

Social research and the cuts: a challenge for us all



By the time you read this we will have had the comprehensive spending review (CSR) and will be beginning to get the measure of the changes that are proposed and their implications for the social science community and social research. The SRA, along with other Learned Societies in the social sciences, is keen to ensure that we take a long hard look at the short, medium and long-term consequences and make an intelligent response to them.

We will need your help to do this. So do report your experiences of cuts and changes as the SRA is aiming to monitor these.

The "quango cull" has had quite an effect on the numbers and location of social researchers. Among the quangos with social researchers affected, known to the SRA by mid October, were the Food Standards Agency, the Audit Commission and the Commission for Rural Communities but there must be many others. In some cases, social researchers have been or are likely to be offered transfers into departments as part of their agency's work is taken back into central government, as with the FSA for example; others know that, in all probability, they will be made redundant, as with the Audit Commission. For some, this is an opportunity but for many it will be a distressing challenge.

But it is not just the quangos cull which is having an effect. The level of social science research being commissioned by central, local government and the agencies has fallen dramatically. This is having a serious effect on both the commercial and not-for-profit research agencies that have seen their volume of work and, of course, their income drop. Sadly, we have heard that some small companies have gone out of business and others are looking hard at how to manage income reductions. Some members have also reported that existing research contracts have been reviewed and in some cases terminated. Clearly, whatever happens to the public sector has a significant impact on the private and third sectors! Moreover, the Government's Social Research category [GSR] is not likely to be immune from these staff and work reductions. Indeed, initially GSRU posts were not filled and then the unit was merged with the equivalent GES body to form the GSER. We are likely to see more posts not being filled and a decline in the use of social science to inform policy making.

There are several issues for the SRA. We are concerned for individual social researchers' jobs and will be looking at what we can do to help them. But we also have to look at what the reductions mean more generally for the whole of social research. The SRA is concerned that, unlike the economists or statisticians, we have no voice for social science at the highest levels of government and so is pressing hard for this to be reviewed. We argue that it is essential that there is a dedicated person able to look across the whole of government activity and make the case for a social science perspective. And, of course, this is important for both the social research practitioner and academic social science communities.

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Two other major concerns are:

- what happens to capacity – will we lose a cohort of young researchers who either do not enter the profession or leave early unable to build a career?
- what happens to the stock of knowledge; will this be lost?

Those who remember the cuts of the 1980s, remember all too vividly, how a generation of social researchers was decimated and we still feel the effect of this. There is a lack of highly experienced researchers in their fifties now. The issue of research being lost or forgotten is a particular concern for some government departments and agencies that rely on their reports being on their websites. Some

are talking to the British Library to see if the material can be lodged there so it's not "lost" when websites close down. This seems a responsible way forward and we urge colleagues to think "legacy" (like the Commission for Rural Communities has) as they face these sort of changes.

There is much to be done. Please help the SRA to help you and subsequent generations of social researchers by continuing to support the SRA even if times get hard. Let us know what is happening in your sector or organisation and, very importantly, be proactive. Show what social science research offers and how it can help to make effective policy and practice as well as contribute to explaining how society works.

Spending review is at: http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010_complereport.pdf

SRA training and events

Check out our full programme of training and events online at www.the-sra.org.uk

Course	Length	Date	Location	Level
Designing a Qualitative Study	1 Day	4 Nov	London	Introductory
In Depth Interviewing	1 Day	9 Nov	London	Introductory
Cognitive Interviewing	1 Day	11 Nov	London	Introductory
Introduction to Evaluations	1 Day	25 Nov	London	Introductory
Running Focus Groups	1 Day	1 Dec	London	Introductory
Introduction to Qualitative Data Analysis	1 Day	13 Jan	London	Introductory
Essentials of Survey Research Design	1 Day	2 Mar	TBC	Introductory
Introduction to Survey Sampling	1 Day	3 Mar	TBC	Introductory
Research with People with Disabilities	1 Day	TBC	TBC	TBC
Survey Research and Data Privacy	½ Day	18 May	London	Advanced
Advanced QDA	2 Days	8–9 Jun	London	Advanced
Getting Research into Policy into Practice	1 Day	21 Jun	London	Advanced

Are you working in research with an international dimension?

You may be interested in international social research training designed to meet the needs of early career researchers and research managers (at postdoctoral or equivalent level) who are engaged in, embarking on or using research with an international dimension. This series of workshops, funded by the ESRC under their Researcher Development Initiative, is being organised by the Social Research Association in partnership with the Centre for International Studies, London School of Economics.

Feeling the crunch

SRA chair, **Mark Wardman**, gives his quarterly report



It's crunch time. By the time you read this, we will know the full scale of the spending review cuts. Inevitably, some of you are facing redundancy, whether you work in the public sector or other sectors that depend on public funding of research. And if you work independently, you will no doubt be feeling even more uncertain and will not have the benefit of any redundancy payments.

To all of you in this position, I offer my sympathy and indeed my empathy, as I too am affected. But more than that, the SRA will offer you as much support as possible. Firstly, we will work with the Academy of Social Sciences, and our fellow Learned Societies, to promote the role and contribution of all social sciences. Our contribution initially will be to monitor the effect of the cuts on our members and their organisations. One of the first casualties of war is the truth, so goes the saying. We intend to play our part in making known to the wider world the reality of the cuts, ensuring that critical information is in the public domain.

To do this effectively, we need your help. Nigel Goldie recently emailed members seeking help to create a system and process that does this cost-effectively. Please do offer your assistance.

