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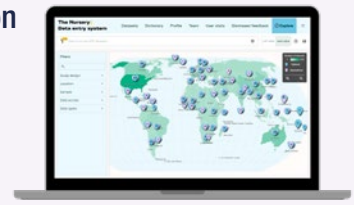
SOCIAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

# research matters

# Introducing the Atlas of Longitudinal Datasets

**By Elena Triantafillopoulou, PhD student and research assistant, King's College London**
**Georgina Brown and Siann Hirani, research assistants, King's College London**



In 2023, the Wellcome Trust commissioned a global search for longitudinal datasets that may hold opportunities for transformative mental health research. This search resulted in the discovery of over 3,000 longitudinal datasets and, therefore, an impressive repository of rich data mines. We found that while these datasets could be valuable resources for research, information about them was not easily discoverable. This inspired our team of researchers based at King's College London, our collaborators from MQ Mental Health Research, and a lived experience expert (LEE) group to create an online platform that showcases these datasets. This project, the Atlas of Longitudinal Datasets, is funded by the Wellcome Trust and launched earlier this year.

## About the Atlas

The Atlas is an online searchable platform with information about thousands of longitudinal datasets from across the world. The aim of the platform is to increase the findability and uptake of longitudinal data and to help researchers, students, governments, non-governmental organisations, funders and others with exploring the richness and areas of opportunity in longitudinal research globally.

The platform provides metadata on datasets, including information about their location, sample, data collection, data access and, where possible, links to data sources.

The Atlas is free to use for anyone from any sector. Users can search and filter for datasets based on their interests, compare key features and save selected datasets for future use.

The Atlas also includes whether patients, service users, LEEs, participants, advisory groups or communities have been involved or engaged in each study.

## Co-production between researchers and the public

The Atlas has been co-created with a group of international LEEs who bring expertise by lived experience of mental health, neurodiversity and sensory impairments. Their insight informed the development of the platform, which we pilot tested with them and other future users before its launch, to ensure the Atlas is:

- inclusive and easy-to-understand for all users, using simplified language
- user-friendly and intuitive, making it quick and easy to navigate and find what you need

## Using the Atlas

As a research tool, the main aims of the Atlas are to:

- allow researchers and students developing research questions or designing studies to discover a broad range of longitudinal studies in their areas of interest
- enable funders to identify gaps in research and guide resource allocation
- help inform government and non-governmental organisations when developing evidence-based policy and public health monitoring
- promote collaboration and sharing of data where possible and reduce duplication by making datasets more visible

For researchers within the social sciences, the Atlas can help with the discovery of datasets focusing on particular topics or study populations. For example, users can search for specific social issues, like poverty or crime, and narrow down their search results filtering by study design, location, sample specifications, data accessibility and/or data types collected. Datasets from over 180 countries are included on the Atlas, making it great for discovering datasets from around the world – including low- and middle-income countries.

## Next steps

We have over 2,000 datasets on the Atlas and it's growing daily as we add new longitudinal datasets, introduce new features and expand existing entries with more detailed information. Soon, users will be able to filter datasets by even more data types, including cognitive, environmental and psychological data beyond mental health measures. We will continue to implement feedback from the LEE group and user groups.

# What do you think of Research Matters?

***Research Matters*** **is for anyone interested in social research, whether working as a social researcher, using social research or just wanting to learn more about it.**

**The editorial team is keen to hear from readers what you think about the magazine. Are there any industry sectors, methods, or disciplines you would like to see included more often? Or other features or series you would like to suggest? Or would you like to write a regular column on an industry hot topic? Please email admin@the-sra.org.uk with any ideas. You do not necessarily need to contribute to any future features but are more than welcome to do so if you would like!**

# The challenges of mistrust, misinformation and polarisation

**SRA chair, Ed Dunn, discusses the importance of demonstrating that social research can be trusted, valued and used to improve lives.**

Welcome to the autumn 2025 edition of Research Matters. As the leaves turn and we look back on a busy summer, one highlight shines especially brightly: the SRA annual conference in July. It was fantastic to see so many of our members come together – both familiar faces and new voices – for a day of ideas, exchange and connection. The energy in the venue was a testament to the strength of our community, and the opportunities such gatherings create: for learning, sharing and collaboration, reflection, and for shaping the future of social research together. This edition of Research Matters continues that momentum, drawing together themes of innovation, inclusivity and impact that were all central to the conference itself.

We begin with a feature on the new Atlas of Longitudinal Datasets, an invaluable resource that illuminates the breadth of data available for researchers across disciplines. By mapping and making sense of these rich sources, the Atlas opens up new possibilities for longitudinal analysis, offering insights into social change over time.

Innovation in research isn't only about data – it's also about how evidence feeds into policy. That's why we're pleased to include an introduction to the UK Government's new 'test and learn' approach. This shift towards experimentation and adaptive delivery will have implications for evaluation, creating space for evidence to shape programmes iteratively rather than retrospectively.

This edition would not be complete without a look at the fast-moving world of AI. One of our articles explores how large language models – tools that are generating much debate across society – are beginning to be applied in qualitative research, particularly for narrative analysis. The piece considers both the potential and the pitfalls of these methods, raising questions about ethics, methods and the future skillsets of the social researcher.

Inclusivity and social impact are recurring themes. We feature a fascinating piece on the social model of disability and its intersection with deliberative research, highlighting how inclusive approaches can empower participation and improve outcomes. I recall working on the groundbreaking Life Opportunities Survey many years ago, so it's pleasing to see the social model in use here. Alongside this, we have an article on systemic change through co-designed EDI interventions, reminding us that equity, diversity and inclusion must be more than values – they must be embedded in research practice at every level.

Research doesn't exist in a vacuum: how we communicate findings matters as much as the findings themselves. A timely piece on better storytelling in consultations explores how narrative can cut through 'consultation fatigue' and re-engage communities whose voices too often go unheard. Relatedly, another article takes a wider lens on the system and community benefits of a research-led approach, underlining how robust evidence can improve both local services and broader social outcomes.

