**SRA SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION**

40 YEARS ANNIVERSARY

# research matters

# Four decades of social change

## By Alison Park, director, CLOSER, UCL Institute of Education

The SRA began 40 years ago, in 1978. James Callaghan was Prime Minister of a Labour government entering its final year in power. That year, the first IVF baby, Louise Brown, was born and Viv Anderson became England's first black international footballer. The year before had seen the launch of the Apple 2, the first easy-to-use 'microcomputer', selling for $1,298 (a mere $4,650 in today's money).

These examples give a sense of some of the many ways in which the UK has changed over the 40 years since the SRA began. But what can we learn from more systematic sources of data? This is the challenge tackled by this article, which uses as evidence some of the key surveys and other datasets that so many SRA members have helped produce and analyse over the years.

## The UK's population

The UK's population has grown by some ten million since 1978, from 56 million to 66 million. We're getting older too – the proportion of the population aged 65 and over has increased from 14% in 1976 to 18% in 2016 (ONS, 2017). We are also more ethnically diverse. In the 1991 census (the first one to include a question about ethnicity), 94% identified themselves as 'white', compared with 86% in 2011 (ONS, 2012).

## Employment

The decline of manufacturing, and the rise of the service sector, began a long time before 1978, but the last 40 years have seen this seemingly inexorable trend continue. In 1981, 23% of the labour force in England and Wales worked in the manufacturing sector; now it's 9%. The service sector was strong even then (60%) but now accounts for 81% of jobs (ONS, 2016).

Number of degrees awarded in UK 1980-2011



These changes partly explain the changing composition of the labour market, with a 15-percentage-point increase since 1978 in the proportion of adult women in employment, reaching 71% in 2018 (ONS, 2018).

## Family life and relationships

There have been huge changes in family formation over the decades, most notably in family size and the proportion of people having no children. Just over half of children (53% in 2013) are born to married parents, with nearly a third (31%) born to cohabiting couples, up threefold since 1986 (ONS, 2014).

Our views about marriage have changed too. In 1983, the first of NatCen's British Social Attitudes surveys found that 42% of people thought sex before marriage was 'not wrong at all', compared with 75% in 2016. But the magnitude of this shift is dwarfed by changing views about same-sex relationships. In 1983, 17% thought that sex between two adults of the same sex was 'not wrong at all', increasing to 64% by 2016 (Swales and Attar Taylor, 2017).

## Gender roles

Increasingly liberal views are also apparent about gender roles. In 1984, 37% disagreed with the view that 'a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family'; now 72% do (Attar Taylor and Scott, 2018).

## Religion

Increasingly liberal attitudes partly reflect changing religious beliefs. In 1983, when the British Social Attitudes survey began, 67% described themselves as Christian, and 31% said they did not see themselves as belonging to any religion. The proportion of non-believers has gradually increased over the decades, standing at 53% in 2016, while the proportion of Christians has fallen to 41%.

## Health

We are living longer than we were in 1978, but increases in life-expectancy are now slowing, reflecting new challenges to the nation's health. These include an increase in the proportions of people who are overweight or obese. Recent research using the UK's birth cohort studies has found that children born since 1990 are up to three times more likely than older generations to be overweight or obese by the age of ten (Johnson et al, 2015).

## Education

There have been dramatic increases in the numbers of students going into higher education. In 1980, 68,000 first degrees were awarded; by 2011 this had increased fivefold to 351,000 (while the number of higher degrees had increased tenfold) (Bolton, 2012). Over this period, student composition changed markedly, with the proportion of women leaving university with a first degree increasing from 37% of all graduates in 1980 to 56% in 2011. Overall, while 13% of 25- to 29-year-olds had an undergraduate or higher degree in 1993, this had tripled to 41% by 2015 (Blundell et al, 2016).
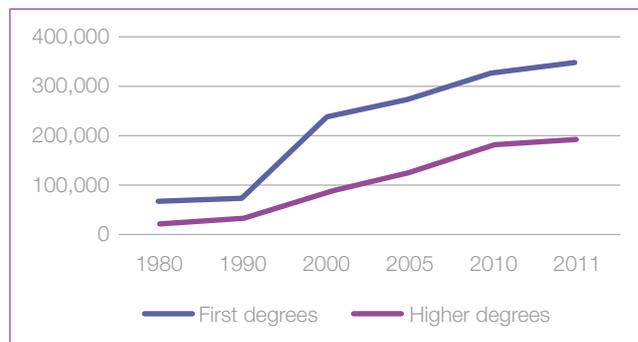
## Politics

Just over three quarters of the electorate (76%) voted in the 1979 general election. Since then, considerable concern has been expressed about falling levels of turnout, with just 59% of the electorate voting in 2001, the lowest rate in the post-war period. However, turnout has gradually risen again since, reaching 69% in 2017.

Levels of political interest are higher now than they were in 1986, according to the British Social Attitudes survey. Then, 29% described themselves as having a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics, compared with 42% in 2016. But we are less likely now to identify with a political party (although most of us, if pushed, still do); in 1986, 8% did not identify with any party, rising to 14% by 2016.

## Europe

Studies like the British Social Attitudes survey have shown that Euroscepticism has been the mood of the majority for over two decades. Until 1996, no more than 40% wanted either to see the UK leave the European Union or for its powers to be reduced; but from that point onwards (with a few exceptions) the balance tipped in favour of a Eurosceptic majority (Curtice and Evans, 2015). As we know, the consequences became apparent in June 2016, when 52% voted in support of the UK leaving the EU.

## Inequality

The 1980s saw sharp increases in inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient, followed by more modest increases. Since the 'great recession', inequality measured in this way has fallen, and remains at around the level it was in the early 1990s. But a different pattern is apparent if we focus on income inequality at the top of the income distribution. The income share of the top 1% increased sharply during the 1980s, and continued to rise until it peaked at 8% in 2000 (Cribb et al, 2018).

## Views about government policy

Our views about taxation and spending have fluctuated considerably over the last four decades. In 1983, 54% wanted to see taxation and spending stay as they were (then the top rate of income tax was 83%); in 2017 this view was taken by 32%, with 60%, instead, wanting to see more taxation and spending. But people's top priorities for more spending remain as they have always been – health and education (Morgan and Harding, 2018).

For a full list of references for the research and data sources cited in this article see http://the-sra.org.uk/whats-new/research-matters/ once the December 2018 issue is published online.