Secondly, we are beginning to embrace new technology – and about time you may say. Social networking is vitally important in building relationships and providing support. We have an SRA group on Facebook, LinkedIn (see page 14) and Twitter. LinkedIn in particular has become an important means of finding jobs and candidates. It also allows us to communicate privately without endless email trails. Of course, not all our members are using these 'wiki' technologies, but an increasing number are – even me! We are establishing a LinkedIn group for independent researchers, who often feel isolated, to offer each other guidance and support.

Thirdly, we will continue to run events and meetings which bring together researchers and policy makers. Face-to-face communication works best for many of us. A recent SRA event on careers in social research for young people held at GfKNOP was a sell out (except it was free) and well received. My thanks to GfKNOP for their generosity in hosting this event (see report on page 7).

And the annual conference is shaping up well. We have an excellent line up of speakers and workshops (see page 8). Our theme of social research in an age of austerity

is clearly topical, and the perspectives from public, private, and voluntary sectors and the media will engage and provoke a good discussion. As an added incentive, in keeping with these more austere times, we are able to offer a substantial discount on the fee for members and non-members alike, compared with previous years. This is due to the kindness and generosity of the British Library, which has offered us their excellent conference facilities this and next year. I look forward to seeing many of you there.

The SRA itself is not immune from the financial pressures you face. We expect that our income from training will decline, for example, as organisations retrench. We have taken various measures to reduce operating costs while protecting services for members – in effect, to do more or the same for less. One such measure concerns this newsletter. We are publishing it electronically. This will save us substantial sums on printing and distribution. We understand that not all members will like this, but it is in keeping with the practice followed by many organisations and Learned Societies and is an unavoidable step in this climate.

We are a community with a powerful legacy of sound and valuable research that many commentators appreciate

I appreciate that it is hard to see a bright future. But we continue to have a role. We would do well to remember our history – we have been here before and bounced back. The spotlight may temporarily shine more on economists, but social researchers are actors on the same stage and we all have a contribution. We are a community with a powerful legacy of sound and valuable research that many commentators appreciate. They will return to social research to understand the human, as well as the financial, costs and benefits of government policy.

Should there be a single regulator for medical and social research?

The Academy of Social Science responded to the Rawlins Review during the summer on behalf of its members (including the SRA). While the initial focus of the review was the regulation and governance of UK medical research, it also asked for evidence for the merits of placing responsibility for different aspects of medical research regulation within a 'single research regulator' which clearly has implications for a significant part of social science research. Janet Lewis orchestrated the submission and several SRA members helped. The full submission can be found on the Academy website www.acss.org.uk academy. Key points made in the submission include:

- 1 Regulation of research should always be proportionate and adopt a risk-based approach
- 2 A single research regulator could not simply focus on 'medical'

research, it would have to be responsible for all the research covered by the Department of Health's Research Governance Framework (RGF)

- 3 The current system of regulation and governance of medical research is dysfunctional and inappropriate for much of the social science research relating to health services and health and social care
- 4 Social science is not represented among the membership of the AMS Review group, despite social science research being firmly embedded within the range of research being carried out within the RGF Committee. AcSS believes, very strongly, that a further inquiry is needed to look at the appropriate inclusion of social science within a restructured regulatory system

- 5 There needs to be one system for permissions to undertake research (ie governance) within the NHS in the same way that there is one system for ethics review (NRES). This could be managed by a single research regulator

- 6 The NRES could make much greater use of RECs in Higher Education Institutions to carry out ethics review, particularly of health and wellbeing-related topics

The way that the NHS regulates and governs research not only has a major impact on social scientists carrying research on health and social care, it also sets the frame for many other organisations. The SRA joins the Academy in urging its members and the social research community more widely to publicise the existence of this evidence and encourage further input and discussion of the issues raised.

New SRA Academicians



Sharon Witherspoon MBE (top) and Jane Lewis

Many congratulations to Sharon Witherspoon MBE and Jane Lewis who we have successfully proposed as Academicians of the Academy of Social Science. Sharon is currently the deputy director of the Nuffield Foundation where she leads the foundation's research in social science and social

policy and oversees the children and family and law in society programmes. Her contribution to social science research is much broader than this however. She played a key role whilst at SCPR

(now NatCen) in developing the British Social Attitude Survey which revolutionised thinking about the use of attitudinal research in policy formation. And she contributes now to wider debates about ethical scrutiny in social research, the nature and consequences of government procurement of social science research and the politics of social science through her membership of significant social science committees and professional groups.

Jane Lewis is director of **research in practice**, a leading practitioner-focused organisation known for its excellence in building capacity for evidence-based practice for children's services in England and Wales. Formerly head of research at the National Children's Bureau she made her name as head of

the Qualitative Research Unit at NatCen. Here, she not only was responsible for leading the centre's qualitative research and training hundreds of social researchers in qualitative methods but she also, through some pioneering studies, showed how qualitative research can be used to understand the implementation and impact of policies and to illuminate social dynamics and experiences. She has written extensively on qualitative research and co-edited *Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage 2003), widely used as a core text on qualitative methods courses as well as on the contribution qualitative research makes to evaluation techniques.

The SRA is sure they will continue to contribute to improving the quality of social science research.

