

research matters



Testing boundaries during the pandemic

By Guy Goodwin, chief executive, National Centre for Social Research

These are indeed exceptional times, and this is a rewarding moment to be working in social research. Certainly, there is no question about the importance and relevance of some of our NatCen research right now, whether we're finding out how older people are coping during the pandemic, helping with the volumes on the Covid-19 infection study, or taking part in the partnership evaluating the pilot of the contact tracing app on the Isle of Wight.



The research questions trip off the tongue during this period of adversity. Will Covid-19 change what the public expects of government? Why are there different infection and death rates by sex and ethnicity? How's our mental health being affected? Are children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind with schools closed? What's going on at food banks?

Organisations have had to adapt quickly in the light of the pandemic, but we've found we can, and are pleased with progress. Face-to-face fieldwork was paused abruptly in March and, at NatCen, we moved early to furlough relevant staff and

interviewers to protect their jobs and re-enforce our financial security. Throughout this period, we've brought forward learning from existing projects and ongoing methodological research and investments. For example, we have 25 researchers trained (from June last year) in moderating online deliberation, providing core skills for online research they can now use in their projects. The demand for these services has, not surprisingly, grown.

Social researchers have spent too long over the past decade debating whether administrative sources will replace surveys and whether 'face-to-face' interviewing is better than 'online' approaches, rather than exploring the best way to integrate sources and use the mixed-mode models that we instinctively know are the future. Society's shift to online interaction in response to the pandemic will undoubtedly shape how we conduct social research in the future. We should welcome that and 'seize the day' – supporting members of the public who have less internet access or are less able to operate online. For example, for the first time, we're using a mixed-mode web and computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) design for the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. A support telephone line will help this sample participate online, building our capability to do more online data collection for this study in years to come, not in place of face-to-face interaction but as part of an integrated and affordable model.

With so much at stake for politicians and the public, the response of research commissioners has been somewhat mixed – some increasing commissioning significantly, others stopping research programmes altogether. At a time of such opportunity for social researchers to inform policymaking, and

with new graduates shortly out of universities ready to find jobs, we need their funding as a community more than ever. We can do so much more to help the national effort...and yet...I'm not confident our commissioning models stand up to scrutiny in delivering the necessary speed and flexibility.

In the 1990s, during the years of the John Major government and when some ONS surveys were market tested, I wrote the first Government Statistical Service commissioning guidelines for surveys. This framework was adopted then, and has evolved over the years, some of it for the better but not all of it. The existing models tend not to produce the collaborative partnerships and responsiveness we envisaged then, and don't generally serve the research community well. In particular, the power balance between the researcher and the procurement specialist has shifted unhelpfully. There is an urgent need for a refresh to make commissioning more flexible, less expensive and less bureaucratic. We've been talking about this for a few years now but actions speak louder than words.

Finally, but certainly not least, how have our staff coped? At NatCen, we've always said we could adopt flexible working practices and work at home if we needed to. I'm pleased to say we can, although there are tweaks we could usefully make. Recent investments in IT have helped, and even I move relatively seamlessly between using Zoom, Skype and MS Teams nowadays. The conditions are far from ideal for people, however, and they're understandably anxious. Against that backdrop, I draw a lot of inspiration from our staff and their extraordinary resilience in doing what it takes to complete our research projects to the standards required.

Spotlight on SRA activity

Training

www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Many qual, quant and evaluation courses have been converted to online delivery, at reduced prices.

Events

www.the-sra.org.uk/events

A range of practical webinars arriving soon – free for members!

No face-to-face conference this year, but we're looking at a virtual event.

Blog

www.the-sra.org.uk/blog

Plenty of topical posts on researching under lockdown – why not consider a contribution?

Journal

www.the-sra.org.uk/journal

Read back issues and find out how to write an article for our free journal.

Resources

www.the-sra.org.uk/resources

Good practice guides, support during lockdown, and more.

Ethics

<https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Ethics>

An expert forum for members' queries, good practice guides, more resources.

Member resources

Login at www.the-sra.org.uk then see 'members' section.

Free access to 5,500+ social science journals, data science training at a third off, and more.

On the customs of the times

SRA chair, David Johnson, on adapting to change

Welcome to SRA Research Matters. Oh, how things can change or, as Cicero said, 'O tempora! O mores!' In the three months since the last Research Matters the world seems to have been turned on its head. We are now trying to adapt to working at home all the time, and while there are some undoubted upsides, many of us are also having to juggle changing ways of doing business, financial pressures for organisations, childcare, Zoom, mental health challenges, loss of social connection, not being able to see family, fears for the future and, tragically for some, having to cope with the loss of loved ones. My heart goes out to you all.



The current situation, week 10 of lockdown as I write, has been very tough too for the SRA. The majority of income comes from member subscriptions and our training provision and so, with no face-to-face courses running, one of our main income streams dried up overnight. We are a small charity, and so this has potentially dire consequences for our ability to stay solvent. However, our reserves are healthy and the trustees, Graham as our chief executive, and everybody in the office have responded magnificently to the challenge. Our main priorities have been threefold – to cut expenditure wherever we can; to focus on developing an online training offer; and, because membership is at the heart of what we do, look at ways we can continue best to support members (including independent social researchers) through the current crisis. On this, the trustees and I would welcome suggestions from readers about how we might do more, and to alert us to specific needs for support that you might have currently. We are keen to continue to grow the membership if possible.

So do encourage social researchers you know and work with to join the SRA and strengthen our community.