Our career journey feature spotlights James Thom, tracing his path from academia to his current role at Verian. His story is one of adaptability and reflection – valuable reading for anyone considering the many routes through a research career.

We also return to the conference floor with a report on perspectives on Scotland's third sector impact. This piece distils some of the most engaging sessions, drawing out lessons on the role of charities and community organisations in addressing social challenges, and how researchers can best capture and evidence that impact.

Together, the articles in this edition show the breadth and vitality of social research today: from big datasets to lived experience, from technological frontiers to grassroots action. What unites them is a commitment to rigour, inclusivity and meaningful impact – the very qualities that underpin public confidence in research.

As we look ahead to the coming months, we encourage you to stay curious, stay engaged and stay connected. The challenges of mistrust, misinformation and polarisation are real, but our collective response, as researchers and as a community, must be to demonstrate, time and again, that research can be trusted, valued and used to improve lives.

We hope you enjoy this edition of Research Matters and look forward to continuing the conversation.

# Test and learn

**By Professor David Parsons, Leeds Beckett University; P&A Research and Consulting**

It is not often that something 'new' comes along in the methodologically packed world of policy research and evaluation in the UK. Practitioner debate continues apace over the utility and fit of different methods, although most of the core techniques have been around for decades. So, it is notable when something potentially game changing emerges, especially when it has yet to attract much practitioner commentary.

What is new are the 'test and learn' proposals for government to act more as a start-up in policy and programme innovation. Introduced in a speech late last year at UCL by Pat MacFadden, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, his announcement attracted considerable media attention for its civil service reform plans but much less for its underpinning proposals to move government towards a 'test and learn' culture. Those proposals, now embedded in the government's comprehensive spending review, have a significantly high profile in Whitehall's Evaluation Task Force with early departmental experimentation and a £100 million innovation fund to set up initial test and learn collaborative teams in selected departments.

There is little new about an incoming government calling for efficiency savings in the civil service and a culture change. However, MacFadden who is close to the Prime Minister and seen as at the heart of policy reform, appears to be aiming for something novel and timely as an approach to policy-related problem solving. Test and learn calls for tapping opportunities for much greater agility in policy and programme innovation through devolved, fast turnaround, responsive and initially micro-scale targeted policy and programme innovation.

Behind this policy, researchers and evaluators will see potentially far-reaching consequences for how government uses evidence. Clarity will come from the forthcoming revision of government guidance on evaluation practice in the 'Magenta Book', but we can speculate on some implications.

- Any move towards iterative policy design and development will place a premium on intensive preparation to provide for well-placed fast starts for evaluation.
- Hyper-intensive and agile research and evaluation methods will need to harness action-research principles geared to rapidly testing implementation and effects.
- Those methods will be shaped and reshaped to provide within the trialling period to respond to emergent dynamics and realities faced by the tested intervention.
- They will also emphasise highly formative approaches based on utility responsive, frequent and opportunistic review of emerging evidence and change implications.
- The power dynamic between evaluator and commissioner will need to be rebalanced to optimise methodological expertise, and pragmatism, in adapting method mix to align with (changing) needs, intensity and progressive reporting.

Going beyond methods, test and learn will likely call for arrangements to embed research or evaluation evidence in the innovation and learning process, closely linking policy developers with the inquiry team to progressively gauge what is working (and what is not) against needs and evolving expectations. This will place a premium on robustly collaborative approaches for evidence formation, review and knowledge exchange to inform real time changes to policy and implementation, and evolving next steps. Such collaboration will come close to co-production which may raise challenges for navigating an appropriate balance between impartiality and independence of the review arrangements with developmental influence.

Looked at in this way, policy researchers and evaluators may see these challenges as ones of emphasis and purposeful application but not requiring a new methodological paradigm to support test and learn. They may also see a lot in past practice to build on including Michael Quinn Patton's longstanding call for more iterative, developmental integration of evaluation.

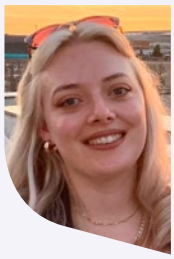
In many ways, the challenges, and ultimately the successful integration of review evidence in test and learn, may be much greater for commissioners where current processes for research and evaluation scoping, specification, external commissioning and contract management are often poorly placed for fast turnaround and adaptation. Processes for consideration of, and harnessing, findings can also be multi-layered, slow and hampered by procedure. Commissioners' aspirations for high-quality evidence to robustly demonstrate proof of effect, and perhaps generalisability, may also need substantial adjustment to rebalance methodological purity with the need for intensive, dynamic and responsive evidence.

None of this suggests that conventional evaluation is about to lose its currency. Not all governmental policy and programme development will be suitable for test and learn, and accountability demands will continue to place an emphasis on high-quality evaluation especially for larger budget, mature or sensitive areas. Nonetheless, test and learn offers policy researchers and evaluators great opportunities and the chance to start to redress longstanding concerns that the evidence they generate can have limited consequence and is too often peripheral to decision making.

**Prof Parsons leads a series of practitioner development courses on evaluation methods for SRA. His next book, 'Purposeful evaluation: a practical guide to design, development and delivery', will be published by Policy Press in the autumn.**

# New frontiers in qualitative research: using large language models for narrative analysis

**By Sarah Jenner, lecturer in child and adolescent health, University of Southampton and Dimitris Raidos, associate director, Ipsos**



Recent advances in generative artificial intelligence (AI) have the potential to transform the way social scientists conduct qualitative research, with implications for researchers across sectors. But we need to make sure to do this the right way. We (a collaboration of researchers at the University of Southampton and Ipsos in the UK) decided to develop and test a novel method for analysing qualitative data using large language models (LLMs), to see what it could tell us about using AI in this context.