# The SRA at 40

**SRA chair, David Johnson, on the importance of understanding where a profession has come from in thinking about the challenges of the future.**

Welcome to this special edition of SRA Matters celebrating 40 years of the SRA. Just before he became Prime Minister, Harold Wilson is supposed to have coined the phrase 'a week is a long time in politics', and so it is hardly surprising that 40 years have seen huge social and political change. In the year the SRA was founded, the 'winter of discontent' was just around the corner, the UK had not yet had its first female Prime Minister, the Falklands War hadn't happened, the Berlin Wall still stood, the term New Labour, first used as a conference slogan in 1994, was still 16 years away, and the internet hadn't been invented. Makes you think doesn't it?
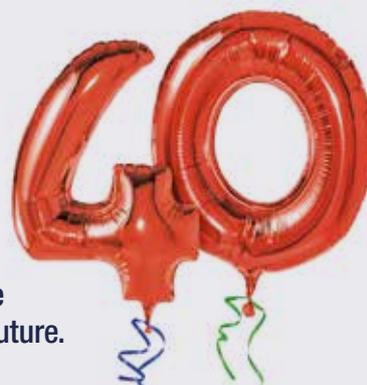
This issue of SRA Matters takes a look back over the last 40 years from a variety of perspectives. In her lead article, Alison Park picks up the theme of social change using a variety of familiar data sources. There are also articles on the changes and development in research ethics, technology, government's use of research, social surveys, data science and evaluation.

SRA chief executive, Graham Farrant, reflects on the SRA's achievements, and Dan Clay, in mid-life crisis, looks at qualitative research as a discipline. Elsewhere in this issue, look out for people's reflections on what they miss/don't miss about how social research has changed and see how much you remember about the SRA by doing the quiz on page 12.

For some of you, I guess this issue will stir feelings of nostalgia, and for others it will all seem a bit like ancient history. I think though, as I was reflecting on in a talk I gave recently to HMRC colleagues about the history of social research, it is important to understand where a profession has come from in thinking about the challenges of the future.

Part of the future will be our new logo, as pictured below. The trustees have felt for a while that our website and digital presence needed an overhaul. Part of the work we are taking forward in this space is to refresh our brand and visual identify. The new logo has been the subject of extensive discussion by the trustees, and I am grateful for the time, effort and thought people have put in to this area of our work. We hope you like it and you can expect to see it in various guises over the coming months.

Anyway, that's all from me for this issue. Happy reading and I hope to see many of you at the December conference. Don't forget about the AGM directly beforehand when we'll present highlights from the annual report and seek your approval to appoint new trustees.

## New colours for 40th year

The current SRA logo has been in use for many years, although exactly when it started is lost in the mists of time. We hear sporadically from SRA members that the logo has been looking a bit 'tired', and the SRA trustees felt the same. The 40th anniversary was too good an opportunity to miss, and after due process the graphics coop has come up with a new logo. Here it is. We hope you like it!



## Social Research Practice

### Issue 7 is due in January 2019

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 free to download at: **www.the-sra.org.uk/journal-social-research-practice**

We welcome offers of articles and research notes for future issues. Read the guidelines for authors and download the article template at the link above. If you have an idea for an article or research note but are not sure if it's suitable, please email Richard Bartholomew, the editor: **rabartholomew@btinternet.com**

# Research ethics in the SRA after 40 years

By Jane Evans, SRA trustee (incoming); Ron Iphofen, independent consultant; and Helen Kara, SRA trustee (outgoing)

It should be of no surprise that ethics and professional integrity formed part of the SRA's mission from its foundation. In the 1980s, political developments were seen as a threat to independent social science, so researchers from government, academic and independent sectors joined together to ensure an ethos of transparent, collaborative and collegial relationships that could transcend sectoral location and methodological inclinations. This diversity has been part of the SRA's strength but it can often be tested when conflicts of interest and outlook arise.

## The SRA's work on ethics

The original SRA ethics guidelines were drawn up by Roger Jowell, a founding member of the SRA, in the early years. They were always intended to be educational rather than rules-based. They were drafted with new researchers in mind and to pre-empt some of the dilemmas they would inevitably confront. As such, the guide was a distillation of the better part of current practice, and both learned from, and informed, similar guidelines and codes being adopted by other professional associations.

By 2000 there was clear need for an update, and a working group of the more experienced members accomplished this, again drawing from different research sectors. The group spent 18 months restructuring the guidelines, focusing on how researchers addressed emerging concerns in society. A draft of the new guidelines was circulated across the UK and internationally for comment.

Feedback was constructive, and resulted in a 2003 publication which has been commended and shared widely throughout the social research community. During this period, the SRA became a key partner in a European Commission project on socio-economic research ethics (RESPECT); advised the UK Research Integrity Office on incorporating social science as part of its brief; and participated in the Association for Research Ethics (AREC) activities.

Following the updated guidelines there were intermittent requests for guidance and advice on ethical matters. So, we established the Ethics Advisory Forum which Ron wrote about in the last issue of Research Matters. This is a free, confidential service for members to put their ethical dilemmas to a group of knowledgeable volunteers. The guidelines are now being updated again to consider methodological developments such as the expanding role of technology in research; the new version should be published in 2019.

## Looking ahead

Ongoing legislative changes, such as GDPR and concerns about litigation, have increased concern about ethical social research practice among practitioners, commissioners and funders.

Debate continues about the right ways to ensure compliance with good ethical

> Debate continues about the right ways to ensure compliance with good ethical practice across all sectors of social research

practice across all sectors of social research. This has become increasingly linked to accurate, evidenced-based policymaking and impact evaluation.

Developments in research methods, such as research using social media; arts-based research; participatory methods; and the use of video, bring new ethical challenges. Society is becoming more diverse, with more awareness of issues such as multiple categories of gender and family. Researchers are realising that research ethics does not exist in isolation, but is inextricably linked with individual, social, professional, institutional and political ethics. This produces a complex picture for the future of research ethics, with not only dilemmas but also trilemmas and quadrilemmas becoming commonplace. We are increasingly aware that research ethics involves far more questions than answers. Yet it is essential to continue raising those questions and having the debates they provoke.

While there may be innovative methods and new topics of research, many of the fundamentals of research ethics remain the same as 40 years ago: the confidentiality, consent and comfort of research participants remain the key concerns.