We have taken the difficult decision to cancel this year's annual conference. We have done so with a heavy heart, but it was necessary to free up short-term resource (the conference takes many months to plan and deliver), especially with so much future uncertainty – who knows at this stage what the 'rules' might be for such public gatherings, or even if they would be allowed. We considered turning the conference into a virtual event and, if capacity allows, we may still run a winter networking event of some sort. But for now, our focus has been on adapting our training. I am very pleased to report that we are now able to offer a wide range of online courses and our trainers have worked closely with us to make this a reality in very short order. My thanks go to everyone involved as this both continues to promote high quality methods training and offers us a financial lifeline. The back page gives a list of what is on offer. Perhaps now might be the time to refresh your knowledge and skills?

As many of you report, there are new opportunities to be grasped. and the phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' has never felt so true.

We are all trying to establish a new normal, and, as Guy Goodwin reminds us in his article, social research is important and relevant in these times. As you will be totally unsurprised to learn, this issue of Research Matters is all about Covid-19 as it affects social research. As well as the article from Guy we have articles from Tim Hanson about the European Social Survey, Anna Scott and David Kane about 360Giving, Sarah Coburn on the employer's role in mental health and wellbeing, Vicky Cummings on remote cognitive interviewing, responses to the pandemic and our usual round ups. You will also see we have a piece on page 13 about recruiting new trustees and a new chair. SRA trustees serve a maximum of six years (and my time is up at the end of the year) and so we are regularly looking to recruit new people to ensure the board has a strong, diverse set of trustees to take our charity business forward. If you think you have the skills to contribute to the strategic leadership of the SRA in the coming months and years, or even take up the role of chair, do consider applying. I would be very happy to chat to anyone wanting to find out more about what we do.

Until next time, happy (virtual) researching!



Getting SRA training online

By Graham Farrant, chief executive, SRA

In 2019 the SRA ran 120 courses. It was business as usual in 2020 until lockdown came, when we had 42 future courses advertised with 200+ places already booked.



The prospect of not running any courses for months was quite a problem.

Three very experienced trainers were responsible for around half of these courses: Karen O'Reilly, Karen Lumsden and David Parsons. They were keen to try making the adaptation to online delivery.

We were fortunate to have the help of an expert in online training. Christina Silver of Qualitative Data Analysis Services, a long-time SRA member, was our consultant and adviser about how to adapt a face-to-face course to online, and how to use Zoom. The main principles were:

- ▶ Vary the delivery of material so that a course over several hours is broken up into shorter sessions
- ▶ Insert Q&A, videos, polls etc to introduce variety, interest and interaction
- ▶ Put attendees into small groups via the breakout rooms feature, for exercises and discussions (which the trainer can drop in on)
- ▶ Ensure regular breaks so people get some screen downtime and return refreshed

“Course was great, it worked really well online and would recommend it to anyone.”

Our three trainers were able to test out their first courses on SRA independent members who were offered a free place on a trial run for foundations in qualitative research, narratives and storytelling, and foundations of evaluation.

Debbie Collins of NatCen has been working with colleagues to adapt the courses they run via SRA, and developing ‘questionnaire design’ as an online course.

“Overall, it was great given the circumstances. Would still have preferred to be there in person. It was adapted brilliantly to be online.”

More courses are available now, from these and other trainers. New courses are being added regularly. See page 16 for the list or [visit SRA training](#).

The maximum number of attendees is between 12 and 16. Small groups are important to encourage interactivity – these are not webinars!

The reduction in running costs means lower prices for online training, at £165 for members and £220 for non-members, compared to £202.50 and £270 respectively for face-to-face courses. (Prices are, as always, subject to review.)

We'll continue to offer online training after lockdown. We hope it will benefit researchers who live at a distance from course venues, in and beyond the UK. One feature of SRA courses is the wide variety of attendees from different sectors of research. It would be terrific to also welcome research colleagues not just from Europe, but also Africa, America, Asia, Australia.... time zones permitting, of course!

“I thought the course was excellent, and the delivery via Zoom worked really well in place of face-to-face. The pace was good, the breaks well-timed, and the use of Zoom breakout rooms worked excellently.”

A note about Zoom

Zoom is probably the most widely-used software platform for online meetings and webinars. It has a justified reputation for being intuitive and easy to use. However, it also has a reputation for data privacy issues, which we understand Zoom has been working to fix. An [independent comparison of GDPR-compliance](#) among the popular software providers, including MS Teams, GoToMeeting and Skype found that none is perfect for compliance.

We encourage course attendees not to sign into Zoom with another login (for example, Facebook). We don't record online sessions, or allow attendees to record them. So, the data at risk is minimal and not sensitive. However, at present, some government departments, public bodies and universities don't allow Zoom to be used from their computers – although others do. During lockdown this is less of an issue but may become more of one when researchers go back to their offices.



Mental health and wellbeing: developing company policy

By Sarah Coburn, associate director, IFF Research

What is mental health and wellbeing?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wellbeing as the 'state of being comfortable, healthy or happy'. Mental health, then, is about emotional and psychological wellbeing. The terms are often used interchangeably. But, we must observe the distinction when it comes to workplace policy.

The charity Mind explains that 'if you experience low mental wellbeing over a long period of time, you are more likely to develop a mental health problem'.¹ So, it is important to protect both. If an organisation's focus is perceived to be too narrow, there will be a knock-on impact to levels of uptake and impact.

Why it matters

One in six working-age adults has symptoms associated with mental ill health.² In addition, a recent study by the MRS and Opinium Research found that a staggering 85% of research professionals reported struggling in the past year (vs. 53% of UK workers), with 77% explaining that this had affected their work.³ Many people will not communicate this with their employer for fear of being judged or mistreated.