## What we did

We compared LLM-conducted analysis with human analysis of the same qualitative data, exploring how best to optimise LLMs to conduct narrative analysis. We analysed 138 short stories written by young people (aged 13 to 25 years) about social media, identity formation and food choices separately three times: by human researchers, and by two different LLMs (Claude and GPT-o1). We compared the analysis conducted between the human researchers and both LLMs, and found that both models were able to quickly and successfully conduct a narrative analysis of the story data. Their findings were comparable to those of the human researchers and were judged by the researchers to be credible and thorough.

Beyond replication, the LLMs provided additional insights into the data that enhanced the human analysis. The findings highlighted the significant potential benefits of LLMs to the field of qualitative research and propose that LLMs could one day be seen as valuable tools for strengthening research quality and increasing efficiency.

## What does this mean for social researchers?

This opens up many opportunities for LLMs to help us to do qualitative analysis better. LLMs could improve the efficiency with which large qualitative datasets can be analysed while maintaining analytical rigour, such as allowing for quicker turnaround of public consultation findings to inform policy development. It could also allow resource-limited organisations (like charities) to extend their analytical capabilities, allowing smaller teams to undertake more ambitious qualitative projects and analyse more extensive datasets.

Our findings suggested that incorporating LLMs into qualitative research is not just about improving efficiency. The tools enhanced the quality of analyses by providing alternative perspectives to challenge our assumptions, which offered opportunities for reflection and reflexivity.

LLMs could serve as a methodological tool to enhance reflexivity and provide alternative interpretations of data, working with existing frameworks such as thematic or narrative analysis. This could be particularly beneficial for academic researchers.

## Navigating ethical challenges

Responsible use of AI in research requires careful consideration of a range of issues. Data security is more important than ever, and we, as researchers, must be sure that any tools we use comply with institutional ethics requirements and data protection regulations such as GDPR.

Existing concepts from qualitative research, such as rigour, transparency and reflexivity must also be considered. It is vital to thoroughly review all LLM-generated content for accuracy, watching out for 'hallucinations' (fabricated information). When documenting our processes, it's also important to include information on how LLMs were used. In terms of reflexivity, when using LLMs in this way, we need to reflect on how LLMs influenced our interpretations of the data and to what extent the models' training data impacts the output.

## Methodological considerations

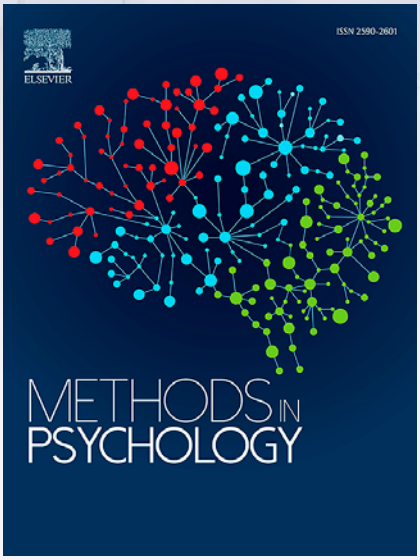
We propose a four-step framework for LLM-assisted analysis, which aims to support you to incorporate LLMs into the analytic process in a way that effectively combines human intuition with computational efficiency:

1. Develop a structured analysis plan: establishing clear roles for human and AI analysts.
2. Select the best model: choosing appropriate LLMs for specific analytical tasks.
3. Format data appropriately: structuring data in formats LLMs can effectively process.
4. Use prompt engineering: creating clear instructions optimised for LLM comprehension.

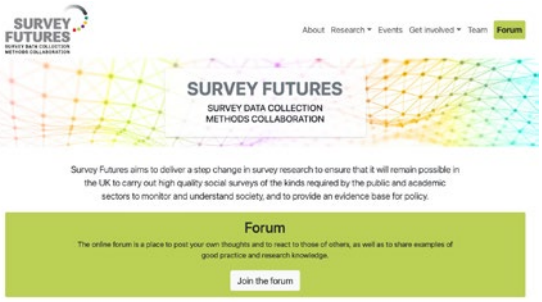
## Looking ahead

As LLM technology continues to evolve, there will be increased opportunities for researchers to thoughtfully engage with these tools. Those who develop appropriate skills will find ways to enhance their research, whereas institutions that do not equip their researchers with the skills to utilise these tools risk being left behind. Our research suggests LLMs could eventually be seen as valuable collaborators, supporting us to maximise the positive impact that our research can have on people and communities.

There's more information in our full journal article in the June 2025 issue of Methods in Psychology.




# Update from Survey Futures




**Surveys play a crucial role in informing policy and financial decisions, as well as enhancing our understanding of major social and health phenomena. Many researchers rely on them as the foundation for high-quality and impactful social science research. Confidence in survey quality is, therefore, vital. However, increasing challenges in survey design and implementation raise ongoing questions about the quality they can deliver.**

For many years, response rates have been a key survey performance indicator and are often interpreted as the sole or most important measure of survey quality, which is misleading. On their own, response rates are not a reliable indicator of survey quality. In recent years, declining response rates and, for some surveys, a switch from interviewer-administered to self-completion data collection have raised questions about the role of response rates and sparked public debate about survey quality.

We are pleased to announce the release of the 'Survey Futures Position Statement on Response Rates'. The statement outlines our perspective on response rates and survey quality. We encourage all relevant colleagues to review and share this statement widely, as it aims to support informed, evidence-based approaches to improving data quality and research practices across the sector.

The statement, along with the supporting material, is available on the Survey Futures website.

Professor Olga Maslovskaya (deputy director, Survey Futures) and Professor Peter Lynn (director, Survey Futures).

# The social model of disability and deliberative research

By Dr Alessandra Radicati, senior researcher, Centre for Deliberation, National Centre for Social Research

NatCen is conducting a project commissioned by the Welsh Government aimed at improving survey questions about impairments to be more aligned with the social model of disability (SMD). The Centre for Deliberation (CfD) led a strand focusing on deliberative research with disabled adults in Wales. Deliberative workshops brought together 40 participants to discuss the best ways to collect survey data on impairments.