SRA/NCRM joint events starting in January

The SRA is planning jointly with NCRM a series of daytime workshop events to be held, ideally on a monthly basis, at the Nuffield Centre in London. The aim is to present a 'pick of the festival' with a re-run of session from this year's NCRM Research Methods Festival. This will provide an opportunity for people who missed the festival to get the benefit of some of the learning opportunities of this major event. For example it is proposed to run some of the 'What Is?' sessions, for example: What is e-research? What is an e-lab? What is web link mining? What is webometrics? The first workshop is planned for January 12th to be followed by one on February 23rd. Check the SRA website for details.

GSRU becomes GESR

The Government Social Research Unit has become part of a new Treasury team known as GESR – the Government Economic and Social Research team. This is now the professional support unit for both the Government Economic Service (GES) and the Government Social Research Service (GSR). This new team is the result of combining GSRU with the Government Economic Support Team (GEST) under Andy Ross. The two government professions for economists and social researchers continue to exist as separate entities, but significant efficiencies will be made by merging their professional support teams. The new GESR team will continue to provide distinct professional support for each analytical profession. More information: www.civilpages.gsi.gov.uk/display/GSR/Home

SRA project on commissioning and the procurement of government social research

Despite electoral upheaval and the anxiety of talk of and actual cuts, there has been significant progress with this Nuffield-funded project. Carol Goldstone and Meta Zimmeck started fieldwork in the summer. They initially scoped the type of procurement arrangements in key government departments and agencies and then identified which ones they wished to use as case studies. The team and advisory group were concerned that government departments might not have been willing to co-operate or were too busy to take part in interviews but this has not proved to be the case. The team has also talked to several research centres, organisations and individuals about their experiences of the different procurement methods. In late October, the team held a workshop with those who took part in the study to discuss early findings and check their implications with participants. The report is now awaited with a view to launching the findings and recommendations in early 2011.



Meta Zimmeck (top) and Carol Goldstone

Scottish gender-based violence research network launches

September 1st saw the launch of a new network, which aims to link researchers doing gender-based violence research in Scotland and connect them to practitioners. The launch event opened with presentations from Dr Sylvia Walby, Dr Emma Williamson and Frances Monaghan of Wise Women and was attended by over 50 researchers and practitioners from across Scotland enthusiastic about what the network could offer.

The network has been established by the Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust, the National GBV and Health

Programme at the Scottish Government and the Centre Research on Families and Relationships at Edinburgh University. It aims to create links between GBV researchers to enable collaboration and reduce duplication and to offer peer support and review and good practice sharing on methodological challenges.

The network is free to join at www.vawpreventionscotland.org.uk/directory/researchers.

More information: Michelle Lowe, Prevention Network Officer, Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust: 0131 624 8957

Get stats

The getstats campaign is a ten-year statistical literacy campaign to build a society in which our lives and choices are enriched by an understanding of statistics. The launch date – 20.10.2010 – was also the first UN-designated World Statistics Day. More information at: www.getstats.org.uk

New chief executive for the ESRC

Professor Paul Boyle took up post on 1 September as the new chief executive of the ESRC. More info at www.esrc.ac.uk

SRA Scotland *Julie Carr and Sarah Thomson report*

What's been happening in SRA Scotland?

The autumn/winter training and development programme for SRA members in Scotland and the north of England has involved the ongoing provision of the ever popular *one day modular courses on qualitative research* (run by Liz Spencer in Aberdeen in October and again in November in Edinburgh) and *on quantitative research* (run by Dr Pamela Campanelli in November in Edinburgh). These courses run regularly so please check the SRA Scotland web page for details (link below).

Based on feedback from members, we also ran a new course for SRA Scotland in September in Glasgow. The advanced level 2-day course, *Approaches to Evaluation*, was led by Prof. Shirley Dex (until recently at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, University of London) and Dr Desiree Lopez and covered both qualitative and experimental evaluations.

In addition to our ongoing training, we also successfully re-launched the seminar programme on the 29 September with *Public Attitudes to Public Services: Survey Data in the Scottish Government* presented by Franca Eirich and Catherine Millington (Scottish Government) and chaired by Rebecca Williams (OPM).

What's on in 2011? You decide...

We are currently developing a range of learning and networking opportunities through our training programme, seminar programme and a range of other events.

- **Training:** looking forward to the New Year, we are keen that our 2011 courses reflect the CPD needs of our members, So if you have any ideas for future SRA courses, do let us know (contact details below).
- **Seminars:** please check the SRA Scotland web page for upcoming seminars in early 2011. If you would like to suggest a seminar

topic or would like to volunteer to deliver a seminar, Rebecca Williams (RWilliams@opm.co.uk) and Carolanne Quigley (cquigley@audit-scotland.gov.uk) would be pleased to hear from you.

- **Events:** planning for a possible *research ethics debate* continues as does that for a *networking event for freelance researchers*. We are really keen to see if these events are of interest to you, so do email us to let us know if you would be interested in attending and whether you have any views on what the event should involve.

The SRA Scotland committee looks forward to welcoming you at future events.

More information: Lindsay Adams (lindsay.adams@blueyonder.co.uk); Julie Carr (Julie.carr@scotland.gsi.gov.uk); Sarah Thomson (sarah.thomson@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)

More at: www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_scotland.htm

SRA Ireland *David Silke, Chair, SRA Ireland reports*

Now up and running!

Established by Dr Peter Humphreys, for the past few years the SRA has had a small but growing membership throughout the island of Ireland. We have members and supporters in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Galway, Ennis, Limerick, Tralee ... so we are determined not to be Dublin centric. We believe that the SRA has a unique contribution to make to the professional development of social research in Ireland and we are doing our best to raise the profile of the SRA and improve services available to members throughout Ireland. These include the local provision of quality research training and workshops,

seminars and other events, as well as opportunities to network.