Alongside fair treatment and duty of care, there are corporate effects to consider. Poor mental health and wellbeing translates to 72 million working days lost every year with £35 billion in cost.⁴ But is this for the employer to address? Absolutely. Mind asserts that 'the support people receive from employers is key in determining how well and how quickly they are able to get back to peak performance'.⁵

It also reflects a company's values and how it's perceived.

Case study: IFF Research

We have always recognised the importance of workplace wellbeing, with core values focused on 'being human first' and 'making a difference.' In 2019, we began formulating this into concrete policy. Key learning includes:

- ▶ The scope is vast. Simply starting by promoting the organisation as a safe space to talk can be enough; indeed, further initiatives – such as afternoon company walks – have spontaneously emerged as a result
- ▶ Breaking things down into immediate priorities and longer-term goals can help to rationalise the approach
- ▶ Observing national events is a great way to demonstrate our commitment to the cause and for employees to feel connected to the wider movement
- ▶ Backing from senior management is vital – presenting to senior staff in an open forum works well; encouraging and welcoming honest feedback by proposing positive impacts and critically, potential drawbacks
- ▶ Involving employees from different departments and levels ensures that all voices are heard, this can be achieved through lunchtime sessions or staff surveys, for example, demonstrating that all views matter
- ▶ More recently, Covid-19 has taught us the importance of being able to adapt and foster a culture of looking after one another even when we are dispersed; we have achieved this

with online lunch groups, social quizzes, regular round ups of news and photos from people at home, and weekly updates from our managing director about the company's position and goals. We have also issued staff surveys on views and anxieties about returning to the office



Summary

- ▶ Wellbeing is about more than diagnosed mental health conditions, and protecting it is important. The broader definition of 'wellbeing' must not be forgotten, lest relevant policy be dismissed as inapplicable to those without a diagnosed condition
- ▶ Researchers are at the top of the list when it comes to those affected with poor wellbeing and mental health
- ▶ Often, simply promoting the organisation as a safe space to talk about wellbeing is enough to spark change
- ▶ It is a vast topic, so try to break things down into short- and longer-term goals
- ▶ For maximum buy-in, involve the whole organisation – across different departments and levels – and welcome constructive feedback
- ▶ Working towards a clear wellbeing policy has proved vital during these uncertain times

¹ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/wellbeing/wellbeing/?o=10135>

² <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation/mental-health-statistics/>

³ <https://www.mrs.org.uk/resources/mental-wellbeing-in-the-sector>

⁴ <https://mhfaengland.org/mhfa-centre/research-and-evaluation/mental-health-statistics/>

⁵ https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4660/mental-health-at-work-1_tcm18-10567.pdf

Over £30bn of open grants data can help us understand the social sector

By Anna Scott, communications manager and David Kane, product lead, 360Giving

At 360Giving, our main focus is to help organisations publish open, standardised grants data, and empower people to use it to improve charitable giving. We were set up in 2015 because our founder, philanthropist Fran Perrin, couldn't find the information she needed to inform her funding decisions.

When funders publish information on who, where and what they fund in the 360Giving Data Standard, it means they are sharing it in a way that others can access and use for free. Because the data is standardised, it can be looked at and compared all together, helping us to see and understand grant making across the UK.

The real value of the data comes with its use.

For funders, having this information means that they can be more informed, effective and strategic. The process of publishing the data and using it also means they can collaborate. This is truer now than ever, with UK funders rallying to publish their Covid-19-related grants data openly, and using it between them to enable the best use of limited funds.

Charities across the UK can use the data to get to know funders better, and to inform their fundraising efforts. By seeing who funds what, and where, they can get a better sense of which funders are likely to fund them.

Planners and researchers can use the data in many ways to get a better picture of what is being funded and delivered across the UK.

One early example of how the 360Giving dataset could contribute to better understanding of civil society is a research project conducted by the voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, NCVO, in 2015. The project, which was funded by Nesta, used an early version of published 360Giving data to find organisations described as 'below the radar'. Policy discussions often ascribe importance to these organisations that are too small and informal to appear on official registers, such as the register of charities. By their nature they are difficult to find and study, so 360Giving data offers an opportunity to discover some of these organisations. 360Giving and NCVO are repeating this exercise, with results expected in June.

In 2018 the Young Foundation published '[Patchwork Philanthropy](#)', an examination of the geographical patterns of philanthropic and charitable spending across the UK. The report mapped these patterns against other datasets describing society, such as measures of deprivation. The report also focused on the results of the 2016 referendum on whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union, and examined the differences between areas that voted to leave or remain.

The research used data from 360Giving to provide a picture of philanthropic spending. Data on grants made by funders with a national reach across a specified timeframe was matched with geographical data describing the location of the organisation receiving the grant.



Local Trust, a grant making foundation that provides residents with the power to make grants in their own areas, and Oxford Consultants for Social Impact (OCSI) have used 360Giving data as part of the construction of an aggregate index in their 2019 report '[Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge](#)'. Their Community Needs Index brings together data from a range of sources to highlight areas that are lacking in civic assets, are not connected to key services and infrastructure, and have low levels of community participation. 360Giving data formed part of the civic assets measures that made up the index, along with data such as community spaces, green space and sport and leisure facilities and average broadband speed.

In January 2020 New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), a charity which supports grant makers, charities and others to achieve the greatest impact, used 360Giving as part of their [examination of the distribution of charitable activity across the UK](#).

We hope that the data will be used by many more. We offer free office hours if you would like help using the data. You can find out more at: www.threesixtygiving.org

Covid-19 implications for the European Social Survey

By Tim Hanson, senior research fellow, ESS ERIC HQ

Round 10 of the European Social Survey (ESS) was due to start at the beginning of September, with around 30 countries expected to participate using a face-to-face fieldwork approach.