Our aims were to understand how disabled people in Wales perceive 'impairment' and 'disability' and the relevance of these concepts to their personal experiences; to share information about the medical and social models of disability; and to gather views on the current Government Statistical Service impairment harmonised standards as well as draft survey questions on barriers experienced by disabled people.

While our summary interim report, 'Social model of disability: discovery phase', published by the Welsh Government, outlines the main findings of this work, in this article I reflect on the practical challenges faced by the CfD in designing accessible discussions and how we overcame them.

## Challenges in designing accessible deliberation

At the outset of the project, the Welsh Government identified 12 impairment types that had to be represented at the workshops to ensure an adequate range of experiences. Designing deliberative workshops to include such a wide and varying range of experiences presented several challenges. We found that using a typical deliberative timeline, with workshops beginning shortly after recruitment ended, did not give sufficient time to establish some participants' exact accessibility requirements in advance. This meant having to pre-emptively book some suppliers that were ultimately not needed by participants at the workshops (for example BSL interpretation, as none of our participants with auditory impairments required this).

Additionally, some services, such as the production of Easy Read and BSL versions of our briefing materials, fell outside the regular purview of many interpreters and required additional time and effort to source. Furthermore, we had to be careful not to inadvertently create barriers between participants with conflicting support needs. For example, while the use of an on-screen interpreter and visual aids may improve accessibility for some participants, the addition of too many elements may become confusing or overwhelming for others.

We also had to ensure that the duration and content of the workshops were appropriate for disabled participants. Many of these considerations might be unfamiliar to deliberative researchers accustomed to planning events in which disabled participants often make up only a small percentage of the attendees.

## Accessibility measures

Some of the measures to ensure our deliberative workshops were as accessible as possible were:

- splitting each workshop into morning and afternoon sessions over a weekend
- including longer breaks and reducing the overall duration of the deliberation
- hiring BSL interpreters and commissioning a BSL video of our briefing materials
- translating all briefing materials into Easy Read (Welsh and English) and making all slides Easy Read
- ensuring breakout activities involved both verbal and chat components, and reiterating that participants could take breaks as needed

Each adjustment required careful planning and clear communication in drafting our discussion guide and briefing facilitators.

## Reflections for future research

Deliberating with disabled participants, or people with different impairments, challenges various assumptions underpinning deliberative research, which often involves demanding and detailed conversations. It also challenges traditional deliberative schedules and budgets. To fully align with the SMD, commissioners and research suppliers need to revisit traditional ways of working by being collaborative, flexible and realistic about what can be provided in project budgets. Our planning was guided by the Welsh Government and project steering group. The group provided invaluable advice often rooted in their own lived experiences. Having such a group to advise on research design is essential when undertaking research of this scale. A solid knowledge of the landscape of service providers (such as BSL interpreters and Easy Read translators) and ability to adapt based on participant needs are also essential.

As NatCen continues to conduct innovative research with disabled participants, we are working to embed lessons from this project into our practices, ensuring that participants in all our work – no matter the topic or focus – can fully participate and feel empowered to share their views.

# Systemic change through co-designed EDI interventions in research

**By Dr Stefanie Schneider, Dr Chiara Cocco, Dr Dong Lin, Dr Siddartha Saxena and Dr Jos Collins, postdoctoral research fellows with the EDI Caucus**

Effective equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives drive cultural change by removing systemic barriers – a complex task, yet one that is essential for the UK to thrive by leveraging the talents and contributions of all members of society. The EDI Caucus (EDICa) is a three-year multidisciplinary initiative led by Heriot-Watt University that aims to support the development of effective EDI policies across the research and innovation sector. EDICa builds evidence bases and co-designs workplace interventions with a range of stakeholders to ensure research findings are robust, inclusive and relevant to end users. This article provides examples of co-design methods under each of the three workstreams.

## The career lifecycle

EDICa explores the interaction between life events and career progression, aiming to make research careers equitable and inclusive across the life span. Using menstrual health as the core focus, our research has fostered more open conversations about health and wellbeing at work, and rethinking inclusion and accessibility. EDICa has partnered with universities, learned societies, research councils and several organisations from industry to co-design menstrual health interventions, involving staff with different roles, levels of responsibility and lived experiences. This co-design approach, through surveys, workshops, interactive boards and ethnographic visits, has led to workplace interventions which benefit not only those with menstrual health conditions, but the whole workforce. These include:

- developing comprehensive flexible-working policies
- adding dedicated quiet rooms
- facilitating (menstrual) health-related conversations destigmatising health and wellbeing at work, especially with relation to gendered conditions
- creating a platform for managers and staff to reflect on their workload and organisational work culture, problematising unattainable standards

## The research process

How can the funding application process become accessible to all? We invited video diary entries, held focus groups and conducted interviews with administrators, reviewers, panellists and applicants participating in funder-hosted and internal selection processes to build evidence bases for the impact of biases and effective interventions to curb this. We found that biases towards the prestige of a discipline, an institution or professional network are often tied to assessment criteria and can, therefore, be particularly difficult to recognise and challenge. EDICa implemented these learnings in the assessment process for each workstream's flexible fund: by strengthening EDI assessment criteria like early career researchers and innovators in project leadership roles, a diverse pool of applicants received funding.

EDICa further set up the Equity Champions (EC) Network, which is a cohort of 40 researchers and innovators from various disciplines, institutions and career stages. They picked topics for eight EDI training sessions, and reflected on the content and format of each seminar in video diary entries. Training participation is meant to inform ECs' advocacy at their own institutions, but active ECs are also invited to co-design a good practice report on effective EDI training methods in higher education institutions.