The SRA Ireland branch this year has organised some very successful training on knowledge transfer and held an AGM and open lecture. Two highly-regarded researchers, Professor Brian Nolan and Dr Sinead Hannifin, addressed the lecture on the topic *The Uses of Social Research: Potential and Pitfalls*. A report of the lecture is on the SRA website.

Our next activity is to run a two-day training course in October on quality in research, delivered by Liz Spencer and Dr Pamela Campanelli.

The SRA Ireland Committee includes members from both the North

and Republic of Ireland and meets regularly. It includes a good mix of academic, public sector and consultant researchers. It is currently planning activities for 2011.

If you would like more information about the branch, would like to suggest a training course or seminar topic that you think would be of interest or would like to get involved in planning an activity, please do not hesitate to contact me: sra.ireland@gmail.com

More at: www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_ireland.htm



SRA Cymru *The SRA Cymru Organising Committee reports*

SRA Cymru launched its new programme for 2010/11 with a seminar led by Professor Laurence Moore on experimental designs attended by over 50 researchers and policy colleagues from many different organisations and backgrounds. The seminar (*Experimental Designs In Policy Evaluation: Expensive and Futile? Or Feasible and Valuable? Some evidence from Wales*) focused on the feasibility, ethics and values of experimental designs, using examples of policy evaluation in Wales.

In the UK, social policy interventions are rarely tested using experimental designs such as RCTs, and the feasibility, ethics and value of such designs are contested. During the seminar, Professor Moore used recent trials of public health interventions in Wales to demonstrate that trials are feasible. It was argued that these trials

have provided unbiased estimates of intervention effects, as well as illuminating process, implementation and context. The seminar also used examples to highlight ways in which policy makers and researchers can work together to maximise the relevance and value of high quality evaluation research.

Other seminars planned include *“Problem-Solving for Safer Communities in Wales: The Role of Social Science”*. This will be led by Professor Gordon Hughes, Adam Edwards (Centre for Crime, Law and Society, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University) and Stephen Carr (Community Safety Manager, Cardiff). This seminar is part of a series of ‘trialogues’ which members of the Cardiff Centre for Crime, Law and Justice in partnership with the newly formed Welsh Centre for Crime and Social Justice have initiated across the, too often separate, communities

of practitioners, policy makers and academic researchers in criminology across Wales.

The focus of this seminar is on the challenges associated with developing evidence-based, problem-solving strategies in community safety and multi-agency policing. It will also seek to both raise and answer urgent questions regarding the fate of multi-agency partnership working in Wales in the wake of the unprecedented cuts in public spending and in the context, inter alia, of the Home Office’s recent consultation paper, *Policing in the 21st century: Re-connecting the police and the people*.

To find out more about SRA Cymru events in Wales, please contact Rebecca Nelson or Beverley Morgan: Rebecca.Nelson@wales.gsi.gov.uk Beverley.Morgan@wales.gsi.gov.uk

More at: www.the-sra.org.uk/sra_cymru.htm

SRA event for new/early career researchers

Dr Nina Burrowes, NB Research Ltd, reports

The SRA recently held an event for new and early researchers. Its aim was to give people who are new to the research industry a taste of the types of careers that they may be able to pursue and an opportunity to network with others who are in a similar position. The event was generously hosted by GfK NOP and was attended by approximately 50 new/early researchers.

Presentations were given by Amrita Sood from GfK NOP who talked about her career working for a large private sector research provider; Daniel Stevens from the Institute for Volunteering Research who talked about his recent move into the voluntary sector research; and Julia

Heynat from JH Research who talked about life as a freelance researcher. The presentations illustrated the varied and often unusual pathways that researchers follow. Indeed it might be misleading to suggest that researchers ‘follow a pathway’ so much as ‘respond to opportunities and events as and when they happen’. The common themes to the stories were hard work, making the most of the experience you have, and recognising opportunity when it comes along.

Whilst the stories of how the various presenters ended up in their current position varied, the realities of day-to-day life as a researcher were similar. Tendering for work,

maintaining client relationships, project management, administration, and always thinking ahead to the next project appeared to occupy a significant amount of time. From my own perspective, much of my training to become a researcher focused on the academic aspects of conducting research and paid little attention to project management, tendering and client relationships. I definitely faced a steep learning curve when I first started out on my own and I think that I would have found all of the presentations really useful had they been available to me at the start of my career.

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SRA Annual Conference

Making a difference: social research in an era of austerity

7 December, British Library, London NW1

Early bookings are advised as places are limited.

More info: www.the-sra.org.uk

Plenary and panel speakers include:

- **Mark Easton**, BBC home affairs correspondent
- **Prof Sandra Nutley**, Edinburgh University
- **Paul Boyle**, chief executive and deputy chair of the ESRC
- **Bill Blyth**, global director for TNS-BMRB
- **Jenny Dibden**, joint head of Government Social Research
- **Peter Alcock**, director of the 3rd Sector Research Centre
- **Bill Solesbury**, independent researcher

Prices for the event are £125 for members and £200 for non-members. Please complete your booking form online at www.the-sra.org.uk/events.htm



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After the presentations, we divided into groups and explored a research sector in more detail. A key question emerging from group discussions and the following Q&A session was about the impact of the current economic climate on those seeking a research career. The general consensus was that there were likely to be fewer jobs in the sector, but that this was a feature shared with most other industries. The advice was that new/early researchers should do the best that they can to ensure that they hear about jobs or opportunities by networking as much as possible. The SRA provides many opportunities to do this.