We are in a fortunate position compared to some surveys as we were not in field, or about to go into field, at the time the pandemic started. However, as we don't anticipate a return to normality by September, we have spent significant time over the last couple of months considering options for Round 10 fieldwork. This has involved extensive consultation with ESS's core scientific team (CST), the national coordinators (NCs) representing each ESS country, and members of the ESS Methods and Scientific Advisory Boards.

Following these consultations, our [current proposal](#) is to continue with the planned face-to-face approach for Round 10. This is partly driven by a wish to provide data that allows our users to understand the impact of the pandemic on the measures in the long running ESS time series. Furthermore, given the [diversity of countries that participate in ESS](#), there are considerable practical issues in switching to an alternative data-collection approach that could be implemented consistently by all countries.

However, it has been agreed to allow greater flexibility in fieldwork timings for Round 10. This reflects expected differences between countries in when face-to-face fieldwork will be possible and the impact on fieldwork capacity caused by the current situation.

Countries have now been instructed to complete fieldwork anytime between September 2020 and December 2021, compared with our previously planned February 2021 end date. A few countries are hopeful they can start fieldwork in late 2020, but most see a spring 2021 start as more realistic.

While continuing with the face-to-face approach continues to be our preference, we also need to plan for alternative approaches if a face-to-face approach is unfeasible for Round 10 itself and/or over a longer period

Even after face-to-face fieldwork returns, we expect some impact on the ability and willingness of respondents to participate. Some groups of the population may need to continue to isolate and others may no longer be comfortable allowing an interviewer into their home for an hour-long survey. We are, therefore, consulting our CST and NCs on whether to allow video-interviews as a back-up to in-home interviews at Round 10, and have done some initial testing on this. We may

consider allowing telephone interviews, as long as the survey showcards can be provided to respondents before the interview. Countries are also being advised to select reserve samples given uncertainties about the impact on response rates.

While continuing with the face-to-face approach continues to be our preference – for reasons of quality, consistency and a lack of feasible alternatives in some countries – we also need to plan for alternative approaches if a face-to-face approach is unfeasible for Round 10 itself and/or over a longer period. In some ways, this is not entirely new as we have been planning for a future when face-to-face fieldwork would be less feasible for some time. However, the pandemic may mean that this future emerges sooner than we would have anticipated. We are, therefore, considering whether to repurpose our CROss-National Online Survey [CRONOS-2 project](#), which aimed to recruit ESS Round 10 respondents to an online probability panel in 12 countries, to instead test a push-to-web with postal recruitment approach (similar to that employed by the Active Lives and Community Life Surveys in the UK).

We are also asking all ESS countries to consider the feasibility of such an approach, in case a face-to-face method becomes impossible in the Round 10 timeframe.

Continuing cognitive interviewing remotely



By Vicky Cummings, senior research officer, ONS

Within the Social Survey Transformation division of the Office of National Statistics (ONS), a research and design team (comprising qualitative researchers) is responsible for transforming the respondent materials and questionnaire content for ONS social surveys. Their aim is to make the new transformed ONS social surveys respondent-centric, otherwise known as 'user-centred'. [More information about the transformation of social surveys](#)



When designing surveys, the team uses a combination of cognitive interviewing and usability testing – 'cogability' testing. This research is normally conducted in a face-to-face setting but as we are not currently able to do so, we have had to consider how this research can be adapted to work remotely.

The two main types of remote research are moderated and unmoderated. We find that moderated testing is preferable for conducting cognitive interviewing remotely as it more closely matches the traditional face-to-face testing.

As there are so many software tools available for remote research it can be difficult to know which is the most suitable. We have considered the following when reviewing the optimal software options for our research needs:

- ▶ The aims of the research project and which software would help best meet those aims

- ▶ Whether our participants would need to download any software, how burdensome a process that would be, and whether that would exclude less digitally able participants
- ▶ Which software tools would meet our organisational requirements for managing personal information
- ▶ What hardware our participants would have access to. Some of the software tools require a desktop or laptop for use but there are participants who may have only a mobile phone
- ▶ Whether we would need to screenshare and audio or video record the session

After considering the options, as well as testing the software within our team, we decided that Google Hangouts would allow us to conduct cognitive interviewing most similarly to our 'traditional' methods. It has the capability for screensharing (for use in questionnaire probing) without the respondent having to download software to their laptop or desktop. It is also approved for use within our organisation by our information security team, which is tasked with ensuring that the software options can manage personal information.

When reviewing our approach, we also concluded that some of our research aims could be met by using telephone interviewing. This approach could be used to explore the cognition of certain concepts within the survey without the respondent needing to have any digital technology.

Here are some tips for running a remote research session:

1. Plan the session and the task beforehand and consider how you are going to administer this to the respondent remotely
2. Test run the technology
3. Run a mock session to practise the probes and task
4. Consider your consent process as it may need adjustment if you are now recording the participants' faces and screens as well as the audio
5. Think about where the interviews are taking place, taking extra care to protect the privacy of both the interviewer and the participant
6. For moderated research sessions, consider the human effect of not running the session face-to-face. For example, it is more difficult to build rapport remotely

For research ethics, there may be topics of research which ordinarily cause little concern for participants but which have become more sensitive because of the upheaval that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused. While each organisation may have its own ethical procedures, there is also a [self-assessment process provided by the UK Statistics Authority](#) to review the ethics of research projects.





Responding to Covid-19

We asked members to share short items about their response to the Covid-19 lockdown. We asked for contributions about how members have adapted to keep projects going, as well as tips, ideas and workarounds.