# Standing on the shoulders of giants

### By Graham Farrant, SRA chief executive

A significant anniversary allows us to reflect on the fundamentals. The purpose of the SRA is described on our website: 'promoting high-quality standards of social research, we seek to represent, support, connect and inform our members and the wider social research community'.

**Training** has a major role both in upholding high standards and supporting researchers. We're very fortunate that the essential introductions to qualitative, quantitative and evaluation methods are taught by a cohort of experts, committed to passing on their skills and standards to new generations. It is possibly unfair to single out Liz Spencer and Pam Campanelli here, but what a beneficial influence their courses have been, for hundreds, maybe thousands of social researchers!

**Providing guidance** is a broader way to enable researchers to maintain high standards. As Ron Iphofen describes elsewhere in this issue, the SRA has always been known for offering sound practical advice on research ethics, starting with Roger Jowell's ground-breaking work, and then the 2003 guide which is still widely used. Thanks are due to Ron for his dedicated support to the SRA over 40 years, and to the teams of volunteers with whose help the guidelines are written.

As well as ethics, there are guides covering data protection, research commissioning, and safety for researchers in the field.

The SRA's **representation** of researchers is seen in responses to consultations on key issues affecting research; and less visibly, in committee work by volunteers. For example, a longstanding group focuses on improving the way research is commissioned. They have written guidance for clients on procuring research to get the best from suppliers, and are currently involved in providing robust feedback on the new government-wide electronic framework system. Deborah Harding of MRS continues to be a source of support to the group; among many volunteers, SRA founder member Janet Lewis deserves a special mention for guiding the work of this committee over many years.

Face-to-face events are a good way to **connect** people, and most SRA seminars, talks and events include time to chat and network. Events arranged by the branch committees in Wales, Scotland and Ireland are ideal for encouraging connections at a local level, but of course they need volunteers to step forward. A good recent example is SRA North, where members in the north of England have come together to run events with local speakers. The trustees are keen to encourage this kind of local activity, so do come forward if you have a plan.

The SRA e-newsletter, magazine, journal and Twitter account all do their bit to **inform** members and others about what's happening in our profession.

These channels of communication may look effortless from the outside, but a lot of work goes on behind the screen to identify, gather and collate material. Again, there are dozens of individuals who have contributed over the years, exemplified by Gillian Smith, a volunteer who has tirelessly and single-handedly produced the SRA e-newsletter every fortnight for the past seven years.

Finally, the SRA continues to benefit from trustees of exceptional calibre. On a personal note, I must thank Ceridwen Roberts, a founder member active in many spheres, and Graham Hughes, treasurer for six years from 2011. When I joined the SRA in 2012 they were effectively running the SRA office between them, as volunteers, and since then they have never ceased to be a source of support and wise advice.

If the SRA can continue to attract such outstanding people, it should have a very healthy future!
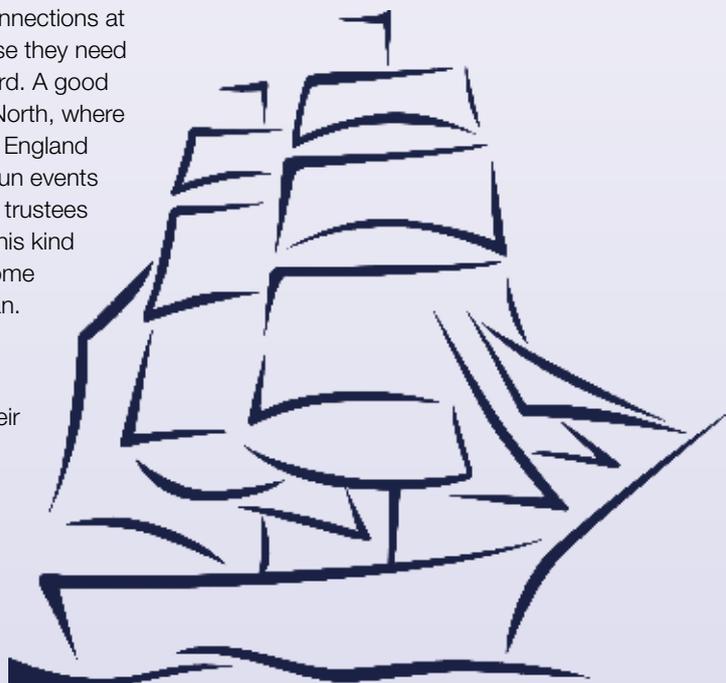
# From the archives: changing technology and social research

**By Annika Coughlin, PhD student at UCL Institute of Education**

The SRA archive is a modest box containing paper copies of Research Matters (formerly SRA News) from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Later issues are online at http://the-sra.org.uk/whats-new/research-matters/. I was looking for recurring themes and discovered that technology has been an important topic across the decades (as in this anniversary issue), particularly in the following areas:

◗ Collecting and analysing data

◗ Disseminating research

◗ As a research topic

◗ For collaborating and finding resources

◗ For archiving data

◗ Research ethics

Conference notices, advertisements and articles published in the past 40 years provide a glimpse into life as a social researcher and how technology has changed how we work.

In 1979, researchers new to recording interviews could get together at a one-day SRA conference simply called 'tape recorded interviews'. Its aim was 'to provide an introduction to the research method, rather than a sophisticated discussion for those already experienced in their use' (SRA News, March 1979).

Today when we get confused or frustrated using equipment or software, we search YouTube for immediate and free advice from around the world. Researchers in the 1980s did not have such luxuries. An advert in the SRA newsletter from October 1982 stated that for £485+VAT educational institutions could buy a videotape course called 'introducing SPSS'. The course consisted of seven, 25-minute videotapes and accompanying materials produced by the British Universities Film Council.

It is difficult to imagine how researchers did their work without a personal computer, since today we use these for almost every aspect of the research process. In 1984, the SRA organised six one-day events on 'the use of micro computers in social research'. These events were 'designed to be consumed in one-day bites (bytes!) or even better, in totality', said Geoff Payne, chair of the SRA committee (May 1984). The course covered: sampling, questionnaire construction, fieldwork, administration, coding, editing, data management, analysis and report production.

Today, researchers can download, immediately and for free, digitised quantitative and qualitative archives and datasets via the UKDataArchive http://data-archive.ac.uk/. In an advert in SRA News in July 1986, the Data Archive was letting new owners of a microcomputer know about its floppy disks containing data files from the archives. Some researchers today may never have even seen a floppy disk, except as the 'save' icon.