## Enabling workspaces

Work in research can be organised across diverse settings such as laboratories, offices, fieldwork, hybrid and remote environments to create enabling workspaces that support all researchers.

Findings from focus groups, observational work and co-design sessions highlight how inflexible working patterns, inaccessible physical spaces and poorly designed digital tools create barriers to participation, particularly for disabled and neurodivergent individuals. In response, we are co-designing strategies that leverage virtual reality (VR) to address these challenges, drawing on evidence of its potential to simulate flexible-working environments. VR is being used to simulate and co-design inclusive work environments by enabling participants to explore and assess sensory-friendly layouts, and improve digital accessibility testing features such as lighting, acoustics and spatial flow through immersive, interactive experiences.

## Conclusion

Rather than making reactive adjustments, EDICa promotes anticipatory inclusion, embedding access, flexibility and wellbeing into how work is organised, extending benefit beyond marginalised groups and demonstrating that equality, diversity and inclusion are systemic priorities that affect everyone. Inspired by the disability movement ethos of 'nothing about us without us', our co-design approach includes and celebrates the voices of those most affected, making EDI research more inclusive and impactful.

You can find out more on the EDICa website.

# Can better storytelling tackle 'consultation fatigue'?

**By Richard Freeman CEO, always possible**

## Why people stop engaging

Many people are tired of being asked what they think. Not because they don't care, but because they're used to nothing happening after they contribute. Many consultations happen because they are supposed to, and not because they are valued. It is common, in our information age, to ask people for data on their still-emerging, sometimes vulnerable, opinions – and for them to never hear of it again.

With my company, 'always possible', we've spent the last ten years looking for antidotes in new formats rather than just different types of forms. In particular, we've been experimenting with storytelling as a research tool – not just as a way to report findings, but as a method to surface them in the first place.

## Listening infrastructure, rather than listening events

Over the past few years, we've produced a series of podcast-led research projects that aim to help places hear themselves. 'The Brighton Paradox' used longform storytelling to explore why one of the UK's most creative cities feels both inspiring and exhausting. We heard from artists, business owners, politicians, students and activists – all trying to square the idea of Brighton as a 'maverick' city with its affordability crisis, political churn and creative burnout.

Rather than anonymous data points, these became rich-layered human stories that built upon one another; carefully edited but not sanitised. Listeners told us they 'heard themselves' in the episodes. Local organisations started citing the podcast in strategy meetings. Teacher trainers used it as a prompt to explore local identity. Even several of a new intake of city councillors were inspired to run for local office because of what they heard in the podcast.

We've started to think of this work as building 'listening infrastructure': public storytelling as a foundational tool for place-making and civic planning, rather than a communications afterthought.

## Building co-conspirators

In Hastings, we designed the Big Conversation to be explicitly story-led. We began, not by asking people what's wrong – but by celebrating what's worked. Over 45 community projects were nominated as 'bright spots' in pre-workshop surveys, giving us rich narrative data to feed into a co-design session of over 60 local leaders. We printed anonymised quotes and built workshop activities around them. The result was a shared set of community engagement principles that people could recognise – because they helped create them.

In Crawley, the challenge was different. We were part of a consultation exploring the potential for a new cultural quarter – a place that doesn't yet exist. Asking people to imagine the intangible required a different kind of dialogue. Many participants described Crawley's culture as 'hidden' or 'under-celebrated' and struggled to picture what a cultural hub might look like. People didn't just want to be asked about what they wanted; they wanted help imagining what it could feel like to be part of it. Community engagement should start with a question, not a statement – asking 'what if?' before 'why not?'

## What we've learned

When research is framed around narrative, people who wouldn't normally participate are more likely to show up – and speak up. Podcasts and story-based workshops resonate with teachers, planners, volunteers and councillors alike. And stories allow people to share uncertainty, ambivalence or conflicting views without pressure to resolve them.

However, too much polish can make participants feel like their words are being appropriated, not amplified. Deep storytelling can uncover trauma. So, any listening infrastructure must include support structures for aftercare. When consulting on something that doesn't exist, asking 'what does it feel like?' often works better than 'what should it be called?'

Storytelling isn't the answer to everything. But it can help reframe the question. If you're designing a consultation or evaluation process, consider:

- starting with what's gone well, not just what needs fixing
- creating opportunities for people to tell the story of a place, not just rate its services
- using audio or visual formats that feel more human than an online form

And above all, don't just collect the stories, play them back. Share them publicly. Let people hear themselves. Because when people feel listened to, and not just surveyed, they are more likely to engage again.

# System and community benefits of a research-led approach

**By Ang Broadbridge, head of implementation, Ways to Wellness**

Ways to Wellness is a northeast England-based charity providing a trusted test bed for health innovations across the UK. We have adopted Learning Communities, an approach in which peers come together to reflect and share experiences with a view to growing through learning. This provides a mechanism for reflexivity, enhanced knowledge and skill-sharing in a test and learn environment which has grown the team's capability. In their patient-facing roles, staff have a direct impact on outcomes as active change agents, while also contributing to vibrant, vital and socially significant research.

Ways to Wellness delivers service prototypes. These are collaborative, iterative real-world projects in which delivery teams test and learn about (if and how) a new service works with a view to scale and spread of successful innovations. Our portfolio of prototype projects includes:

- social prescribing for those with persistent physical symptoms, who receive holistic, personalised support to manage varied, often complex conditions, helping them eat well, move more, get involved in activities and build positive relationships; this assists people to make more productive use of health services, which evidence suggests they then access less often
- PROSPeR – part of NHS Waiting Well in northeast England and north Cumbria – this supports those on surgical waiting lists prepare so they recover better post-operatively, with less likelihood of hospital re-admission; this has seen significant results in opioid de-prescribing
- SPACE pilot – a partnership with Great North Children's Hospital and Newcastle University that supports children with chronic, complex conditions using a whole-family approach
- maternal mental health for young mums – a discrete National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)-funded partnership with the University of York and other partners, focused on evaluation and the dissemination of learning

## Curiouser and curiouser

Based on the premise that everyone can cultivate natural curiosity and research skills, Ways to Wellness sees value in building research capacity in its teams and communities. A research skillset is teachable, tangible and measurable, and the organisation's approach results in a depth of data, and an unparalleled understanding of real-world patient-level need, outcomes and the impacts of health inequalities.