Whilst I have been working as a freelance researcher for several years and no longer consider myself 'new' I gained a lot from the event and would recommend any future events like this to anyone interested in learning more about our industry.

Nina can be contacted at: nina@nb-research.co.uk or www.nb-research.co.uk

Video in qualitative research: analysing social interaction in everyday life

By Christian Heath, Jon Hindmarsh and Paul Luff. 2010, Sage

Reviewed by Dr Rowena Passy, University of Plymouth

This book has two aims. The first, main purpose is to provide introductory guidance to academics and students who are intending to use video in their qualitative research. The secondary aim is to illustrate the value of work which focuses on the detail of human communication and interaction – a subject matter to which video recording is particularly suited.

The book's strength lies in its practicality, both in the way it can be used and in the way that the authors approach the subject matter. Each chapter takes the reader through a different stage of the research, is clearly laid out and provides useful tips at appropriate points throughout the text. There is some recommended reading and a summary of the key points at the end. But it is the way that the authors draw on their extensive experience in the field to provide clear and accessible advice that makes the book stand out. They highlight the particular challenges that are associated with using video while providing illustrations of the ways in which these challenges can be approached; their emphasis is on collaboration and experimentation and, above all, clarity on the purpose for which the data is being collected. Their chapters on data analysis and data presentation, including recommended software, are particularly helpful.

The final chapter, which examines the ways in which this type of research may be put to use, provides a conclusion that succeeds in the secondary aim. To sum up, whether you are interested in the 'minutiae of human conduct' or in the use of video recording as part of your research, this book will be a valuable addition to your library.

BOOKS FOR REVIEW

If you would like a copy of any of the following books, simply write a short review of about 300 words. In exchange, you get to keep the item. Contact Carolyn Roberts, book review editor: carolyn.roberts@samh.org.uk

Interviews in Qualitative Research

by Nigel King and Christine Horrocks, 2010, Sage Publications

Welfare and well-being, Social value in public policy

by Bill Jordan, 2008, Policy Press



Mode effects in qualitative research interviews

By **Annie Irvine**, Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Unit

What difference does it make when we conduct qualitative research interviews by telephone rather than face-to-face? This is an important methodological question, but one which has received relatively little attention to date. An ESRC-funded study conducted at the University of York has sought to contribute to filling this gap in knowledge. The study took an innovative cross-disciplinary approach, bringing together methodological expertise from the fields of conversation analysis and applied social policy research.

The key aims of our study were to contribute to a more evidence-based understanding about what differences interview mode (telephone or face-to-face) might produce in the qualitative interview interaction and to consider the implications that any such differences might have for the research. Rather than comparing the substantive content of the interview conversations, we were interested in the *interactional features* of the spoken dialogue between the researcher and participants. We considered differences in such things as:

- The duration and depth of interviews
- The ways that the researcher displayed attention and interest

- The incidence of misunderstanding or requests for clarification
- The patterns of turn-taking and incidence of overlap or interruption
- The strategies through which rapport and 'naturalness' were accomplished

We found that, on average, telephone interviews were shorter than face-to-face interviews. This was due to the interviewee speaking for less time, rather than the researcher and interviewee both saying less when talking on the phone. As such, the researcher was relatively more dominant in the interaction in telephone interviews. We found no tendency for the researcher to interrupt or speak over the interviewee more often in telephone interviews and there was no evidence that misunderstandings occurred more frequently over the phone. However, interviewee requests for the researcher to clarify questions were slightly more common in telephone interviews. Paraphrasing of what interviewees had said, or completion of interviewee's sentences by the researcher, were more common in face-to-face interviews. The researcher gave relatively fewer verbal acknowledgements (things like mm hm, right, yeah) during telephone interviews, which is perhaps surprising given the absence of non-verbal cues such as nods or smiles. Telephone interviewees had a greater tendency to check that what they were saying was 'along the right lines', i.e. that they were giving the researcher relevant or sufficient information.

Our study was small scale and all findings are tentative. However, they suggest that there are some interactional differences to be found between telephone and face-to-face interviews. The implications of these differences may vary according to the specific aims of any given study.

A one-day workshop took place in May to disseminate and discuss the study's methods, findings



THE UNIVERSITY of York

and implications. The workshop brought together qualitative social researchers engaged in applied policy research, market research and sociological research with academics specialising in the fields of qualitative research methodology, conversation and discourse analysis. Bringing together a group with diverse but related interests provided multiple perspectives on the theme and highlighted a wide range of further questions that could be explored. Some participants commented that their perceptions about telephone interviews had begun to alter. Views were also expressed about the potential for a greater focus on telephone interviewing in research methods training. The group agreed that there is much scope for further investigation into mode effects in qualitative interviews.

Our exploratory investigation has only been able to provide some initial suggestions as to what difference it might make if we conduct qualitative research interviews by telephone rather than face-to-face. However, we hope that it has raised the profile of this important methodological question and we encourage other researchers to join us in furthering the inquiry.

A summary of the study's main findings and further details about the practitioner workshop are available from the project web page: <http://php.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/summs/mode.php>. Details of forthcoming publications will be added to this page shortly.

All you've ever wanted to know about rural England...