The late 1990s was when the internet and email came into most of our lives.

Do you remember the Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG)? It was a service promoted in SRA newsletters in the 1990s that aimed to provide trustworthy social science information for students, academics and practitioners in social sciences, business and law. What a huge task that would be today with billions of websites and resources to sift through.

The growth of web-based social surveys in the 2000s prompted the question 'are web-based surveys the survey method of the future?' to be asked at the Cathie Marsh Memorial Lecture in November 2008. By 2013, 83% of UK households had internet access but this did not mean there was an easily accessible population waiting to be surveyed. Issues about ethics of online research prompted a conference in 2014 where the key message coming from the conference report by Helen Kara was that 'every researcher working online is on a steep learning curve' (June 2014).

Seeing how researchers used to do their day-to-day work makes me realise that each generation of researchers has experienced technological change that has transformed their research lives.

So, I leave you with two questions:

◗ What aspect of technological development are you most grateful for as a researcher?

◗ What technology do you wish someone would invent to help you as a researcher?

Let us know on:
http://twitter.com/thesraorg

**How much do you know about the SRA? Take the quiz on page 12**

# Qualitative research: a magpie discipline

## By Dan Clay, head of qualitative, Kantar Public

With the SRA hitting 40 there is no time like the present to have a symbolic mid-life crisis and take stock of how qualitative research has evolved over the past four decades, as well as speculate where things might be going in future. It would be impossible for me to write this without engaging with peers across the industry so a massive thank you to everyone who contributed including Sarah Castell (Ipsos MORI), Debbie Lee Chan (Which?), Lucy Joyce (Kantar Public), Deborah Mattinson (Britain Thinks), Karen O'Reilly (Goldsmiths, University of London), and Caroline Turley (NatCen).

## Looking back

Looking back over the past 40 years, one clear trend has been the continuing expansion of the portfolio of tools and methods available to qualitative research – aptly described as a 'magpie discipline' by Sarah Castell. We now have more opportunities than ever to draw from across psychology, anthropology, sociology, data sciences and more, using everything from ethnography, semiotics and social media analytics through to role-play, art and poetry as means to understand views and behaviours.

One clear facilitator of change has been the development of mobile technologies that allow us to gain more real-time insights into behaviours. Debbie Lee Chan reflected that, in the past, researchers have used paper diaries to help research participants record thoughts, feelings and behaviours but, in the past five to ten years, mobile apps have enabled us to engage people 'in the moment'. This helps reduce recall bias or post-rationalisation, and enables us to follow-up with participants almost instantly: we can now be far more present in people's lives than ever before. Deborah Mattinson highlighted the value that online communities can bring in creatively supporting conversations and engaging with dispersed communities – like young men with prostate cancer – in an influential and cost-effective way.

Alongside this increasing proximity to those being researched, there has been an important shift in how we see our relationship with research participants. Both Sarah Castell and Karen O'Reilly noted the progression from 'subject' or 'respondent' to 'participant', signalling a change from a more top-down, extractive engagement to one where we are increasingly reflexive, consciously immersing ourselves in the lived experience of individuals. This aligns with a trend towards creating inclusive research environments that actively engage and inform participants about the issues that affect them. This includes a growth in co-creative and deliberative approaches, empowering participants with tools and information, respecting their ability to step outside their own circumstances in shaping policies, services and interventions.

Of course, not all changes have been for the better. While the portfolio of options open to qualitative researchers is now broader than ever, there were interesting reflections from Lucy Joyce and Deborah Mattinson on countervailing pressures resulting in more cautious, and arguably less impactful, research. One of these trends has been the tightening of policy-research procurement processes allowing for less dialogue between clients and research agencies. Another has been the trend towards covering a greater range of complex issues in depth within tighter resource constraints. This latter trend presents a real challenge for researchers – needing to provide clients with the reassurance that objectives will be covered, but also embracing the qualitative principles of openness and flexibility that lead to the most insightful outputs.

## Looking forward

Looking forward, the focus is on the role that technology will play in helping researchers enter ever more deeply into people's lives and, when appropriate, bringing disparate groups together to collaborate within virtual environments. As the magpies of the research world, it is inevitable that we will continue to innovate and look to leverage technology to deliver better quality evidence and insight more effectively. However, the consensus view is that artificial intelligence, for all its promise, is not going to replace the intuitive, empathetic and artistic role of the researcher in listening to, and interpreting, what people tell us.

From my own perspective, I'd say the past 40 years have seen a step-change not just in the range of ways we collect data but in how we collaborate across diverse disciplines to develop insight in the movement towards more impactful dissemination of research findings. In the future, I can see this trend continuing with tools, teams and outputs increasingly tailored to meet the specific needs of clients.

# Evaluation: past, present and future

**By Kelly Beaver, managing director, Social Research Institute, Ipsos MORI (and professional evaluator)**

The Great Society Experiments of the 1960s in America marked the start of the evaluation profession but it was not until the 1980s that the UK actively followed suit. Back then, the social policy evaluator's approaches and techniques were limited to literature reviews, a little management information and a lot of primary data collection. That was that. Fast forward 30-odd years and evaluation has diversified greatly, and the industry has professionalised all the while.

I would argue that there are three noteworthy trends that have emerged from the UK evaluation scene over the past 20 years:

◗ The rise in experimental approaches to assess impact

◗ The Government's increasing recognition of non-experimental approaches

◗ The increased availability of 'other data' with which evaluators may work

Over the last ten years, the evaluation community has participated in an increasingly polarising debate – to randomise or not to randomise. The push for Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental evidence resulted from Cabinet Office and National Audit Office (NAO) interjections: the spin out of the Behavioural Insights Team in 2010; the Test Learn Adapt paper[1] in 2012; the NAO review of evaluation in government in 2013[2]; and the late Jeremy Heywood's strong advocation for evidence in policymaking and his launch of the What Works Network in 2013.

