

research matters



Involving ‘experts by experience’ during the pandemic

By Stan Burrige, director, Expert Focus

My research specialism is involving [experts by experience](#) from disadvantaged groups in research, sometimes referred to as service-user involvement. For more than two decades, I have worked on capturing the voices of ‘lived experience’ and trying to ensure that these voices help improve provision for disadvantaged groups. Involvement in this field began with my own disadvantage: spending a considerable amount of time in the care system and experiencing homelessness.



Covid-19 brought a focus on those who are on the margins: homeless and dispossessed. Capturing qualitative data from this cohort has had to shift to more remote harvesting. Before the pandemic, I regularly met individuals face-to-face or brought people together to form small groups, hopefully teams. Working alongside university researchers, we would often meet outside coffee shops (regardless of the weather) and talk about the focus of the study.

The group would not only relate their own experiences but also would often consider the impact or outcomes for their peers.

Sitting in the street works well: many people have historic (and sometimes current) addiction issues, and something as simple as being able to smoke a cigarette while chatting means they are not in a hurry to leave a meeting room. Offering tea and cake makes the experience relaxing, and underscores the value placed on them and their time, which is also paid for in vouchers (which don't affect welfare benefit claims). There is always a lot of joking and catching up on life before we get down to reviewing the research questions or whatever the task in hand. It has always been about making slight changes to how research is done, which has made it so successful, and that includes anticipating all these elements when drafting research budgets.

When Covid-19 exploded it really set some challenges. Health conditions are often multiple and serious amongst disadvantaged groups. Coffee shops and face-to-face meetings were less easy or were banned. If it hadn't been

that I provide (informal) emotional support as part of the process – as well as support with technology so people can stay involved in the research process virtually – I wouldn't have been able to see any of the current team face-to-face.

With the closing of day centres and other homelessness hangouts, meeting new people has been almost impossible

There have been some hurdles. With the closing of day centres and other homelessness hangouts, meeting new people has been almost impossible. I have managed to get some new people talking over the phone but, compared to face-to-face, it can seem almost cold. This kind of engagement in research is dependent on relationships and building trust.

Doing everything online has magnified some of the other issues, for example

literacy levels can often be low in disadvantaged groups. Masking those in face-to-face discussions or wider meetings is easier but overcoming this online has meant us spending more time reading through documents (often line by line) and being careful not to embarrass anyone. It would also be fair to say that, in the safety of their own room, there may be someone rolling a joint or smoking something stronger, forgetting that the rest of the group can see what they're doing. But that's the nature of the work.

I know that there are some who have adapted well to using digital technology: it saves a lot of professionals' time and travel costs. But it's hard to capture the essence of people's lived experience over the phone or Zoom, and I am hoping that things can return to how they were. I think my research and involvement work will suffer from these limitations in the long-term. Sometimes we just need that coffee and a smoke in the street.

CALL FOR WORKSHOP PRESENTATIONS

SRA conference 2021

A virtual event in the week of 22 November

Would you like to offer a short presentation at our annual conference?

Having missed the conference in 2020, we look forward to welcoming attendees from far and wide: national and local government, other public bodies, research agencies and institutes, academia, the voluntary and independent sectors, and more.

Share your experiences, insights and learning with an audience of practitioners – the research problems you've faced, what worked and what didn't, and why. Some suggestions for themes to get you started:

- ▶ Research in the pandemic and what comes next
- ▶ Making research more inclusive
- ▶ Qualitative innovation
- ▶ Survey developments
- ▶ Evaluative methods
- ▶ The use (and abuse) of research findings
- ▶ New directions with data
- ▶ 'Wild card': something different!

The deadline for submissions is Monday 5 July. The SRA events group will review entries and aim to let you know the outcome in August.

We expect most of the 20-minute workshop presentations will be pre-recorded, with presenters attending the live session to take part in the Q&A. Presenters will pay a reduced delegate fee. [Submit your abstract.](#)

Meet the SRA co-chairs

Chair, David Johnson, retired from the SRA board of trustees, after six years of sterling service, the last three as chair of the board. Two trustees stepped up to take over from David, becoming co-chairs:

Ailbhe McNabola, director of policy at Power to Change

We asked Ailbhe:

What do you hope the SRA can achieve in the next three to five years?

My hopes range from the practical to the ambitious.

First, I would like to see us continue to grow the SRA membership and the training offer. We've had a really successful switch to online training. Now we need to navigate the return to face-to-face, or more likely, a

combination, in a new training offer that can reach more people.

Second, I'd like us to build on our first piece of work on diversity in our social research roles and workplaces. We will be publishing a report this summer that is a first look at the composition of the profession, the barriers to entry and the issues that persist, as well as looking at what social research employers have been doing to improve sector diversity. Along with other players in the social research space, we need to do more to boost equality, diversity and inclusion.