By **Nicola Lloyd**, Executive Director for Research and Analysis, Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)



England is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, so researchers and policy-makers tend to focus on developments and trends which affect most of the population who live in the larger towns and cities. But to get a full picture, we need to understand what's happening for around 10 million people who live in rural areas. For example, as more and more services are being made available through the internet, if we want to avoid a digital divide, it's important to know that 471,000 (11%) households in rural areas do not have access to the minimum standard of broadband, compared with 0.5% of households in urban areas.

This fact is just one of the very many useful and interesting statistics published by the CRC in this year's *State of the countryside* report. This is the last one in a series of 11 such reports produced first by the Countryside Agency (1999-2004) and then by the CRC (2005-2010). The report presents data on a comprehensive range of social, economic and environmental factors. In the commentary, we then draw out the longer-term trends from the short-term impacts, so that we can accurately present the circumstances of people living and working in the countryside to those who make the decisions that will affect their lives. It contains up-to-date maps, charts and contextual information which is

regarded as being both authoritative and independent. The report has been produced as Official Statistics and it is often quoted in Parliament and the media.

In the 2010 report, we examine many of the issues that affect rural England in greater detail and provide readers with a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics involved than ever before. For the last two years we have been developing the rural evidence base by acquiring a wider range of data that can be analysed to reveal the rural picture and undertaking analysis at a much finer spatial scale. In the CRC's role as rural expert adviser, we need an in-depth understanding of the impact of factors, such as the global recession and environmental change on rural communities. So this report not only updates previously available information, it also adds much more to our understanding of what these data actually mean.

To give a flavour of the types of data contained in the report, it's worth selecting just a few topics as examples. The slowing of in-migration to rural areas has continued and may herald an easing of some pressures on rural communities. However, declining access to many services (especially job centres, post offices and petrol stations) for rural communities, that we can trace back over many years, continues to be a clear feature of

rural life. Rural land is still required for its traditional use of food production in an era of increasing concern about availability of food supplies and increasing interest in the local sourcing of food. England's rural economies are under pressure with increases in unemployment over the last two years. Also, the overall picture of prosperity in rural households is tempered by low pay for women and lower wages for those who work in a rural area, rather than commute. Nevertheless, continuing high levels of entrepreneurship and the resilience to the recession shown by rural businesses emphasise the potential for rural economies to make a substantial contribution to a national return to growth. This is particularly important given the scope for rural areas to provide new 'green jobs' for both rural and urban residents.

Although the CRC is one of the bodies which the Government intends to abolish, the evidence that we have produced will stand as a comprehensive source of information not just for those who focus on

...continuing high levels of entrepreneurship and the resilience to the recession shown by rural businesses emphasise the potential for rural economies to make a substantial contribution to a national return to growth

the rural context, but for all with an interest in the English society, economy and environment. The actual data may lose its contemporary relevance but those who wish to tackle the policy issues and address rural disadvantage in particular will continue to find useful approaches and methods in our analysis for future reference.

In some ways, NCB Research Centre is like many other policy research organisations: we are a group of researchers with a range of methodological skills, and we apply these skills creatively to develop innovative solutions to answer a range of research questions. We are passionate about quality, as we believe that bad research can be worse than no research and can lead to poorly designed policies and services. However, in other ways, NCB Research Centre is unique and very different from any other research organisation I know. What makes the centre special, and makes me proud to be part of it, is the combination of three key features: our child-centred approach, our strong links with policy and practice, and our commitment to enable the children's sector to operate in a more evidence-informed way.

Our first, and most important, defining feature is that children and young people are at the heart of what we do. Their interests and needs determine not only what kind of research we do, but also how we do it. We strongly believe that a child-centred approach means enabling children and young people to shape the research agenda and to actively participate in the research process. Children and young people are involved in most of our projects in a range of roles: from the more traditional 'research participant' role, to a more active role as advisers, research commissioners (when they decide the research aims and scope), and 'research apprentices' (when they get involved in a range of research tasks). A group of young research advisers informs our work programme, strategic direction and dissemination activities. Involving children and young people in research in 'non-traditional' roles presents some methodological, ethical and practical challenges, but we strongly believe that it brings great benefits to

NCB RESEARCH CENTRE: high quality research for and with children and young people

Ivana La Valle, Director, NCB Research Centre, describes what it is like to work at the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Research Centre, as part of a series of articles which aims to share social researchers' experiences of working in different settings and organisations.

our research, and ultimately the policy and practice informed by this research. We are keen to exchange and debate with the wider social research community the experience of involving children and young people in research. We are therefore organising a conference, in March 2011, to explore the benefits and challenges of involving children and young people in research in more and less traditional roles.

The second feature which makes the centre special is that we are surrounded by policy and practice experts. Having spent the first 18 years of my career in research institutions and somewhat removed from policy and practice, I now feel very fortunate to be able to rely on the advice and support of colleagues who have played a key role in shaping children's policy and practice. We help our colleagues to access robust research to inform the development of policy and practice and to evaluate their effectiveness, they help us to 'translate' research findings into messages that make sense and are useful to policy makers and practitioners.

Our third defining feature is our commitment to enable the children's sector to work in a more evidence-

informed way – an approach that is more important than ever at a time when many services need to provide evidence of their 'value' in order to survive. We run training to make research language and concepts more accessible to those working in the children's sector, and to enable them to develop tools to evaluate their services. We are not trying to transform children's managers and practitioners into

...we aim to provide some basic research tools and knowledge to enable the sector to self-evaluate and improve services and practice

top-notch researchers who can run complex evaluations, but we aim to provide some basic research tools and knowledge to enable the sector to self-evaluate and improve services and practice.