More recently, there has been further exploration of evaluation approaches that could provide robust and reliable truths for policymakers, when RCTs and quasi-experimental approaches are not feasible. For example, the aptly named Centre for Evaluation Complexity across the Nexus (CECAN) was established by several government departments and agencies in 2016 to that end. In contrast to the more widely established RCT or quasi-experimental approaches, the Centre explores lesser-known and largely unproven evaluation approaches: contribution analysis and realist approaches, for example. The use of non-experimental yet robustly applied evaluation approaches has increased throughout government, and the long-awaited revised edition of the Magenta Book is likely to include a far wider range of evaluation approaches, research methods and analytical approaches than ever before.

Arguably, some of the greatest recent advancements in evaluation have been enabled by improved access to, and quality of, administrative datasets. Evaluators now make extensive use of administrative data, social media data and other contextual information to support the construction of counterfactuals, understand the extent to which outcomes are achieved and sustained, and, more generally, enhance the understanding of 'whom interventions work for'. With the recent launch of the five Office for National Statistics data centres[3] for areas of significant policy interest, this element of the evaluator's toolkit is likely to develop further, as will the ethics and protocols for the use of such data.

So, what does this mean for the future of evaluation and the profession itself? While government is demanding ever greater levels of sophistication and quality in its evaluation studies (both experimental and non-experimental approaches), there has been no tangible increase in willingness to pay for the greater skill requirements this entails. In future we may find it increasingly challenging to recruit talent into the profession, and retain it. And with the ongoing increase in What Works activity, access to improving administrative data and the like, the role of evaluators is solidifying as *independent arbitrators* of a progressively complex patchwork of curated evidence.

So, while an independent perspective, good stakeholder management and effective problem-solving skills are requirements for any evaluator, the evaluator's role in the *production* of evidence will be further refined and limited to populating gaps in existing evidence, and there will be yet more on the quality of thought underpinning any evaluation framework, and on the analytical skills to assess and arbitrate the evidence.

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[1]  https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/test-learn-adapt-developing-public-policy-with-randomised-controlled-trials

[2]  https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/10331-001-Evaluation-in-government_NEW.pdf

[3]  https://blog.ons.gov.uk/author/liz-mckeown/

# The changing landscape of social surveys: 1978-2018…

**By Patten Smith, director of research methods, Ipsos MORI and Peter Cornick, research director, NatCen Social Research**

The SRA was founded in 1978 to provide a membership body for the growing discipline of social research. At the time, there was a rapid increase in high-quality social surveys – examples include the British Cohort Study 1970, the General Household Survey (1971-2007), the National Travel Survey (since 1965) and the Crime Survey for England and Wales (since 1982). Typically, these surveys collected data to inform government policy and social science, and were largely delivered by specialist survey organisations in the public, charitable and private sectors. In this, little has changed over the last 40 years, but in other respects the social survey landscape has changed hugely.

## CAI and mode changes

During the first half of the SRA's existence, the most high-quality social surveys were conducted face-to-face by professional interviewers, although some used postal administration. In the 1990s traditional surveys became harder to administer: response rates began to fall, with greater effort (and expenditure) needed to resist the decline.

This was a spur to methodological innovation at a time when new opportunities were emerging.

Computer-assisted interviewing (CAI) began to replace paper questionnaires for both face-to-face and telephone surveys. This led to improved data quality because it eliminated routing errors, and allowed edit anomalies to be resolved during interviews, and the data-entry stage to be omitted.

In the early 2000s, effective random probability telephone surveys methods using random digit dialling (RDD) became technically feasible.

Unfortunately, recent rises in mobile phone use, in call-screening technologies and falling landline use have rendered them largely infeasible again. Telephone methods are now rarely used for single-mode high-quality general population surveys.

There was also a rapid rise in internet surveys, often for general population surveys. However in the UK we lack good sample frames with online contact details, so most online surveys used volunteer panels instead of high-quality random probability samples. These were cheap but unusable for high-quality social research because they could not reliably deliver accurate data.

Recently there have been efforts to collect online data from genuine random probability samples, using 'web-push' methods. These involve recruiting random probability samples using offline methods (for example mail, or face-to-face) followed by online data collection. Surveys such as the Sport England Active Lives Survey send letters to large random address samples to persuade recipients to complete online questionnaires. The NatCen online panel repeatedly contacts a panel recruited through a pre-existing face-to-face survey. Good web-push surveys mix modes: following up non-responders using a second, offline, mode to reduce well-documented biases found in online-only samples.

Web-push surveys deliver considerably lower response rates than the face-to-face surveys they replace, but lower levels of error than non-random alternatives.

Questionnaires are being radically simplified and shortened to facilitate completion on mobile phones.

This 'mobile-first' approach is making researchers re-think the conventions of questionnaire design.

## Developments in methodology

Methodological innovation over the past 40 years has been considerable. The Total Survey Error (TSE) framework now attunes researchers to errors at all stages of survey workflows. Collecting process paradata allows us to make real-time adaptations to data-collection during fieldwork, using responsive design principles.

Research on non-response bias indicates that response rate is often weakly associated with estimate quality, allowing consideration of new methodologies for high-quality surveys.

## The future

Social surveys have evolved significantly since 1978, reflecting social, technological and methodological developments. In the 'big data' era, there is a growing aspiration for greater integration of administrative and survey data. Researchers are increasingly looking at how administrative data can answer some of the questions previously answered by surveys, and this trend will undoubtedly continue.

There will, however, always be a need for data that can be obtained only by asking people direct questions, and high-quality surveys will, undoubtedly, remain in demand.

# Data science, big data and ONS

**By Dr Tom Smith, managing director, ONS Data Science Campus**

The raw material available to researchers interested in the economy and society is changing. Alongside survey data, 'administrative' sources of data generated by public services such as the taxes and benefits systems are increasingly available to and used by researchers around the world. The growth of novel sources of data such as text, images and movement traces – often lumped together under the 'big data' umbrella – can also be highly valuable. Below, I show three examples of big data that the UK's ONS and other statistics offices are using to better understand the economy and society.

## Better use of text

Text responses have long been a staple tool for social researchers. ONS work to automatically code text fields in surveys is making use of natural language processing (NLP) techniques to improve survey processing.

However, NLP tools also enable very different sources of data to be used at scale. The Data Science Campus has been developing automated tools to **classify the raw manifest descriptions** of what is being carried by ships and lorries, potentially opening-up a huge source of information on trade in goods at national and regional level. These tools can be applied in many different settings, with another campus project analysing 90 million patent applications to **identify emerging trends in new technologies** and the ONS Big Data team using company records and websites to classify companies into the most appropriate sector.