And finally, I can't wait for us to get back to running some of the live events

which were how I was first introduced to the organisation. I really hope there'll be a renewed appetite for events and networking once these are safe.

For social researchers, especially those working in organisations where they might be the only researcher on the staff team, networking and events are a really important way to stay in touch with the profession, to find those development opportunities, and to make lasting friendships, as I have done!



Diarmid Campbell-Jack, associate director at Ecorys

We asked Diarmid:

What made you apply to be a trustee?

I applied to be a trustee because I have always valued the work of the SRA – the support it provides to members, the quality of publications and training, and the willingness to provide a solid voice for the industry. For a small organisation, the SRA has consistently punched well above its weight thanks to the efforts of staff and volunteers. The SRA staff have worked incredibly hard over the last year, meaning we have not just survived the pandemic but are emerging in a stronger position than ever. I also applied to be a trustee as

our current work is important. We are working hard on diversity and inclusion, looking into our training, and building upon our excellent social research ethics guidance. The SRA has always focused on our members, but we can't afford to take anything for granted. That's what makes being a trustee such an exciting role.

Who is your research hero/heroine and why?

Due to his expertise and ability to communicate to the public I'm tempted to say Sir John Curtice. That's almost true. But my research hero isn't a social researcher at all. Bill James overturned decades of conventional thinking about baseball and revolutionised sport statistics in the process. While working in a Kansas pork and beans canning

factory, he began asking the questions about baseball that no one had asked before. Is there a better way of predicting how well a team has performed than just wins and losses? Are the number of mistakes someone makes the best way to tell if they are a good fielder? Every major sports team in the US, and many around the world, now employ Ivy League-educated stats crunchers to make major decisions. Sure, you can throw in a counterfactual and say much of this might have happened without Bill James. Just occasionally though, there's a heretical case for ignoring counterfactuals and sticking with a more romantic narrative...



Find out more about the board of trustees

Project launch: diversity in the social research profession

Isabella Pereira, SRA trustee and Ipsos MORI

Since 2018 the SRA board has been actively considering plans to understand issues of disadvantage in our sector, and what can be done. In 2019 we started to plan a major piece of research to uncover the experiences and views of individuals working across the profession, and we awarded the contract in early 2020 to the Young Foundation. Unfortunately, the pandemic then put the project on hold, for financial reasons.



2020 over 900 UK researchers from within government, academia, charities, research institutes and the private sector took part in an extensive survey on diversity and inclusion at work, the first research of its kind to engage the whole spectrum of the profession. Follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain a greater understanding of more complex and nuanced issues arising from the survey research.

As I write, the report is being drafted and redrafted by the Young Foundation with help from a sub-group of SRA trustees. It tells a powerful story of the challenges faced by those from minority groups working in social research and the concerns about the lack of diversity

and inclusive research practice in the profession. It also presents evidence on more successful areas and the powerful appetite for change that exists.

There will be a launch event for the report to highlight and discuss key findings from the research including:

- ▶ Perceptions of workplace culture and inclusion
- ▶ Experiences of entry to the profession and progression within it
- ▶ The need for inclusive research and procurement practice
- ▶ What organisations are doing about diversity and inclusion, and what is making a difference

Please join us for this free webinar.

How diverse is the social research profession?

THURSDAY 1 JULY, 12.30PM TO 1.45PM

Presentation followed by panel discussion and audience Q&A.

CHAIR: Isabella Pereira (head of qualitative methodology, Ipsos MORI and SRA trustee)

PRESENTER: Victoria Boelman (director of research, Young Foundation)

PANEL: Craig Watkins (CEO, Kantar Public UK), Elizabeth Bewley (head of strategy, talent and engagement at Government Social Research), Edward Walden (diversity, equity and inclusion manager at Power to Change), Babita Earle (chair of the MRS diversity, inclusion and equality council)

[Register for this event.](#)

On doing social research

By Patten Smith, director of research methods, Ipsos MORI

In early July I'll be 66, and will retire from my role as head of the Research Methods Centre in Ipsos MORI. Inevitably, at such a moment, a person wonders why they have spent the past 40+ years doing the job they have done – social research in my case.



Was it for the money? Yes, the work provided a reasonable income which has paid for housing, books, culture and beer. But other occupations would have paid me a lot more – working for a bank or a law firm for example.

Was it because the topics I investigated were so fascinating? Some were certainly interesting: people's attitudes to different forms of homicide, the lives of Black and Asian people in the 1990s, for example. But what about asking elderly people to weigh everything they ate for a four-day food diary, or collecting detailed data on the net costs of running government youth training schemes? A researcher in an agency has little choice over research topic. This was why I became a survey methodologist: every survey presents methodological challenges.