The following pages include contributions from a wide variety of different members and organisations, from independent researchers, academia, charities, government and commercial agencies.

Connie Taylor, Georgie Johnstone and Marion Lean, Fibre Programmes, Building Digital UK, DCMS

The work hasn't stopped. It's more important than ever but it's becoming more challenging.

The UK Fibre programme at Building Digital UK (DCMS) supports research and evaluation of broadband infrastructure projects, with particular focus on rural connectivity. This is a high government priority and work in this area is continuing during the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, while continuing with our main objectives we are also offering support to sectors that are badly affected by the virus. Two key challenges include changing our projects to adapt to our partners' needs and considering how to tackle fieldwork.

Approaches we have taken to address the issues we are facing and alleviate pressure on our local body partners include:

- ▶ Postponing fieldwork with public services (health sites, schools) and changing research project plans
- ▶ Offering extra support for local bodies in their data collection
- ▶ Assessing our team capacity for in-house research

Approaches to address original research aims through new objectives include:

- ▶ Developing a guidance pack to support local bodies with their evaluations
- ▶ In-house research with public services – using smaller scale digital surveys

- ▶ Fieldwork methods – video ethnography, digital surveys, comparative groups (who are contactable)

During this time, when communication is more important than ever, learning from others' experiences is important. Tools which we have found useful for developing new methods are:

- ▶ Reaching out to research subjects using social media for citizen participation
- ▶ Using video on Google Hangouts to conduct interviews and focus groups
- ▶ Visual data collection to embody these insights and demonstrate meaning
- ▶ Testing new software for collaboration – Google Jam and Mural
- ▶ [‘Making design research work remotely’](#) – Future Gov
- ▶ Crowdsourced document – [‘Doing fieldwork in a pandemic’](#)

We acknowledge that innovative skills, tools and behaviour are required to adapt and respond to challenges during the current uncertainty, and it is important that we support others in the wider organisation by sharing best practice. Though we hope things will go back to some sort of ‘normal’, we’re certain that these new skills will strengthen our research as we undoubtedly go through more change and instability in the future.

Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Ecorys

In common with other research companies, the pandemic and lockdown have presented challenges and opportunities. We're getting used to the reality of working at home, having more discussions about contract variations, supporting staff, checking best ways of working with vulnerable people, and putting up with Nescafe rather than espresso from the office coffee grinder...

While some studies have been put on temporary hiatus, other work has provided new opportunities. We're undertaking a large-scale qualitative study funded by the Nuffield Trust to understand how Covid-19 affects young people across the globe. Our multi-year work with the National Lottery Community Fund on their Ageing Better

Genna Kik, IFF Research

It feels like we're in the midst of an era of innovation. Our working practices have rapidly changed, and while it hasn't quite been 'business as usual', we've learned new ways to adapt, and as a result, hopefully developed new business practices that offer greater resilience in the long term. We were lucky to have had a large proportion of our workforce (including our interviewing team) working from home already, but the lockdown forced us to move to a fully dispersed team at speed. Zoom and MS Teams have been used extensively for team and client catch-ups; instant messaging has become the new norm; and presentations, webinars and even workshops have been run online. Face-to-face fieldwork has moved to phone, and our telephone interviewing has continued through our home worker network.

Kerry KilBride, Miller Research

Maintaining team wellbeing has been challenging. In normal circumstances, we work in an open-plan barn conversion. Ad hoc conversations while making coffee, lunchtime walks and summer meetings on the terrace, play an important part in keeping up morale.

Working remotely means these interactions are no longer possible. To try to keep up team spirit we have introduced an optional daily 11am Zoom call, which is an opportunity for us to have coffee and a chat. We also vary the different communication mediums that we use – Slack or WhatsApp for simple questions (email communication has dropped dramatically); Zoom or MS Teams for formal meetings or internal workshops; and 'old school' telephone when we are 'Zoomed-out'.

programme is flexing to look at similar issues among people aged 50 and over at risk of loneliness.

One area of interest is the move in many organisations to digital service delivery. On the one hand, this has led to increased discussion on learning from best practice and ways to monitor and evaluate new digital approaches. On the other hand, if changes are temporary and organisations and sectors intend to revert back to previous modes of service delivery, it can raise questions around the value and external validity of findings during this period. These, and other questions about digital delivery (particularly in education around access, attainment and disadvantage/equity) are likely to continue, providing opportunities for social researchers in the years to come.

As well as finding ways to continue to deliver research, we've been mindful of staff wellbeing. We've increased the regularity of team catch-ups to keep up 'face-to-face' time, and everyone has been encouraged to put their families/wellbeing first and work flexible hours if they need to. We're a sociable company so we've tried to replicate this. We usually get together in the office for a drink on a Friday evening so we've now moved this online with everyone on a Friday evening allocated to a different Zoom group gathering, and we now have a weekly Wednesday staff quiz night. As a homemaker previously, I feel more connected than ever to the team. Would we have enjoyed a little more time to adapt? Absolutely. But has it forced a rapid uptake of new systems and technology that will benefit us in the long term? 100%.