Specialist link workers with research skills at Ways to Wellness use Triangle's Wellbeing Star™ (see Outcomes Star) and other validated assessment tools to measure quantitative outcomes building a rich qualitative picture of patients' lives. Significant training of link workers has covered motivational interviewing skills and working with a range of patient outcome measures, both of which have research application. This is an approach rooted in curiosity to explore systemic barriers, skilfully assess need in support plan development, and triangulate findings through Learning Communities.

Specialist link workers offer far more than supportive signposting for patients, with deep connections made with researchers, community groups and statutory services, and a relational approach that enables them to more clearly see gaps and systemic barriers, and to forge new pathways.

While it can be difficult for anyone to critically assess their own practice, Ways to Wellness has seen a research-led perspective in which we get curious, and look through a different lens, result in interesting shifts. Moving towards a 'safe to fail' culture sees the link work team openly share challenges and honest reflections on missteps as valuable sources of learning and growth.

## Explicit about evaluation

Briefing notes are produced following each Learning Community event, which individual event attendees use to spark 'mini experiments' within prototypes by taking forward key messages to facilitate discussion and learning across the wider health and care system. The resulting connections have seen team members involved in NIHR-funded research, either on steering groups or as co-applicants, increasing community voice in regional and national initiatives.

Having encountered a perception that research conducted in the voluntary and community sector is not as rigorous as traditional academic research, Ways to Wellness developed its own ethical research guidelines and uses resources pragmatically, drawing on external expertise to build evaluation into prototypes from the outset.

The approach to system change has matured and deepened as interest has grown in this evolving area, recognising this is key to exploring the systems in which we live and work, as is accepting, with honesty, that we may be part of the problem when unpicking barriers and blockages.

Increased involvement with research has strengthened the quality of how data are captured on health inequalities, leading to greater knowledge transfer in local and regional health systems.

Delve deeper into any of the ideas presented by contacting Ways to Wellness.

# Career journeys: from academia to agency social research

**Eileen Irvin from the Research Matters editorial team interviews James Thom, senior director, Verian, about his experience as a social researcher and the move from academia to agency social research.**

## Q. Can you tell us a bit about what you do: what sort of research do you now do?

**A.** I work at a research agency, Verian, in the methods team. Our role is to help out with some of the more technical aspects of social research projects, and my bit of that is focused on anything you might call an experiment. That covers a lot: from short online experiments looking at changes to the choice architecture of an application form to longer-term field trials testing interventions aiming to, say, reduce homelessness or improve educational outcomes in schools.

## Q. Where did you start your career?

**A.** I'm not sure *when* it started! As an undergrad, I studied natural sciences and thought I would become a geneticist. At some point, I started drifting further away from the 'hard' sciences and more towards an interest in understanding behaviour, which led to me completing a PhD and post-doc looking at self-control.

## Q. Why did you decide to make the move from academia to agency social research?

**A.** My post-doc had a fixed end point, which forced the decision. Really though, I had been thinking of leaving academia for some time. I loved research but I had missed working as a part of a team on a day-to-day basis.

I started naively searching online for 'research jobs', with very little idea of what the opportunities actually were. That I ended up in a social research agency was a matter of luck. Someone I knew pointed me toward a job advert for a role in Ipsos' big survey team, which had a heavy emphasis on working with data in SPSS syntax. I knew very little about surveys but had done quite a lot of data work, and fortunately, that was enough for me to get the job.

From then to now my career path has been fairly haphazard. Upon arriving at Ipsos, I figured I had better learn all about survey methods, and spent some of my lunchbreaks and commutes reading Kalton's 'Introduction to Survey Sampling' – an excellent recommendation from my then line manager. (At the time I thought everyone else must do this sort of thing – quite wrongly, I soon learned!) That sparked an interest in survey methods, and eventually, the opportunity arose to get my hands dirty with some sampling and weighting. A few years later, one of my old bosses from academia told me that she had accepted a job in the behavioural practice team at Verian (then Kantar Public) and that they were recruiting – more luck – leading to my current role.

## Q. What have been some of the benefits?

**A.** Working in a team really helped to build my confidence and gave me the chance to learn from some fantastic colleagues.

Then there's the feeling that your work matters – informing government policy or generating archived data for future researchers. But it can also be varied and hugely fun! My first job at Verian was a study of hand hygiene for which we rented out a commercial kitchen and gave professional food workers a burger preparation task while we filmed the sinks.

## Q. What have been some of the challenges?

**A.** In academia, you own everything you are doing and have full control. In an agency, you have a client who sets the agenda and a team you need to work with. You have to deliver what they need in the timescale they need it, which might not be what you would do if designing the study in a vacuum. Ultimately, I prefer this way of working, but the transition can be tough.

## Q. What practical advice would you give to someone who is looking to make a similar move?

**A.** Most academics are naturally curious – try to hold on to that and apply it to whatever else you end up doing. If there is something you don't understand, ask. Social researchers are a generous bunch, and I have repeatedly benefited from colleagues sparing the time to talk to me. I wouldn't have ended up where I am now without that.

Lastly, read books. If you want nearly any senior role in a research agency, you will need to write, and if you don't read, you will write badly. It (almost) doesn't matter what you read, just read.