Perhaps methodology provides the key? Is it the pleasure of solving methodological problems that has motivated me for so long? I certainly have had some gratifying moments: for example (with others), developing new approaches to sampling BAME groups in the 1980s and seeing these becoming widely adopted. But the excitements of designing yet another sample, developing yet another weighting scheme, or finding

yet another way of nudging response rates up by three percentage points has not really been enough to fulfil me completely over 40+ years. Give me a choice between (for example!) studying (a) Zeno vs. Epicurus or (b) bias vs. variance, I'd take (a) any time!

But perhaps this mention of two leading Hellenistic philosophers provides the clue. For them, philosophy was about more than solving difficult conceptual problems: it was also about how best to live one's life. And for me, living my work-life well has meant making a background ethical commitment, and it is this that has kept me going. As a naïve and idealistic young man, I wanted to earn my living doing something that was socially beneficial, tolerably interesting and an appropriate fit for my talents: social research met these requirements. As a naïve and idealistic near-retiree, I want to earn my living doing something that is socially beneficial, tolerably interesting and an appropriate fit for my talents, and social research still fits. Nothing changed between then and now, and this is what has kept me motivated.

But, what kind of social researcher *could* happily engage in work that is not socially beneficial? Unfortunately, it looks like quite a few. Let's rehearse the logic.

1. Social research is socially beneficial because it improves our knowledge of the social world.
2. In order to achieve this, the information it provides must be reasonably accurate; this leads to two requirements:
 - a. social research must use data-collection methods that follow canons of good practice defined

by recognised methods experts; methods that are demonstrably reliable and for which error rates are shown to be low

- b. if we are to be confident that this requirement has been fulfilled, data-collection methods must be transparent, and be seen to follow good practice guidelines.

In summary, if social research is to be socially beneficial, the use of visible high-quality methods is a *sine qua non*.

But in practice, a lot of social research, some of it receiving considerable publicity, fails abysmally to fulfil requirements 2a and 2b. For example, no research using non-random online panel data will pass the test.¹

So, why do some social researchers make unjustifiable claims for the accuracy of poor-quality social research thereby undermining its ability to be of social benefit?² For some, it's basic ignorance of good methodological practice: they are clearly in the wrong job! For others, it's a cynical pursuit of applause from self-proclaimed thought leaders and the commentariat.³ And for yet others, it's prioritising making, or saving, money over providing social value. Again, wrong job: better to move into banking. None share with me a seriously thought-through ethical commitment to carrying out research that is of real social benefit.

Stubbornly, I'm pleased that I remain as naïve and idealistic as I was when I started, and, I am heartened to see, across our profession, many social researchers who seem to be equally naïve and idealistic! My last 40 years don't feel like the bleakly futile waste of time they otherwise might have!

¹ The first conclusion of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) review of online panels is as valid now as when it was written in 2010: 'Researchers should avoid nonprobability online panels when one of the research objectives is to accurately estimate population values. There currently is no generally accepted theoretical basis from which to claim that survey results using samples from nonprobability online panels are projectable to the general population. Thus, claims of "representativeness" should be avoided when using these sample sources.'

² To be clear, I mean researchers who are senior enough to direct the course of the research they do. I do not wish in any way to impugn the integrity of junior researchers who work on projects over which they have no say.

³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Bullshit

Careers in social research

By Georgina Culliford, senior research executive, Qa Research

For aspiring social researchers, those in the early stages of their career, or simply those considering a change in direction, understanding the landscape of social research can be a daunting prospect.



SRA North helped demystify this in May with a webinar, 'Careers in social research'. Three north of England-based speakers shared their career journeys and advice in a presentation/Q&A session: Louise Starks of Starks Consulting; Emma Wincup of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation; and Beverly Bishop of the Department of Health and Social Care.

What followed was a vibrant discussion of the relative merits, skillsets and challenges of the varied career paths available in social research, having relevance way beyond northern England.

Consultancy/agency

A research agency or consultancy is a great option for those who want to work on varied topics in a fast-paced and competitive environment. Alongside the standard methodological skillset, Louise noted that an agency researcher's key role is to give their client more insight into what is already known. That needs creative thinking and strong communication skills.

Freelance

Louise also shared her experiences of starting her own freelance research business. She described it as a new challenge for an experienced researcher, with its key benefits of flexibility and autonomy over work.

To anyone considering a freelance move, Louise said, 'It's making your business plan, deciding how you might want to work, and having the confidence in yourself. You can make it work'.

Academia

Academia is a common entry-route for social researchers, but even within this there are considerations over job types, for example whether you wish to take on a research-only post, or a lectureship which also involves teaching. For Emma, her academic post provided access to large funded projects on prison resettlement and homelessness. Bev also noted that academia involves independent working on highly specialised topics, something aspiring academics should bear in mind.