Some of the more positive effects of lockdown have included:

- ▶ Involvement of the entire project team in virtual inception and progress 'meetings' with clients – not just the project director and project manager, who would typically travel to a face-to-face meeting
- ▶ A greater sense of pragmatism and shared problem solving between us and our clients in agreeing what aspects of a contract can continue as planned (desk research, some telephone interviews), what needs modifying (mini groups facilitated via MS Teams replacing face-to-face focus groups) and what needs postponing indefinitely (for example engagement with frontline health professions)
- ▶ The opportunity to focus on non-project work, for example applying for BCorp status, writing blogs and signing up for online training

Lisa Calderwood, principal investigator, Next Steps; and senior survey manager, UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies

The UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) has launched a special online survey of its national longitudinal cohort studies to examine the impact of Covid-19. The survey will gather insights into how the pandemic has affected different aspects of people's lives, including their physical and mental health and wellbeing, family and relationships, education, work, and finances. It will be sent to participants of all four of the national longitudinal cohort studies run at CLS – Millennium Cohort Study, Next Steps, 1970 British Cohort Study and 1958 National Child Development Study – as well as the 1946 British Cohort Study.

The data from the survey will help researchers understand the health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. It will be especially important for understanding how people at different life stages are being affected, and how prior life experiences shape resilience or vulnerability to its effects.

Ron Iphofen, independent consultant

Certainly, not having to travel too much around Europe is a welcome relief. So much is already done 'remotely' that it becomes a matter of finding the best, most reliable conferencing systems – and not too costly. Several of my network have been using Zoom – and we are in the process of preparing a bid which we always do online using Sharepoint in any case. Most of my work is either with or for the European Commission – and its IT systems can be unreliable and take some time to fix. Patience is a necessary virtue. In one project we were about to begin some expert workshops

Ruth Copson, University of East Anglia

I have been involved in a rapid response research project with my PhD supervisor which is exploring how children's connections to their birth families are being maintained during lockdown, when children are living with foster carers, kinship carers or who are adopted and they are unable to see them face-to-face.

What has really struck me is how quickly a research project can get off the ground – from getting ethics approval back within a day, to getting a survey online in a few days, to interviewing 20 people in two weeks. It has been exhausting but thrilling. I've had to learn new skills very quickly –

By following participants' lives into the future, the studies will be able to track the longer-term consequences of the pandemic too. The initial survey took place in May, and it will be repeated during the pandemic. The data will be deposited with the UK Data Service.

Covid-19 has also affected plans for data collection on major study sweeps. Fieldwork for the Age 62 Survey of the 1958 National Child Development Study – involving a face-to-face interview followed by a nurse visit – was paused in March. We hope it will re-start later in the year when the government guidelines are changed to allow home visits. The Age 50 Survey of the 1970 British Cohort Study is currently in its development phase, and is planned to be a face-to-face survey. We are currently exploring the feasibility of conducting interviews using video-calls.

which have now been converted to online interviews – again using Zoom to record the engagements. The only other issue to watch out for is deadlines – we are hesitating asking for extensions to projects since the budget is unlikely to increase, and partners will have budgeted to receive income over a fixed period of time, relying on funders to deliver according to original contracts. If a project is extended and the money is not, income becomes a problem. Maybe we should all convince funders that the savings they make on travel and accommodation costs could be used to help project extension.

conducting telephone interviews, for example, and taking detailed notes of those interviews due to lack of recording equipment, as well as getting my head around new software such as Qualtrics and NVivo.

Knowing that this research will hopefully be beneficial to children, families and social workers who are battling extremely challenging conditions is a huge motivation. There is a lesson from conducting the research itself and in the preliminary results that things can be done differently, with positive results. Hopefully this won't be lost 'when this is all over'. For me as a PhD student, it has been quite inspiring.

Sabina Kastberg, Office for National Statistics

The pandemic outbreak meant that ONS Social Survey Operations needed to adapt large-scale household survey data-collection processes at speed! Following government social distancing restrictions, it ceased face-to-face survey data collection overnight. In most studies, face-to-face interviewers are the first and main point of contact for survey respondents, particularly in early survey waves, and are how contact information for future participation is gathered. We needed to use their interviewing expertise and to continue gathering survey data, while keeping everyone safe. We equipped 700 face-to-face interviewers and 200 office-based telephone interviewers to continue their important work on our largest survey, by telephone, from home. We amended our more complex face-to-face surveys so they could be completed by telephone. Respondent-facing materials were changed to reference the pandemic and to highlight that taking part is more important than ever. Study incentives were

also increased. An online portal was established to collect respondent telephone numbers; letters make a clear call for respondents to provide their number there, or by calling the office or interviewer directly. The impact of these changes has yet to be explored. Finally, ONS has added new questions to some of our surveys, and quickly established new studies and surveys, to gather data about the impact of Covid-19. There is increased public awareness of our role in collecting data and using statistics to inform our nation. We are capitalising on this to help us gain cooperation.

[More on how ONS has responded to safety for surveys.](#)

The Government Statistical Service has published guidance for quality assuring [urgent ad-hoc statistical analysis](#) and guidance for [urgent quality assurance of data](#).

The Office for Statistics Regulation has information about the [regulation of statistics](#) during the pandemic.

Dr Sam Quinn, University of the West of Scotland

I am in the process of winding down one research project and moving university to begin another research fellow role. Changing employers has been an unusual experience as I have not been able to have a physical induction, meet colleagues and so on. The principal investigator on my project has been excellent in managing this, and I would offer the following advice to university staff inducting new colleagues at this time:

- ▶ Have an ongoing email thread/WhatsApp and weekly catch-ups to check on new team members
- ▶ Be prepared for delays in paperwork and accessing equipment and keep the team up to date with how this is being addressed
- ▶ Inform new team members how their project role may change because of Covid-19
- ▶ Ensure that your university policy on Covid-19 is shared with new colleagues and that they know what support is available

Sandra Forbes, freelance researcher

Much of the work for freelancers has dried up but I am trying to keep in touch as far as possible with organisations I worked for. Many of them in the voluntary sector are struggling with home working and childcare, and the time they have is limited as they focus on key projects.

