visit your offices to deliver a course? The content can be 'tweaked' to suit the requirements of your organisation, making this a very powerful learning opportunity.

In recent months SRA trainers have visited venues as far apart as Glasgow and Paris, delivering a wide range of in-house courses, including:

- Data visualisation
- Advanced evaluation
- Focus groups
- Qualitative data analysis
- Questionnaire design
- Basic statistics
- Research project management

Prices start from £1,600 plus expenses. If you see a course on the Training page of our website and would like an informal chat about in-house options, please contact Graham at the SRA office: **admin@the-sra.org.uk** or **0207 998 0304**

SRA training

Date	Course	Location
28 June **NEW**	Creative research methods for evaluation, with Dr Helen Kara	London
29 June **NEW**	Ethical thinking and decision-making in practice, with Dr Helen Kara	London
30 June	Managing challenging interviews, with NatCen Learning	London
4 July	Advanced evaluation: options and choices in impact evaluation, with Professor David Parsons (FULL)	London
11 July **NEW**	Consultancy skills for social researchers, with Dr Simon Haslam	London
8 September	Introduction to evaluation	Edinburgh
15 September	Introduction to data visualisation and infographic Design	London
28 September	Creative research methods for evaluation	Edinburgh
29 September	Introduction to evaluation	Belfast
30 September	Advanced evaluation: new thinking and choices in impact evaluation	Belfast
3 October	Qualitative multi-methods data collection	London
6 October	Qualitative multi-methods data collection	Edinburgh
6 October	Introduction to evaluation	London
7 October	Advanced evaluation: new thinking and choices in impact evaluation	London
10 October	Qualitative multi-methods data collection	Belfast
10 October	Research with children and young people	London
11 October	Research with children and young people: advanced workshop	London
19 October	Designing a qualitative study	London
20 October	Qualitative interviewing	London
21 October	Focus groups	London
24 October	Introduction to research project management	London
26 October	Analysis of qualitative data	London
27 October	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	London
2 November	Designing a qualitative study	Edinburgh
3 November	Qualitative interviewing	Edinburgh
4 November	Focus groups	Edinburgh
7 November	Analysis of qualitative data	Edinburgh
8 November	Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings	Edinburgh
8 November	Writing for doctoral students	London
28 November	Questionnaire design and testing	Edinburgh
29 November	Web surveys: visual design and delivery	Edinburgh
30 November	Understanding statistical concepts and basic tests	Edinburgh
1 December	Sampling and introduction to weighting	Edinburgh

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

Contribute to SRA Research Matters

We are always pleased to discuss contributions to Research Matters. We consider articles on any topic as long as they are about research findings or research practice, and we particularly welcome contributions that show how research can make a difference. Whether you are interested in writing a short piece (330 words) or a full page article (670 words), do email us at **admin@the-sra.org.uk**

Ideas please

Can you help us by suggesting ideas for articles? The editorial team is looking for a new member or two. We're an informal group of volunteers who meet by conference call every three months to plan the next issue of 'Research Matters'. If you have a few hours a month to spare for this career-relevant activity, and have some research experience under your belt, we'd like to hear from you. Please email Graham on **admin@the-sra.org.uk** to find out more.

SRA RESEARCH MATTERS

EDITORIAL POLICY

We welcome submissions for articles on any subject of interest to the social research community. Please email **admin@the-sra.org.uk** and ask for the Research Matters guidelines.

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

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Next copy deadlines: **25 July** and **14 October**

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