Charitable sector

A researcher within a charitable organisation is likely to have a varied role, from commissioning external projects as well as conducting fieldwork, sharing research evidence and external advisory work. Research projects in charities must address core aims and answer to trustees. So, Emma recommended getting to know various charities and engaging with their work before choosing an area of interest.

Government research

Research posts in government are another option. These can be accessed via entry-level roles or the Civil Service fast stream. Bev shared her thoughts on the ideal skillset in government research, including teamworking and practical research skills. She also noted that government research focuses more on impact and outcomes than exploration or depth, and works to strict deadlines.

Key lessons

1. Considering a career change into social research, or a sidestep into a different research setting (such as academia to charity)? You will have a whole host of transferable skills that are valuable to a research career or research in a different setting. The trick is to find the confidence to sell these skills and demonstrate how they are suited to the new environment.
2. Starting out and need experience? One opportunity can lead to another, so any experience is useful. If work experience is hard to come by, try on-street or telephone surveying. You will pick up invaluable skills, understanding and opportunities.
3. Unsure about postgraduate study? Many entry-level roles do not require postgraduate study. But a skills-based master's degree is a good way to learn and to practise foundational research methods, and to demonstrate these to future employers.
4. Will a social research career offer stability? It varies, and being aware of the different types of research career can help weigh up the options suited to your personal situation. Short-term academic contracts or freelance work may be more precarious than permanent government, charity or agency roles, but they come with their own rewards.

At SRA North, we hope this is just the start of an ongoing conversation to empower the next generation of aspiring and early-career researchers. [A recording of the webinar](#) is on the SRA website.

One year after the pandemic: findings from Citizens Advice

By Imogen Birch, senior researcher, Citizens Advice

Last October Citizens Advice commissioned four waves of a nationally representative online survey of 6,000 adults to help us understand and monitor the impact of the pandemic on people's lives. We completed wave two of the survey in April, roughly one year after the pandemic began.



We produced a [Life through lockdown report](#) which pulled our data together from across our website and from our network of local Citizens Advice advisers.

We also produce an internal data report on trends emerging in local advice centres. We put a question each month to the network of local Citizens Advice advisers asking about the most striking issue they've noticed (when dealing with clients).

Here are some findings:

Life on Universal Credit (UC) is tough

Households on UC¹ are suffering more than most – financially and health-wise. Since the pandemic began, households receiving UC:

- ▶ Have lost an average of 30% of their household income compared with 13% of the general population
- ▶ Are almost twice as likely as the general public to be in debt (50% compared with 27%)
- ▶ Admit (36%) that they have 'often' struggled to get to sleep as a result of their financial situation (compared with 16% of the population)

As we went into lockdown in March 2020, we saw new claims for UC being

matched by an increase in people looking at our UC online content.

By the summer, both fell to roughly 'normal', pre-lockdown levels, and have remained there since.

Intelligence from our local network showed that, at the beginning of the pandemic, employment issues were the most striking issue; it's now UC.

Growth in insecure work

There has been considerable growth over the last decade in insecure work contracts, such as zero-hour contracts, agency work and so-called gig economy jobs. Coronavirus has compounded this trend with more uncertainty about work. Over a third (35%) of insecure workers top up their income with UC. Our ['On the edge'](#) report shows that while employment in general has fallen during the pandemic, the number of people in insecure work has grown.

Our latest research shows that over half (57%) of key workers are in insecure work. 60% said they were on zero-hour contracts compared with 12% of the working population. Of those on zero-hour contracts:

- ▶ A third have lost personal income
- ▶ Nearly a fifth (17%) have children aged 18 or under in the household
- ▶ Nearly two-fifths (37%) are behind on at least one bill

A growing number of people are in debt

Our report, [Debt at the close of 2020](#), showed that one in seven (14%) people were behind in essential bills including energy, water, mobile phone and broadband bills, council tax, rent or mortgage payments.²

Certain groups in particular are more likely to have fallen behind on essential bills:³

- ▶ 30% of BAME people (more than twice the UK average). This rises to 42% for black people
- ▶ 27% of those with children under 18 in their household
- ▶ 22% of people who are furloughed

At the end of 2020, we were seeing more people coming to us with debt issues and for referrals to food banks and charitable support. Advisers from our local network reported an increase in debt queries, typically covering energy, rent, mortgage and council tax arrears.

The government has provided unprecedented levels of support to people throughout this pandemic, which has helped to mitigate the impact on the millions of people whose lives and livelihoods have been badly affected. However, we know that, for many people, the legacy of the pandemic will continue. We are committed to working with the government to identify problems and to find solutions so that people are able to get back on their feet as quickly as possible.