## Image data for analysis

Comprehensive high-resolution global satellite imagery (such as that on **Google Earth**) is now available to complement the longstanding openly available **Landsat** data. This 'earth observation' data is being used in a variety of ways by statistics offices and social researchers. Statistics Canada is using Landsat satellite images to **identify crop types at local level**, and to produce crop statistics that were previously dependent on surveys. Survey organisations are starting to use features identified from satellite data in small area estimation models, with a similar approach taken by the Flowminder team to **estimating incomes at small area**.

Other image data sources are also useful. The ONS Data Science Campus **'Urban Forest' project** is producing local environment indicators of greenery and vegetation in urban areas by using machine learning techniques to classify Google Street View images.

## Movement data

Movement of people and goods is clearly a major interest for national statistics offices – for understanding commuter flows, tourism, migration and trade. Mobile phone data is one potential source of information, and analysis by the ONS Big Data team has shown that this data correlates well with travel-to-work data from the census. A separate source of movement data is the global Automatic Identification System (AIS) generated by shipping GPS signals, and the campus is exploring whether AIS data can provide **early indicators for trade**.

Alongside novel big data sources, it is important to remind ourselves of the huge potential of administrative data. Securely linking microdata from individual or business administrative records is a major ONS goal, to enable more detailed, timely and local analysis, over time, of social and economic issues for research purposes. Internationally, statistics offices such as those in Denmark and the Netherlands have long experience of working with linked microdata, allowing them to use additional survey and big data sources to target gaps in knowledge. Recent progress by ONS has incorporated business VAT data into our GDP estimates, part of the GDP improvement programme that has enabled the **move to monthly estimates**.

These are just a few examples of the novel sources of data that are increasingly in use by researchers, and being assessed for use by national statistics offices. As with all data sources, understanding the quality of the source is critical, as is responsible and ethical use of the data for research and statistics.

As our understanding of these data sources matures, we should expect to see more use in research and statistics outputs. I look forward to more exciting changes over the next 40 years of the SRA.

**@_datasmith** (https://twitter.com/_datasmith)

For more on the ONS Data Science Campus work programme see https://datasciencecampus.ons.gov.uk/

Links to more information on the different projects mentioned above will be available in the online version of SRA Research Matters (December issue).

# Research and Government: 40 years on

**By Richard Bartholomew, previously chief research officer at the Department for Education, and currently editor of SRA journal 'Social Research Practice'**

The late 1970s was a time of expansion in social research with researchers working in many (but not all) of the 'big-hitter' social policy departments of central government as well as in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Partly, this reflected the political climate. There was a willingness to address the big social issues of poverty, intergenerational deprivation, race and gender equality, health inequalities, and chronic unemployment. This led to many innovative studies (for example The Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (now Workplace Employment Relations); Women and Employment; the British Crime Survey).

But it was growth largely driven by individual departments rather than by any cross-governmental decision. Government social research was a decentralised entity without a clear corporate identity and only limited central co-ordination. Today Government Social Research (GSR) is a cohesive professional body providing common standards for recruitment and training, ethics and publication protocols.

## What's changed?

Perhaps the most significant change has been the huge expansion in policy evaluation such that evaluation is now the dominant form of social research commissioned by government. Several factors have driven this. The introduction of more directly interventionist programmes to tackle social problems including programmes to reduce mass unemployment and lack of training; to improve youth justice and reduce re-offending; and many others.

Also, stricter financial discipline introduced by the Treasury through the regular 'spending reviews' meant that departments had to make better cases for funds. It forced departments to take evaluation of the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of their policies and programmes more seriously.

The demands of evaluation have become ever more sophisticated and precise, involving vast expenditure on research. The research community has benefited from this spending. But its scale has sometimes distorted the social research market in unhelpful ways, leading, for example, to 'feast followed by famine' when policies or governments change. There have been valid criticisms that ministers and policy officials have been too impatient to wait for the full results of complex evaluations before embarking on further initiatives.

The focus on evaluating policies – and a narrow interpretation of 'policy need' – has sometimes led to a neglect of important issues which are not on the political agenda but may be in future. This has tended to inhibit exploratory studies of underlying social issues and emerging trends. The neglect of research on inequality and social mobility in the 1980s and early 1990s is one example.

## Commissioning

40 years ago, the processes of research commissioning by government departments were often decentralised and sometimes ad hoc. The biggest change, especially in the last ten to 15 years, has been the emergence of procurement as a distinct activity (with its own cadre of procurement specialists) and the move towards 'framework agreements' for commissioning. This may bring a more systematic approach but this can be overly bureaucratic and create an unhelpful distance between those who plan and use research and social researchers outside government who conduct empirical studies. It may look like a fairer and more open system, less prone to over-cosy relationships, but the barriers it erects can make it more difficult to achieve creative and innovative research designs.

## The government's use of research

The $64,000-dollar question is 'has government use of social research findings changed?' Yes and no. Partly because of the discipline of spending reviews but also, because we live in a more data-rich and data-accessible world, it is now much harder for ministers to launch new policies based on ideology alone (though the (mis)use of evidence in the Brexit 'debate' gives pause for thought on this!). Policy officials have a much better understanding of how research and analysis can help, with greater trust between analysts and policymakers. That does not mean that policies are always determined by a coherent evidence case. Too many are evidence-informed rather than evidence-based, with research playing a selective and confirmatory role rather than one of challenge. Is it naïve to believe that, in a political environment, this could be otherwise? Perhaps, but I remain optimistic.

# How much do you know about the SRA?

**Just how much do you know about the SRA? Take the quiz set by Annika Coughlin.
Answers on page 14.**

1.  What was the hourly wage of the one-day-a-week SRA administrator (working from home) in 1985?

    **a.** £1.50 per hour

    **b.** £2.90 per hour

    **c.** £4 per hour

2.  In 1988 what new addition greatly improved the functioning of the SRA office?

    **a.** Pager

    **b.** Computer

    **c.** Rolodex

3.  When was Sue Duncan, a founder member of the SRA, appointed as the first UK government chief social researcher?

    **a.** 1997

    **b.** 2002

    **c.** 2006

4.  What three items were mentioned as being on the menu of the SRA annual conference December 1984 – 'The Best Conference Yet'?