Key for me has been dropping a quick email every three or four weeks to check in. I use email as I don't know who is around and when they are available. This gives people time to respond when they can. Not everyone is adept at using technology like Zoom and it seems a bit hit and miss for

catch-ups. Other researchers I worked with are also keeping in touch so we can share projects if they turn up with a short timescale. We've also offered to volunteer to help with some research work, scoping and background factchecking just to keep a hand in.

It's been a good time to get up to date with some reading and to think about how projects that were under discussion might change. Quite a number will probably not go ahead but no-one is able to take decisions at the moment.

Stephen Vargas, Terrence Higgins Trust

I am finding working from home quite hard as most of my job involves conducting training. I have been making many more social calls online in order to keep in contact with service users. I have found that taking time off the screen every few hours is helping my concentration. Going for a walk by myself with no phone in order to 'unplug' from the constant screen time has been helpful.

I am trying to move our outreach services online for sexual health information. This is challenging because the usual avenues for information gathering are not currently possible. I have been keeping records of when I speak to people online more than I would do normally because most communication is now digital.

Things are still very fluid with how we are responding to the Covid-19 crisis and because of this I have found that doing more meditation is keeping my mind balanced. Making sure I have a schedule for each day and sticking to it is also helpful. I work from my study and don't take work out of the room with me when I am relaxing.

Keeping in contact with work colleagues socially is keeping morale up within the team. Speaking to my manager frequently is helping to keep communications open between us. There is a bit more variety to our work as we cover for staff who have been furloughed.



Can you help to guide the SRA?

The SRA's trustees retire after six years of service. Several will retire in 2020, including the chair in December. So, we are looking for new trustees from among the membership, to join a lively and positive governing group and help to guide us through challenging times.

As an educational charity promoting high standards of social research, the SRA provides training courses, events, publications and other resources. The economic climate during and after Covid-19 will call for innovation and fresh thinking. Along with many organisations, the SRA faces challenges as a result of the current pandemic, but the charity has entered this period with strong financial reserves, and the board has an active plan in place to address these challenges (including the ongoing transition of the training and events programme to an online offer).

Please visit our website and read about our [current trustees](#).

SRA membership is open to all, and our 1,200+ members represent many sectors, research methods and approaches. We welcome applications from across the membership. In addition, so that the trustee body is broadly representative, we would also like to hear from members working in central government, for a public body, as independents, and also those with digital and social media expertise.

Trustees meet six times a year in London (with video-conferencing available), and you'll be expected to attend these meetings, as well as our annual general meeting (usually held at our annual conference). Board meetings focus largely on strategic rather than operational issues. Trustees are unpaid volunteers, whose positions are re-nominated every two years, to a maximum of six years. Expenses for meetings and so on are reimbursed.

Each trustee uses their knowledge and experience to help the board reach sound decisions. This will involve scrutinising board papers, leading discussions, focusing on key issues, and providing views and advice on new initiatives or other issues. You'll need to be aware of your legal responsibilities, and the need to act in accordance with Charity Commission guidance, as explained in '[The essential trustee](#)'.

Our chair, David Johnson, retires at the end of 2020, so we are also looking for a new chair of trustees. The chair's role, which on average takes a day per month, encompasses that of a trustee, as well as:

- ▶ Chairing trustee meetings: encouraging open discussion, helping the group reflect on risks and implications of decisions, summarising views and seeking consensus

- ▶ Supporting the chief executive (Graham Farrant) as matters arise and on issues of strategic direction
- ▶ Representing the SRA, building links to other organisations and promoting its interests
- ▶ Ad hoc support (with the treasurer, Nigel Meager, and the chief executive) on matters that need to be progressed or decided on in between trustee meetings
- ▶ Writing an article each quarter for Research Matters magazine
- ▶ Chairing the AGM and introducing the conference
- ▶ Signing off the annual report

If you'd like to apply, either to be a trustee or trustee and chair, please complete this [online form](#). Deadline: **Friday 31 July 2020**.

A subgroup of existing trustees will make the selection, with reference to the criteria in the online application form.

If you are interested and would like to know more, or have any questions, in the first instance please contact the chief executive, Graham Farrant: graham.farrant@the-sra.org.uk, **0207 255 0695**

And if you know someone who would perhaps like to apply and who could be suitable, please encourage them!

Interviews in qualitative research

Nigel King, Christine Horrocks and Joanne Brooks

Sage, 2018 (2nd edition)

Reviewed by Dr Oliver Hooper, research associate in physical education and youth sport, Loughborough University



This is an accessible and authoritative text that provides a detailed outline of the interview process from start to finish. It covers everything from designing an interview, through to conducting it, and subsequently to analysing the data generated. The book usefully adopts an applied perspective and draws on 'real world' case studies to exemplify the possibilities and challenges that might arise throughout the interview process.

It provides much practical guidance about how interviews might be planned, conducted and analysed – with boxes, tables and figures proving a particularly useful feature. These aid the reader to further explore key content. For example, in chapter 4, boxed content explores the different styles that might be adopted for interview schedules, while in chapter 5, boxed content describes how probe questions might be used in interviews.

This second edition includes revised and updated chapters along with two new chapters – one focused on the use of visual methods within qualitative interviewing (chapter 8) and one focused on interviews and discourse analysis (chapter 12).