Our research is helping with the campaign to keep the current £20 a week uplift to UC as a permanent feature after it is due to end in September. In December 2020, frontline staff had helped more than 170,000 people with one-to-one advice on employment issues since the first lockdown. We are calling on the government to fast track its plans for a one-stop enforcement body to help with employment rights. With over seven million people behind on bills at the end of 2020, the government urgently needs to take a coherent approach across departments to helping people deal with their coronavirus debts.

For more information on our data and latest research please follow our website at <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/> or our Twitter account [#Citizensadvice](#).

¹ UC replaces 6 different benefits and you can receive it if you are unemployed or are working.

² Our latest wave two research shows that is still the case.

³ Figures updated in March 2021.

Reducing survey attrition using behavioural science



By Dulcie Wyatt, head of data collection research and behavioural insights ONS; and Alice Hamilton-Webb, senior social researcher, data collection research and behavioural insights ONS

The challenge

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the UK's largest household study, covering around 40,000 responding households each quarter. It is used to calculate the employment rate among other labour market outputs. The LFS takes place over five quarterly waves, and before Covid-19, most households were interviewed face-to-face at wave 1. For subsequent waves, respondents would complete the survey by telephone – having agreed to re-contact. To help address the problem of between-wave attrition, we worked with the [Behavioural Insights Team](#) and came up with an intervention.

Exploring and developing the solution

Although, at wave 1, respondents agreed to take part in subsequent waves, by the time they received the wave 2 call three months later, some had forgotten about the study. Others dismissed our phone call because our number was unfamiliar. So, we trialled some behaviourally informed reminder texts to see whether receiving a text message would reduce attrition.

We trialled two reminder messages with households which were due to complete wave 2, against a control of no text message. We based each message on a different behavioural science principle. Both messages showed the number that respondents would be called from, to help address the issue of respondents declining calls from an unfamiliar number. We randomly assigned cases to a treatment group, and measured the impact of each text message versus no text message, on cooperation, refusal and contact rates.

Results

A 'commitment message' was most successful at nudging respondents to complete future waves.

Analysis¹ showed that households receiving a 'commitment text message' one or two days before we contacted them by telephone were significantly more likely to complete the survey compared to when a household did not receive a text message.² We observed a 2.3% higher cooperation rate in those who received a commitment message compared to those who received no message. Receiving the 'helping text message' did not significantly improve the likelihood of completing the survey.

Refusal to complete the survey was significantly less likely for households which received any text message compared to not receiving any text messages.³ Neither message had a significant effect on the likelihood of contact.

Using behavioural science

We learned that taking a behaviourally informed approach, and doing something as simple as sending a text message, can reduce attrition in our longitudinal studies. As part of the project, we researched what works according to behavioural science. These insights informed our approach, and could have wider application for other longitudinal surveys:

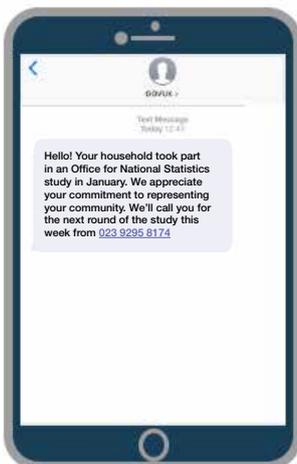
Timely prompts and reminders help!

Refusal to complete the survey was significantly less likely for households which received any text message.



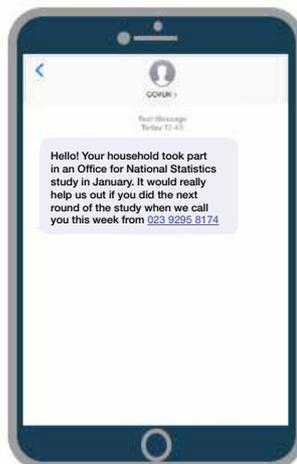
Message 1: The commitment message

'We appreciate your commitment to representing your community'



Message 2: The helping message

'It would really help us out if you did the next round of the study when we call you this week'



¹ Logistic regression was used on cooperation, refusal and contact outcome variables. A total of 17,161 cases were included in the analysis.

² The results showed that sending a commitment message to households just before the start of the data-collection period significantly increased the odds of cooperation by 1.098 (9.8%) compared to the odds of cooperating for the control group households ($p < 0.05$).

³ Results for refusal outcome show that both trial message groups significantly reduced the odds of refusal ($p < 0.05$).

People’s sense of commitment is powerful

Households receiving a ‘commitment’ text message were more likely to go on to complete the survey compared to those who did not receive a text message. However, receiving the ‘helping’ text message did not significantly improve the likelihood of completion.