    **a.** Tri-coloured pasta salad, chicken kiev, stuffed peppers

    **b.** Avocado, salmon en croute, chocolate mousse

    **c.** Chicken, smoked mackerel and quiche

5.  When did the SRA launch its website?

    **a.** 1995

    **b.** 1998

    **c.** 2000

6.  What was becoming an increasing area of interest that led to the SRA to put together a series of evening seminars and workshops during 1982?

    **a.** The government cuts to social research

    **b.** Qualitative methods

    **c.** Questions about ethnicity in the census

7.  How many training courses have been available on the SRA website during 2018?

    **a.** 44

    **b.** 77

    **c.** 111

8.  When did the SRA set up a jobs board for social research vacancies https://jobs.the-sra.org.uk/?

    **a.** 2006

    **b.** 2013

    **c.** 2016

9.  What percentage of members of the SRA in 1978 were women?

    **a.** 34%

    **b.** 55%

    **c.** 68%

10. How many times has the SRA moved office in the past seven years?

    **a.** 1

    **b.** 3

    **c.** 5

# Questionnaire

**Evan Kindley**

Bloomsbury, 2016

Reviewed by Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Ecorys

Social researchers often have a love-hate relationship with the questionnaire. Sure, there are feelings of intellectual achievement when cognitively testing questions, finding that elusive validated scale or uncovering a genuinely new way of approaching an issue. However, there are also late nights stuck on the ninth iteration of a questionnaire, wondering whether the minuscule differences in phrasing we are considering actually make any difference to the person answering.

Evan Kindley's 'Questionnaire' is an ideal pick-me-up for the jaded researcher in those moments, taking us rapidly through an entertaining history of the questionnaire and reminding us not just that questionnaires are important but also that they can be fun and genuinely interesting. This is not to say that questionnaires haven't been used for more nefarious purposes with Kindley highlighting the eugenic views behind many questionnaires in the Victorian era (and later), the worrying cod-psychology of Scientology's 'Oxford Capacity Analysis' and the misogynist assumptions behind tools used by the American Institute of Family Relations.

While social researchers rightly focus on evidence that response rates on many national surveys are falling, this book reminds us that internet questionnaires remain popular. Buzzfeed made its name off the back of questionnaires varying from 'How stereotypically white are you?' to 'How well do you know your Muppets?' Millions provide answers to a variety of weird and personal questions on dating websites in the search for that elusive partner, providing these organisations with the ability to crunch huge amounts of data and provide answers to a variety of important and less important questions.

While 'Questionnaire' ends, quite rightly, by pointing to the possibility that this freely provided personal data can be used for malicious purposes as well as more positive ones, it raises other questions relevant to social research. What, if anything, can we learn from the successes of Buzzfeed or OK Cupid in getting people to enjoy taking part in questionnaires? Are people more concerned about providing data to private companies (who pass this who knows where) than to social researchers and public organisations? If so, why? Kindley's book won't provide any direct answers but will prove a very entertaining and thought-provoking distraction when the next set of questionnaire revisions are required.
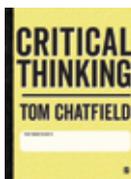
# Critical thinking

**Tom Chatfield**

SAGE Publishing, 2018

Reviewed by Imogen Birch, senior researcher, Citizens Advice

'Critical thinking' is written in a text-book style, and primarily targeted at students who need to read or to produce lengthy documents. As a researcher, I think it will be useful for thinking about written and verbal arguments: helping readers make and recognise an argument, and understand when a valid argument isn't being made.

The author describes common pitfalls including faulty reasoning, empty rhetoric and unjustified assumptions. He also discusses priorities and techniques for using your time well when reading through literature or using social media. He covers some quantitative research concepts such as representativeness, statistical significance, correlation and causation and reversion to the mean. Because this is aimed at those with little or no knowledge of these topics, some researchers may find this information a bit basic.

'Critical thinking' is easy to read with an engaging format. The author, by writing in blue biro, encourages the reader to write notes in the book. He also directs readers to social media and to engage with the hashtag #TalkCriticalthinking.

Definitions are highlighted in yellow, with explanations in the side margins and within the text, so everything is well explained. The text is broken up with brightly coloured pictures and quotes. There are exercises to complete. At the end of each chapter is a summary of key learning points and links to a short YouTube video. Each of the ten chapters includes one of the author's ten commandments: also listed at the end of the book. The first commandment is to slow down and consider what is in front of you: does it need deeper thought, or a strategy? If not, move on.

**See these and other new reviews at:** http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/book-reviews/

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 on the website; **http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/publications/book-reviews/** If you are interested, please email **admin@the-sra.org.uk** and we'll send you guidelines.

## SRA Scotland

**By Karen Kerr incoming trustee**

SRA Scotland is busy planning for an event that will take place in 2019 to celebrate the SRA's 40th anniversary. We are delighted to welcome Georgina Southern (Skills Development Scotland) to the committee. If you would like to get in touch with the branch and be more involved with the organising committee, please contact the SRA office.

## SRA Ireland

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

## SRA Cymru

**By Faye Gracey**

Thank you to everyone who joined us in October to celebrate the SRA's 40th birthday in Wales. It was great to see almost a hundred researchers gather to hear our future generations commissioner for Wales, Sophie Howe, highlight the importance of research in improving all aspects of our social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing. The commissioner and Dr Jamie Smith (director of research and Innovation at Hafod) as the event chair, really challenged us to consider how we as researchers should think, talk about, and plan for the future. Please follow us @SRACymru to hear our latest news. Do visit the-sra.org.uk/events/ for details of events. If you want to get more involved with our organising committee don't hesitate to get in touch: faye.gracey@gov.wales T: **03000 257459**.

## SRA North

**By Leanne Dew**

Building on the success of the SRA North early careers event in September, we returned to Manchester to celebrate the SRA's 40th anniversary with a fantastic event with Stephen Morris exploring RCTs past, present and future. We are now starting to look forward to next year, and planning interesting events. But before then, SRA North members will be heading down south for the SRA annual conference in December – hope to see you there! As ever, do come and say hello or drop us a message if you have any questions or want to get involved (@SRANorth and sranorth@gmail.com).