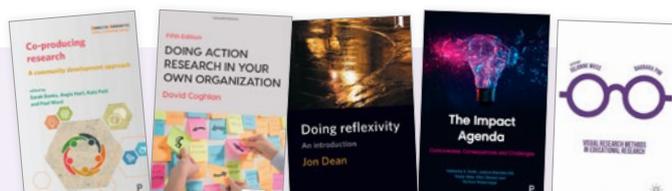
The former is particularly interesting, exploring how visual materials can be used as a stimulus within interviews, as well as how interviews can generate visual materials as a form of data (for example drawings and timelines). It is positive that texts such as this provide guidance on more creative and innovative approaches. Hopefully, this might be explored further in subsequent editions.

While the second edition of the book includes new chapters, there does seem to be something of a missed opportunity in the chapter on digitally-mediated interviews/interviewing in

digital spaces. Although reference is made to digitally-mediated interviews in chapter 7 – which focuses on remote interviewing – it might have been useful to have had a standalone chapter on this, given the increasing use of digital methods within qualitative research.

The book has appeal to a broad readership, from novice to experienced researchers, though would likely be particularly useful for those studying within the social sciences who want to improve their grasp of the interview process. Overall, it's a useful read for anyone conducting interviews within their research, and provides the reader with the practical knowledge to design, conduct and analyse interviews effectively.

Titles for review



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

Co-producing research: a community development approach

Edited by Sarah Banks, Kate Pahl, Angie Hart and Paul Ward

Policy Press, 2018

Doing action research in your own organization

David Coghlan

SAGE, 2019 (5th edition)

Doing reflexivity: an introduction

Jon Dean

Policy Press, 2017

The impact agenda: controversies, consequences and challenges

Katherine Smith, Justyna Bandola-Gill, Nasar Meer, Ellen Stewart and Richard Watermeyer

Policy Press, 2020

Visual research methods in educational research

Julianne Moss and Barbara Pini

Palgrave MacMillan, 2016

SRA Scotland

By Karen Kerr

This is a challenging time for us all professionally and personally, and SRA Scotland is keen to help support social researchers in Scotland as best as we can. We are working with SRA North to run our first joint online event 'Keeping connected, staying social, getting virtual'. The event will take place on 24 June from 1.30 to 4.15pm and is free to attend. If you would like to take part please [sign-up on the SRA website](#). For further information please [contact Daniel Stunell](#).

The committee is also looking at running other online events later in the year. If you have any suggestions for topics or if there is any way in which we can help support you at this time, please feel free to get in touch with me, either by email, karen.kerr@sds.co.uk or telephone, 07584 470028. To keep up to date with SRA Scotland news follow us [@SRA_Scotland](#).



SRA Cymru

By Faye Gracey

We have been saddened to hear how the pandemic is affecting our network either professionally, personally or both. We are keen to hold a branch event soon to provide support to each other, but we are still thinking through the best mechanism (MS Teams, Zoom and so on), and what would be most useful to our members. If you have any thoughts on this, or would like to work with us on these arrangements, please do get in touch. In the meantime, I hope to see some of you at the virtual event hosted by SRA North England and Scotland on 24 June. For our latest news do continue to follow [@SRACymru](#) too. Cofion cynnes. faye.gracey@llyw.cymru/faye.gracey@gov.wales



SRA North

By Jenni Brooks

This is a difficult time for our members, with some being pulled from their regular research to work on Covid-19 projects, others finding creative ways to continue existing research, many working from home, and others furloughed. Members have been liaising with Government Social Research heads of professions to produce guidance for data collection – this has been published on the [SRA blog](#). We are also collaborating with SRA Scotland on a joint virtual event (see above). As always, keep in touch with us by following [@SRANorth](#), or emailing srnorth@gmail.com



SRA Ireland

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

SRA journal 'Social Research Practice': next issue

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

Issue 10 is due in September/October.

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



SRA training

Our trainers have adapted several training courses to run live online. These courses are now available to [book on the SRA website](#).

Trainers are experts in their fields, and the training aims to provide practical hands-on knowledge and understanding to small groups of participants. There's a focus on interactivity including practice sessions in online breakout groups. Courses run either in one day or two half days.

Qualitative methods

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

with Professor Karen O'Reilly: **25 and 26 June**

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS with Professor Karen O'Reilly:
29 June (full day) and **8 and 9 July** (run over two mornings)

INTERPRETING AND WRITING UP YOUR QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

with Professor Karen O'Reilly: **2 and 3 July**

NARRATIVES AND STORYTELLING IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

with Dr Karen Lumsden: **3 July**

CONDUCTING ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

with Dr Karen Lumsden: **7 July**

CREATIVE METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

with Dr Nicole Brown: **14 and 15 July**

Quantitative methods

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

with Debbie Collins:
NatCen Social Research: **25 and 26 June**

INTRODUCTION TO EVIDENCE REVIEWS

with Daniel Phillips: NatCen Social Research: **30 June**

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PROJECT MANAGEMENT

with Professor David Parsons: **6 July**

WEB SURVEY DESIGN

with Debbie Collins:
NatCen Social Research: **9 and 10 July**

Evaluation methods

IMPACT EVALUATION: OPTIONS, CHOICES AND PRACTICE

with Professor David Parsons: **9 and 10 June, 16 July**

FOUNDATIONS OF EVALUATION

with Professor David Parsons: **6 July**

Other skills

SMARTPHONE VIDEO PRODUCTION FOR SOCIAL RESEARCHERS

with Mark Saunders and Dr Michele de Laurentiis:

22 and 23 June (run over two mornings)

New dates coming soon for:

- ▶ Foundations in qualitative research
- ▶ Understanding statistical concepts & essential tests
- ▶ Narratives analysis
- ▶ Introduction to R for social researchers

Cost: £165 for members and £220 for non-members.

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



research matters

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

Publication dates 2020

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

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