Highlighting the phone number seems to help provide reassurance of authenticity

Both messages stated the number that respondents would be called from. While we did not determine whether this had a direct effect, feedback from telephone interviewers suggests that they often mention the messages to aid respondents’ memory and to verify the authenticity of the call. This often helps to reassure respondents and to gain their cooperation.



Keep it short

Evidence from the literature suggests that brevity is important to ensure salient information is communicated. We deliberately kept both messages brief, with only essential information included. Adding too many words can confuse people and distract them from the information they need to know.



Personalise where possible

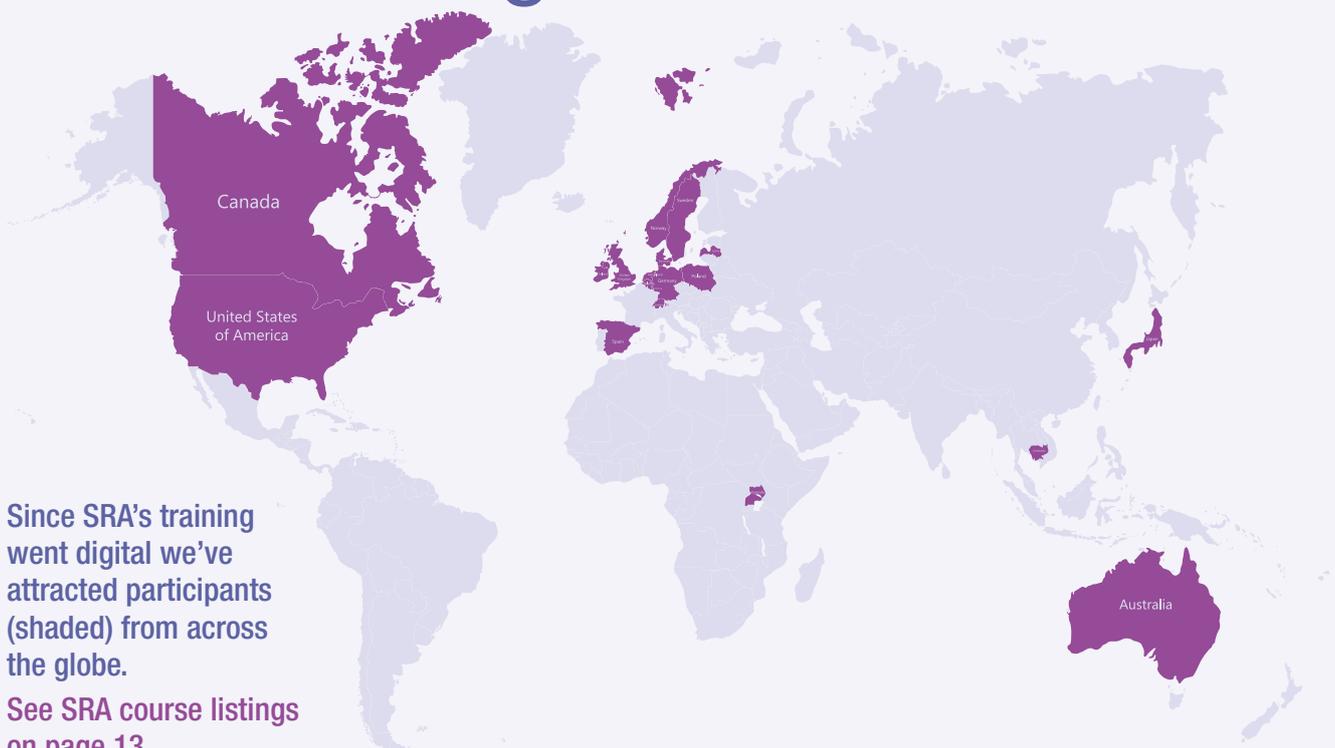
The initial designs for both messages included respondents’ names. However, it was not possible to do this in the trialled intervention due to technical constraints. Evidence from the literature strongly supports using a recipient’s name to make messages more personal, drawing on behavioural theory to make messages more personal. We would like to implement this in the future, if feasible.



We have now implemented the ‘commitment message’ approach on the LFS as standard. We are also considering this on similar studies.

For more information, contact the ONS behavioural insights team at Behavioural_Insights@ons.gov.uk

SRA training worldwide



Since SRA’s training went digital we’ve attracted participants (shaded) from across the globe.

See SRA course listings on page 13.

SRA profile: Gillian Smith

Gillian Smith will be known to many readers as the long-serving editor of SRA's e-newsletter. She started in this volunteer role in 2012, and has continued to produce an unbroken run of newsletters every two weeks (except for Wimbledon fortnight!). Her newsletters, packed with updates, insights, profiles and notifications, bringing together strands of information from many sources, became an important way for many of us to keep up to date with what's happening in the world of social research, as her 1,350+ subscriptions testify.