# Perspectives on Scotland's third sector impact

By Jane Cullingworth, Research fellow, University of Glasgow

## The impact event

Over 70 people from diverse backgrounds came together in June to discuss third sector impact. The day was organised by the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN), Scotland's Third Sector Research Forum (TSRF), Youth Link Scotland, Volunteer Scotland, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and the University of Glasgow. The event attracted people from the third sector and academia to explore the:

- impact of volunteering and the third sector
- role and impact of researchers doing work in the sector

## Measuring the impact of volunteering and the third sector

The morning sessions set the stage. Bethany Sikes (Volunteer Scotland) presented its recent report, The Social Value of Volunteering in Scotland. This measures the social value of weekly formal volunteering, estimated to be worth £530 million annually across Scotland, and a whopping £2.3 billion when combined with economic value. Gary Walsh (Evaluation Support Scotland) shared five key principles to help organisations demonstrate impact, and Alasdair Rutherford (University of Stirling) presented the challenges of measuring third sector impact, describing it as the 'holy grail' of quantification!

People discussed both the benefits and challenges of measuring impact in small groups. The observation that, 'Not everything that counts is counted, and not everything that is counted counts' perfectly captured a perennial challenge of trying to measure impact. Suggestions for good practice included embedded, bottom-up and co-produced approaches.

Adam Lang (Carnegie UK) gave the keynote address about the role of civil society in helping to address shared challenges across the UK. Identifying civil society organisations as 'trusted intermediaries between citizens and the state', he encouraged and challenged us to BE BRAVE in our work with communities. Adam shared this cartoon that beautifully reflects the complexity in which we work (reproduced with permission).

Complexity outside linear cube


Small group discussion about third sector impact

## Meet the sector, meet the researcher

The interactive afternoon began with the opportunity to meet researchers from a range of backgrounds. Using the carousel method, people moved between eight stations that included topics such as working with youth peer researchers, collaborations between universities and the third sector, relational ethics and researching communities, and research with LGBTQ+ young people.


One of the 'meet the sector, meet the researcher' stations

## Research with small community and place-based organisations

Our final session was facilitated by Lewis Hou (Science Ceilidh) with short lightning talks. To help us reflect on our role as researchers, the place of communities and the politics of evidence, speakers set us provocations:

- Why should communities carry out their own research? (Andrew Paterson, Scottish Community Development Centre)
- What needs to change to ensure co-creative research methods are valued ways of generating knowledge and evidence? (Emma Davidson, University of Edinburgh)
- Does research distract us from action? (Sarah Ward, University of Edinburgh)
- How can communities set the terms around ethics better? (Lewis)

## Key takeaways

The day was engaging, exhilarating and exhausting. Judging by how many people were still in the room at the end of day, we had impact! Throughout the day, the third sector shone – a sector alive, powerful and influential.

## What we learned

- Individual relationships are fundamental to our work and to systems change. Partnerships are also essential – between academia and third sector researchers, as well as between third sector organisations and communities.
- Impact can be demonstrated in many ways, including creative approaches. Sometimes a personal story is more powerful than statistics. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words.
- Measuring impact is notoriously difficult and numbers can be contentious. Learning from what works is essential as is learning from what doesn't work – and we must track our learnings.
- Finally, as researchers, regardless of where we are based, we must be reflective in our work and always attuned to issues of power.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at the University of Glasgow and VSSN for funding the event.

Discussing the speaker provocations

# Ethical evidence and policymaking: interdisciplinary and international research


**Ron Iphofen and Dónal O'Mathúna (Eds)**

POLICY PRESS, 2022

Reviewed by Mariel McKone Leonard, researcher, German Institute for Economic Research (DIW-Berlin)

This book brings together diverse views – some practical, some polemical – on non-medical research and policy ethics. Centred around the PRO-RES series of workshops, the chapters aim to support the application of ethics within social policy as an open-access publication that can be easily accessed by all stakeholders, particularly policymakers, ethics reviewers and researchers (p. 1).

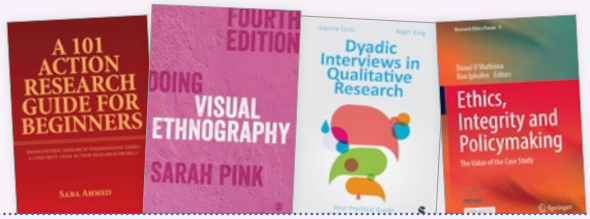
Presented from multiple organisational, disciplinary and individual perspectives, the central message of the book is that the current institutional construction of ethics within the social sciences has failed. One of the book's recurring arguments for this failure is that 'social sciences' are simply too broad an endeavour, with too many stakeholders, practitioners and approaches to be neatly systematised and standardised into a single framework. The effort to do so, has devolved the implementation of ethics into a checklist to be completed, rather than a process to be negotiated (see particularly chapters 5 and 11).

In my experience practising and teaching mixed methods research, I have found the latter assertion to be true. However, I remain unconvinced by the first, having seen it too often grounded in cynicism or moral relativism elsewhere. Here, the effect is more one of subconscious positivistic resignation to the messy difficulty.

While some argue that public exposure to the sausage-making of science and policy will result in 'uncertainty and confusion' and undermine public trust (p. 225), I instead concur that 'accountability and transparency contribute to… trust in science, in researchers and in research results' (p. 110). We cannot return to the previous era of unconsidered faith in science and scientists, and so we must find a way to guide researchers and policymakers forward. Optimistically, I read this book ultimately as a discussion of the sausage-making, rather than a collective abdication of producing more consolidated guidance for research stakeholders and prospective readers. This book does not conclude the process but it does advance it.