## ANSWERS TO QUIZ

**Q1**: (c) £4 per hour  **Q2**: (b) a computer  **Q3**: (b) 2002  **Q4**: (c) Chicken, smoked mackerel and quiche  **Q5**: (b) 1998  **Q6**: (b) Qualitative methods  **Q7**: (c) 111 training courses  **Q8**: (c) 2016  **Q9**: (a) 34% (2018 membership is approximately 30% male and 70% female)  **Q10**: (c) 5 times

**SRA SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION** research matters

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

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# Gains and losses in social research

## Natalie Low, National Audit Office

**I miss:** old questionnaire drafts. Without computers, the process of questionnaire drafting involved photocopying past versions, physically cutting and pasting new and old questions together, and scrawling on amendments. By the end, the final draft was about two-foot-thick, and it felt like a real achievement.

**I don't miss:** when people complain nowadays about computers being too slow, I remind them about running (even pretty basic) analysis in the 90s. You had to write the syntax, submit it to the server, go home for the evening, come back in the morning … to find an 'error in line 4'. And repeat.

## Bob Erens, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

**I miss:** high response rates, for example 81% on the first Scottish Health Survey in 1995.

**I don't miss:** hole counts (researchers under 45 will have to ask their older colleagues what these are!)

## Sue Body, NatCen (retired)

**I don't miss:** old methods of correcting errors. One benefit from the introduction of CAPI (computer-assisted personal interviewing) was the ease with which changes could be made to the questionnaire. Previously we sometimes had to pay interviewers to amend errors in their paper questionnaires. Even worse, on one survey, the error totally altered the meaning of the question, and it was felt it needed to be changed prior to distribution. It therefore fell to the field staff to manually change a couple of sentences on 2,500 questionnaires. Needless to say, that researcher wasn't very popular for a while.

## Nick Moon, formerly GfK NOP

**I miss:** how much easier it was to get people to take part. I remember one postal survey of people on a particular benefit that got a 96% response rate. Although it may have helped that the questionnaire was sent out with their benefit cheques …

**I don't miss:** how primitive the technology was. I spent the whole of my first month in the office copying numbers in my best handwriting from some very non-user-friendly computer printout on to lined paper that could then be given to typists to form part of the report.

## Jane Barret, Department of Health and Social Care

**I miss:** the time we used to have. Working at a faster pace these days means there is less time, as a commissioner, to be as close to the data-gathering stage. I miss the opportunities to accompany a researcher in the field and feeling part of the whole process rather than just the beginning and the end.

**I don't miss:** some of the old technonology. IT has improved even though I still grumble about it! I remember having to walk across Parliament Square with a projector and screen to rig up a presentation for a minister in the House of Commons – very Laurel and Hardy. Now I can simply share slides using Skype – much slicker.

## Liz Spencer, The Qualitative Workshop

**I miss:** proper recognition of what qualitative research does best – mapping nuance, range, depth, context, stories and processes, discovering the 'why', 'when' and 'how' of social interaction. In my view, some new 'semi-quantitative' analysis techniques and an overreliance on analysis software, with its seductive automatic functions like Word Cloud, have begun to erode the 'qualitative' in qualitative research.

**I don't miss:** the old tape recorders because it was all too easy if you were tired to record a second interview over the top of an earlier one, something that, mercifully, can't happen with digital recorders. Turning out on cold winter nights to run focus groups in drab and draughty community halls!

## Ivana Le Valle, research consultant

**I miss:** face-to-face interaction. When I first started, this was at the heart of the job. Research designs were brainstormed and refined in team meetings; qualitative research interviews were usually face-to-face; developing analytical frameworks and interpreting findings involved endless face-to-face discussions. Nowadays, many methodological and analytical discussions happen by email; many meetings are virtual; qualitative telephone interviews and online data-collection methods have become the norm.

**I don't miss:** the 5am starts to do an interview or attend a meeting on the other side of the country.

## Clarissa White, independent researcher

**I miss:** the research budgets and timescales; having time to collaborate effectively; having fun on fieldwork trips.

**I don't miss:** having to explain what qualitative research is and why it is needed; the slow procedures and systems; the consequences of the machinery failing.

## Sarah Cheesbrough, Kantar Public

**I miss:** working on the first ever CAPI surveys – making a lot of it up as we went along!

**I don't miss:** (from the early 1990s) leaving an SPSS program that you had worked on all day to run overnight on the mainframe; only to discover the next day that it had fallen over in the first few lines.

# TRAINING 2019

## BRISTOL

| 27 February | Qualitative interviewing | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 28 February | Conducting focus groups | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 1 March | Qualitative data analysis: approaches and techniques | Professor Karen O'Reilly |

## CARDIFF

| 28 March | Introduction to data visualisation | Lulu Pinney |

## EDINBURGH

| 28 February | Introduction to data visualisation | Lulu Pinney |
| 1 March | Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research | Dr Karen Lumsden |
| 24 April | Designing a qualitative study | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 25 April | Qualitative Interviewing | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 26 April | Conducting focus groups | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 29 April | Qualitative data analysis: approaches and techniques | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 30 April | Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings | Professor Karen O'Reilly |

## LONDON

| 18 January | Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research | Dr Karen Lumsden |
| 31 January | Introduction to data visualisation and infographic design | Lulu Pinney |
| 1 February | Ethnographic methods | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 7 February | Qualitative interviewing | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 8 February | Conducting focus groups | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 11 February | Qualitative data analysis: approaches and techniques | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 12 February | Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings | Professor Karen O'Reilly |
| 25 February | Writing effective research reports | Dr Simon Haslam |
| 7 March | Research with children and young people | Dr Louca-Mai Brady & Berni Graham |
| 15 March | Introduction to participatory action research | Dr Karen Lumsden |
| 21 & 22 March | Depth interviews | NatCen Learning (two-day course) |
| 1 & 2 April | Analysis of qualitative data | NatCen Learning (two-day course) |
| 5 April | Introduction to qualitative research | NatCen Learning |
| 3 May | Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research | Dr Karen Lumsden |
| 20 May | Reporting qualitative data | NatCen Learning |

We have increased course prices by £10 a day. From 2019 these will be **£270** instead of £260: SRA members will continue to receive a 25% discount, paying **£202.50** a day rather than £195. It is always a difficult decision to raise prices, but our costs have increased noticeably since the last time we increased course prices (more than seven years ago). This modest increase will help us to cover our increasing costs.

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

We regularly add courses and course locations to our programme. Keep up to date at: **www.the-sra.org.uk/training** You can also join our mailing list at **www.the-sra.org.uk**. If you have any queries contact Lindsay Adams on **0207 998 0304** or **lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk**.

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