Very sadly for all her readers, Gillian has decided to hang up her editor's green eyeshade and take a well-deserved rest. The SRA is hugely grateful for her dedication to the role and the skills she brought to it. Her voluntary service to the profession is exemplary.

What made you want to be the SRA newsletter editor?

When I discussed taking over the role in the later part of 2011, the SRA was in a perilous state; the financial situation was dire, membership was falling off a cliff due to the significant cutbacks in research staffing and, if I remember correctly, there was no operational SRA office left. I had taken voluntary early retirement at the end of 2010, and I felt duty bound to help to rebuild the SRA.

What have you got out of being editor?

This has been a very enjoyable experience. I should emphasise that it has been a pleasure to work with the SRA office staff. The newsletter would not be possible without their hard work at all stages of production. Another key positive is being forced outside one's own comfort zones in order to try to capture research based on a range of methodologies and subject areas. I have certainly learned a lot and discovered many new avenues of potential interest.

Are there any particular topics you remember?

A key topic over the period has been the impact of austerity and changing policies on different groups in society, areas of the country, and on overall levels of poverty and deprivation. Changing social and political attitudes, and the fallout from the Brexit debate, against a backdrop of the rise of populism, and scepticism about 'experts', has also been a keen defining feature of the period. And of course, the pandemic has been the dominant issue over the last year or so.

Key methodological developments over the period include falling response rates to surveys, and the associated rising interest in mixed-method surveys, the increasing use of data linkage, cross-disciplinary working (particularly during in the pandemic), and increasing interest in capturing data from social media and similar for research purposes.

Tell us something about your career before this role

I spent more or less my entire research career from 1979 to 2010 as a government social researcher, though I was let out a couple of times to do short secondments in return for good behaviour!

I started my career at what was then called the Department of Employment and moved between posts concerned with topics such as employee share-ownership schemes, impacts of the EU social chapter, working time directive and so on.

Early in 1994 I moved to the Department of the Environment, subsequently DETR, to work on what was called 'urban research'. The work of the branch I headed really took off in the years before and after the 1997 general election as research evidence on 'social exclusion' and deprivation took on a far more prominent role than previously.

Early in 2001 I moved, on promotion, to the Department for Transport (DfT) to head up a unit that subsequently took on the much-needed role of developing a social research function and profession, across the department and its agencies. This included initiating significant research programmes, including on the different aspects of the debate about road-user

charging and also how to promote sustainable transport behaviour.

What has been your best professional moment?

There have been a number, but two stand out. Firstly, as head of social research, I successfully initiated a social research presence at DfT, externally recognised when I was awarded an honorary degree by the University of the West of England in 2011. Secondly, the development and publication of the Indices of Deprivation 2000 working with a team at the University of Oxford, was significant. Although hampered by the lack of small-area data available at the time, the index was delivered in time to inform the development and targeting of key policies. And the underlying methodology has stood the test of time – over 20 years.

...and worst?

There have been a number of those too! Perhaps it's best to focus on the most amusing. Shortly after I arrived at the Department of the Environment, we published the 'Index of Local Conditions' – the then method of calculating deprivation across different towns and cities in England. Unfortunately, we had to retract it soon afterwards when it came to light that the contractors had mixed up a sub-indicator score for Kingston upon Hull and Kingston on Thames. This made no material difference to the overall index, but following the reissue in August, what used to be called 'silly season' for the press, the ensuing tabloid headlines of 'Whitehall boffins can't tell the difference between ...', with photos to illustrate the two places, were somewhat embarrassing.

Do you have a social research hero/heroine?

I admire anyone who stands up for robust social research during challenging times or circumstances and raises their head above day-to-day concerns in order to address longer-term evidence priorities. I have had the pleasure of working with a number of such people, but one heroine who stands out is Judith Littlewood, the former chief research officer at the Department of the Environment/DETR who always displayed great determination and vision.

SRA Cymru

By Rachel Hughes

In April we were pleased to host an event with Dr Sioned Pearce from Cardiff University in which she explored evaluation as a concept within a state-led social policy programme. Sioned's presentation and her supporting paper can be found under the [events tab](#) on the SRA's website. We've got some more events planned over the forthcoming months, so please keep an eye out for those.

We're really keen to re-establish the SRA Cymru committee to support the SRA's work in Wales. If you're interested in helping out or indeed have any ideas, please do get in touch – either at Cymru@the-sra.org.uk or Direct Message us on Twitter [@sracymr](https://twitter.com/sracymr). Diolch.



SRA North

By Jenni Brooks

We hosted a successful early careers event in May, with three presenters talking about their own career paths, and giving insights into research careers in consultancy/agency, academia, the charitable sector, government and as freelancers. Georgina Culliford has written a short article for this issue of Research Matters (see page 6), and the [recording of the event is on YouTube](#).