For more information about NCB Research Centre and our March 2011 conference see: www.ncb.org.uk/research

Email: ilavalle@ncb.org.uk

Growing Up in Scotland

*Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) is the longitudinal research study following the lives of thousands of children across Scotland from birth through to the teenage years. **Lesley Kelly**, the dissemination officer for the study, talks about some of the findings from GUS and plans for the future.*



The Growing Up in Scotland study is now five years old. Our participating families have been visited once a year until their child was nearly six to collect information on every aspect of growing up. We will soon be recruiting a new cohort of around 6,000 (or one in ten) babies born in Scotland during 2010/11. This new cohort will allow us to compare the circumstances and experiences of children being born now to those of children born eight and six years earlier.

The study sample is large enough to look at differences in experiences within different groups, for example, lone parents, young mothers and children living in deprived areas or urban and rural locations.

One of the key themes identified by GUS during the first five years of the study has been the issue of support for parents. GUS has uncovered the considerable level of support and care that grandparents in Scotland are providing for their families. Among families with a child aged just under two who used regular childcare, around 60% used the child's grandparents for all or part of this care. Furthermore, almost one in five grandparents was babysitting during the evening at least once a week while nearly two-thirds were buying toys, clothes or equipment for their grandchild at least once a month (excluding special occasions like birthdays).

GUS demonstrates the importance of strong support networks for parents in promoting positive outcomes for children. Parents who reported more satisfactory support networks engaged in more home learning activities with their child, such as reading stories, drawing and singing. The home learning environment was found to have a positive impact on child cognitive development, regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

Parents reporting strong social support networks were also more open to seeking help and advice when required than parents with less satisfactory networks.

In addition, mothers reporting low levels of support from family and/or the local community were more likely to have experienced mental health problems during the first four years of their child's life. Poor maternal mental health has been linked to issues with children's

development. GUS has shown that children whose mothers had been consistently emotionally well had better social, emotional and behavioural development than children whose mothers had experienced brief or repeated mental health problems, even after taking account of family characteristics and socio-economic circumstances.

The above findings suggest that facilitating support networks for parents may have benefits for children's early development and subsequently, their readiness for school.

Other reported topics include food and activity, multiple childcare provision and its effect on child outcomes, the circumstances of persistently poor children and health inequalities in the early years.

Although commissioned by the Scottish Government to inform policy development, GUS is also intended to be a broader resource to be used by local policy makers, service planners, decision makers and others. In response to this, we have adopted an innovative approach to dissemination. A part-time dissemination officer is employed to ensure that findings from the study reach a wide range of audiences across the statutory, voluntary and academic sectors. Keeping our participating families up to date with findings is also a key priority.

With more and more waves of longitudinal data becoming available, GUS is becoming an increasingly valuable resource for anyone carrying out research on the lives of children and their families in contemporary Scotland. Data from the first four years of GUS is available to download from the UK Data Archive. The GUS team recently ran a series of training workshops to promote and support use of the data and is happy to respond to queries about data use.

GUS is funded by the Scottish Government and is carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in collaboration with the Centre for Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh and the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow.

For more information and to download findings see: www.growingupinScotland.org.uk or email lesley.kelly@ed.ac.uk

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES:

linking science, policy and practice in Ireland and Northern Ireland

By *Kate Morris*, Centre for Effective Services

The Centre for Effective Services (CES), with offices in Belfast and Dublin, established in 2008 to provide technical and organisational expertise to promote and support the application of an evidence-informed approach to policy making and service provision across Ireland. Part of an emerging generation of organisations concerned internationally with implementation science (putting scientific and technical knowledge into 'real world' policy and practice), our daily work is to fill an internationally-recognised gap linking science, policy and practice to improve outcomes for children, young people and the families and communities in which they live. We do this in various ways. Some of our work is strategic, for example with government departments, on projects which focus on national policy and service provision issues. We also work with service providers to support them to use evidence in their work. Our multi-disciplinary team has backgrounds in health, social care, education, organisational strategy, research and evaluation, community development and knowledge transfer.

One of the centre's first activities was to conduct a review of the international evidence on 'what works' in community development programmes and to use this to help remodel two important programmes. Recently published online and in hard copy, the key findings are set out at www.effectiveservices.org/projects.php

CES is also working with the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, part of the Department of Health and Children, the Irish Health Service Executive and local areas, to assist with and advise on the strategic development of Children's Services Committees (CSCs). CSCs were established in 2007 to provide a structure for interagency planning and collaboration in providing services for children. A report which distils the learning from the initial implementation stage of the CSCs is available on our website.

Another project has involved supporting the research community in Ireland and Northern Ireland to better understand and improve the lives of children and young people. In 2009, CES was approached by two networks, one based in the health sector, one in the academic

community, with a proposal to re-launch these into one combined network with a focus on research with children and young people. CES helped to set up a steering group and devise terms of reference, to create and maintain an inclusive, independent, not-for-profit network through which knowledge, learning, skills and experience can be shared. The network will be launched at the end of 2010 with a preliminary programme of activities, some of which we hope might eventually involve collaboration with the SRA. Contact Stella Owens (sowens@effectiveservices.org) for more information.

We have also been developing methods to support service providers. Currently there are relatively few organisations in the world which are directly engaged in supporting services to do this. CES has, therefore, been developing a structured framework, the CES Diagnostic Process. The tools which make up this process are designed to help an organisation undertake a practice needs-assessment to obtain a 360 degree overview of their work and to reflect on the extent to which their programme is following agreed principles of effective practice. The tools are currently being tested with help from services of different scale and complexity, and we will have completed the analysis of the results, and have a pilot-tested version of the tool ready to share by early 2011. Ultimately, we aim to prepare a version of the tool which can be self-administered as well as one which can be used as part of a facilitated 'quality improvement' process undertaken jointly by CES and the service concerned.