REVIEWS

# Titles for review




**We are always looking for reviewers (SRA members only) to write a short review for us. 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. Please note that publications are available as eBooks only. Book reviews need to be submitted within 10 weeks of you receiving the book. Here are the titles on offer:**

### A 101 action research guide for beginners: demystifying research terminology using a concrete STEM action research project

**Saba Ahmed**

Peter Lang, 2024

### Doing visual ethnography – fourth edition

**Sarah Pink**

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2021

### Dyadic interviews in qualitative research: your practical guide

**Joanna Szulc and Nigel King**

SAGE Publications Ltd, January 2025

### Ethics, integrity, and policymaking: the value of the case study Research Ethics Forum Series: volume 9

**Dónal O'Mathúna and Ron Iphofen (Eds)**

Springer, 2022

# SRA training

Unless otherwise stated, all courses are run online using Zoom. In-person courses are held in London or Edinburgh. Online courses run over one day or two half days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

New dates and courses are being added all the time (and only courses with space are shown below), so for latest info please visit www.the-sra.org.uk/training or contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Costs: **online**: SRA members: half day: £90; one day or two part-days: £180; two days or three part-days: £360. Non-members: half day: £117.50; one day or two part-days: £235; two days or three part-days: £470; **in-person**: SRA members: £220; non-members: £290.

If you have any queries, please contact Patricia: training@the-sra.org.uk

Full details of all courses are at www.the-sra.org.uk/training

## Evaluation

15 October: Research & evaluation project management, with Sally Cupitt

3 December: Foundations of evaluation, with Sally Cupitt

## Qualitative

**30 September:** Introduction to focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**1 October:** Introduction to participatory action research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**3 October:** Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**7 October:** Conducting online focus groups, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**8 October:** Digital qualitative interviews, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**9 & 10 October (2 afternoons):** Creative data analysis, with Dr Nicole Brown

**15 October (in-person, in London):** Interviewing (qualitative data collection), with Professor Karen O'Reilly

**16 October (in-person, in London):** Qualitative data analysis, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

**17 October (in-person, in London):** Interpreting and writing your qualitative findings, with Professor Karen O'Reilly

**4 November:** Depth interviewing skills, with Dr Sarah Jasim

**4 November:** Foundations of qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**5 November:** Introduction to qualitative interviewing, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**11 November:** Narratives and storytelling in qualitative research, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**13 & 14 November:** Focus group design and moderation, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**18 November:** Writing up qualitative data, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**19 & 20 November:** Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research, with Dr Nicole Brown

**26 November:** Narrative analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**2 December:** Qualitative data analysis, with Dr Karen Lumsden

**9 December:** Introduction to qualitative research, with NatCen trainers

## Quantitative

16 & 17 September (2 afternoons): Questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

19 September: Introduction to sampling for social surveys, with Alexandru Cernat

26 September: Data management and visualisation with R, with Alexandru Cernat

8 October: Cognitive interviewing, with NatCen trainers

14-16 October (3 afternoons): Advanced questionnaire design, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

4 & 5 November (2 afternoons): The 3 stages of weighting probability samples, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

18 November: Introduction to quantitative research and analysis, with NatCen trainers

21 November: Introduction to R for social researchers, with Alexandru Cernat

2-4 December (3 afternoons): Correlation, linear and logistic regression with R, with Dr Pamela Campanelli

## Other research skills

22 & 23 September (2 mornings): How to design trauma-informed and inclusive research, with Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis

23 September & 7 October (2 mornings): Designing a communication plan for disseminating research findings, with Mihaela Gruia

2 & 3 October (2 mornings): Research with children and young people, with Berni Graham

10 October: Introduction to mixed methods research, with Dr Sarah Jasim and Dr Ruth Plackett

10 & 11 December (2 mornings): How to design trauma-informed and inclusive research, with Dr Holly Taylor-Dunn and Skye Curtis

# Spotlight on SRA activity

## Training
www.the-sra.org.uk/training

Many qual, quant and evaluation courses are online.

## Events
www.the-sra.org.uk/events

## Blog
www.the-sra.org.uk/blog

Topical posts on researching.

## 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 and more.

## Ethics
www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics

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

## Member resources
Log in, go to 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.

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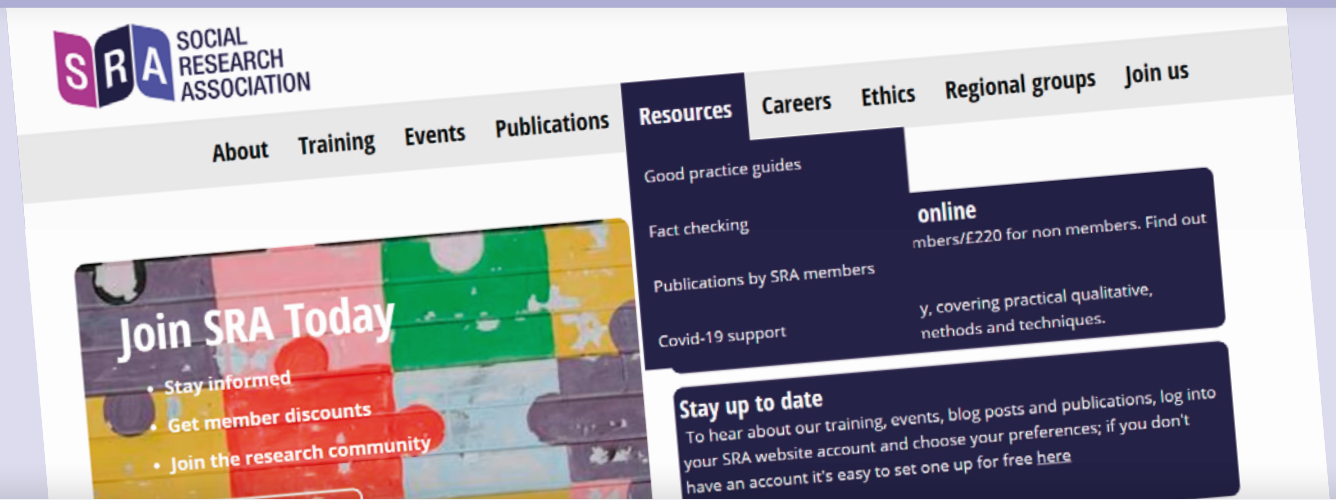


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