Further information: www.effectiveservices.org and office@effectiveservices.org

The Centre for Effective Services is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee (company number 451580 in Ireland) and is governed by an Independent Board. The work of the Centre is supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs.



You are not alone: joining up SRA's independent researchers online

By *Christine Garland*,
Qualitative research
& consulting

It can be a little lonely working on your own as an independent researcher. There's no one sitting at the opposite desk to answer a quick question and you can't stick your head round the door of your neighbour's office when you need some advice.

To help address this situation, a new online initiative has been set up for SRA members who work independently. The *sra_independents* networking group is easy to join and use. A member with a query can now contact all the others belonging to the group via a single email.

So if you want to know (for example) how other people set cancellation charges, or you need a recommended recruiter in a particular location, or are looking for a possible partner with specific expertise, you can just send a quick message to the group. All the other members will receive it and can reply if they are able to help.

The idea is to keep queries short and sweet. More detailed, follow-up discussions between individual members can be done by phone or email (but not using the group address). This might sound as if members will get inundated with email, but experience of other networking groups suggests that this isn't likely to be the case. For an existing qualitative researcher group, members receive one or two group emails a month, at most.

To help finalise the practical logistics, the SRA members who developed this initiative (Christine Garland, Matt Baumann and Angela Ruotolo, working in conjunction with Nigel and Dorothy at the SRA) incorporated feedback from other independently-working members who



Left to right: Angela Ruotolo, Christine Garland, Matt Baumann

were sounded out about the idea (well ... we are researchers after all!). This has led us to set it up on LinkedIn.

As some of you may know, LinkedIn is a business-oriented networking site used mainly by professional people. It is free to join, and offers additional benefits that *sra_independents* group members will be able to access.

As well as being able to contact fellow group members to request or share advice, they will be able post a CV profile on the LinkedIn website, which is helpful given that SRA's own online members directory is still at the discussion stage. LinkedIn also offers the opportunity to make connections with non SRA contacts, partners and potential clients through its website.

The good news is that you don't have to be an existing LinkedIn member to join the *sra_independents* group. An invitation to join from the SRA will automatically take you through the LinkedIn joining process, if this is necessary. Then, how many of the site's facilities you decide to use is up to you!

If the SRA knows that you are self-employed or a freelance/independent researcher, you should have received details about joining the group. This is done via the SRA office so that we can confirm, and if necessary update, your contact info.

However, it is also possible that the new group may be relevant to those who work for an organisation/company, but don't have any researcher colleagues to help or advise. If this describes your circumstances and you want to discuss the possibility of joining the group, please contact Maki at the SRA.

If the new group proves a success, there is nothing to stop other types of networking group being set up by SRA members in order to share info and advice. This could include, for example, a group for those working in a particular geographic area (e.g. Scotland) or for members who specialise in a specific type of research (e.g. public health or employment).

In the meantime, *sra_independents* members will report back on how the group is working via these pages next year. It was also included on the agenda for a (face-to-face) meeting for independently-working SRA members held at the SRA in October.

We hope that we will soon be able to confirm that, thanks to the new group, these researchers no longer feel so alone. Now they have a number of like-minded, helpful colleagues just down the (metaphorical) internet corridor!

NatCen Learning's new 2011 training programme

NatCen Learning is proud to be leading the Survey Skills programme of low-cost training and learning for early-career researchers. Funded by the ESRC and part of the Survey Resources Network, Survey Skills offers researchers an exciting insight into survey research in the UK through a series of workshops and placements with leading survey research organisations. See our website for more details and 2010-11 workshop dates:

www.surveynet.ac.uk.



OUR COURSES

Depth interviewing skills	12 - 13 th January
Ethics in social research	2 - 3 rd February
Qualitative research design	8 - 9 th February
Basic statistical analysis for social research	17 - 18 th February
Communication research to policy and practice	9 th March
The analysis of qualitative data	9 th - 10 th March
Moderating focus groups	16 - 17 th March
Sampling for surveys	23 rd March
Formulating policy recommendations	11 th May
Depth Interviewing skills	18 - 19 th May
Cognitive interviewing skills	25 - 26 th May
Questionnaire design	6 - 7 th April

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Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture

40 years since the Equal Pay Act 1970

SRA/Royal Statistical
Society event

16 November, 5–7pm
(followed by drinks
reception)

RSS, 12 Errol Street,
London, EC1Y 8LZ

Professor Jill Rubery, Manchester Business School, Co-director of European Work and Employment Research Centre and Professor Alan Manning, London School of Economics will examine the achievements and failures of the Equal Pay Act which came into force 40 years ago. They will consider whether the approach to narrowing the gap which the Act represented can continue to serve its purpose or whether a new strategy is needed. Ceri Goddard, Chief Executive of the Fawcett Society, will chair. Pre-registration required – see www.rss.org.uk/events or www.the-sra.org.uk for details.

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EDITORIAL POLICY

SRA News will include any copy that may be of interest to its readers in the social research community. We will notify you if we are unable to include an item. Copy submitted for publication is accepted on the basis that it may be edited to ensure coherence within the publication. The views expressed by individual contributors do not necessarily reflect those of the SRA.

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