We are continuing our early-career development by facilitating links between our members and universities. Sheffield Hallam University plans to enrol all students on its undergraduate sociology degree and MRes course as members of the SRA from September, and we are working on expanding our informal job shadowing and discussion opportunities for early-career researchers.



We are planning an event for the autumn to link with the launch of the SRA's diversity and inclusion research. If you have any suggestions for this, or any other events you would like to see from us, please do get in touch.

We are experimenting with a series of short, informal 'bring your own biscuits' meetings to support members. There will be no presenters, no recordings, no agenda – just a space to chat with other researchers as you might do in a workplace kitchen. Please do get in touch if you'd like to join in.

Keep an eye on our Twitter feed for announcements [@SRANorth](https://twitter.com/SRANorth), or email sranorth@gmail.com

SRA Scotland

Check latest news from SRA Scotland online or email Scotland@the-sra.org.uk and keep in touch [@SRA_Scotland](https://twitter.com/SRA_Scotland).

REVIEWS

Little Quick Fix: Gather your data online

Janet E. Salmons

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019

Reviewed by Lucy Lindley, Ipsos MORI

As part of the 'Little Quick Fix' series, this book promises to provide quick authoritative answers to online data collection. If you're looking for a short and concise guide to put your thinking on the right track, this book will help with that.

Reflecting the digital world, the book acknowledges the range of data available online, and the diverse forms of data we can collect using online technologies. However, as a guide, this book also acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it aims to guide the reader to ask some key questions, and to take some

practical first steps. These steps are a starting point, and the reader is required to follow-up. For example, you may be prompted to 'find and access relevant data'. So, if you're looking for step-by-step instructions about how to do this, this isn't the book for you.

Instead, to help the reader think through their research problems, the book features quick checkpoints throughout to test understanding, as well as 'do it yourself' questions to support self-learning. In addition, it provides a list of skills and strengths to help readers identify where they may have gaps that require further training. Like all books in

the 'Little Quick Fix' series, it wraps up with a final checklist that allows readers to self-assess whether they've got what they need to progress with their research.

My tip for beginners would be to read through the glossary (at the back of the book) first, as this will lay a foundation for terminology (such as extant vs. elicited) used throughout. Overall, this book gets readers thinking about important issues related to online data collection, while promoting independent learning.



Inspiring collaboration and engagement

Julie Reeves, Sue Starbuck and Alison Yeung

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019

Reviewed by Merili Pullerits, City, University of London

This book was written in response to the changing nature of academia, where there is now simultaneously more of a requirement and more of an appreciation for collaboration and engagement. It discusses collaboration and engagement both with others within academia, as well as those outside it, such as industry, charities, policymakers and the wider public. The book is aimed at an academic audience, with a specific focus on doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, and although much of the book can be transferable to other contexts, the focus is on the UK.

The book aims to 'demystify collaboration and engagement', and it certainly achieves this. Using a conversational writing style, the authors discuss what collaboration and engagement can constitute and what benefits are involved, and provide ideas on how to get started and tips on how to be successful in the endeavour. They do this in a balanced way, by also highlighting the potential challenges and areas of resistance. In addition to drawing upon their own experiences and existing research, the authors have incorporated guest chapters, case study examples and statements from others about their personal

experiences. For anyone interested in learning more about the areas covered in each section, there is a helpful list of further reading at the end of each chapter.

The main strength of the book lies in its engaging approach, whereby the reader does not merely play a passive role, but is invited to actively engage with the content through activities and reflection points. As a whole, it is a useful starting point for early-career academic researchers who want to learn more about the nature of collaboration and engagement, and to gain practical insight on how to do this.



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:

Material methods. Researching and thinking with things

Sophie Woodward

SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019

<https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/material-methods/book251560>

Critical realism for health and illness research: a practical introduction

Priscilla Alderson

Policy Press, 2021

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/critical-realism-for-health-and-illness-research-3>

Creative research methods in education: principles and practices

Helen Kara, Narelle Lemon, Dawn Mannay and Megan McPherson

Policy Press, 2021

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/creative-research-methods-in-education>

Creative writing for social research: a practical guide

Richard Phillips and Helen Kara

Policy Press, 2021

<https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/creative-writing-for-social-research>

Training courses in research methods

Currently all courses run online, in live sessions, with small groups of attendees (between nine and 16).

Our courses are designed to help you learn the practical application of research methods, and are led by experts in their field.

Costs: SRA members: half day: £82.50; one day or two part-days: £165; two days or three part-days: £330. Non-members: half day: £110; one day or two part-days: £220.00; two days or three part-days: £440.

Standard courses run over one day or two half days, and extended courses over two full days or three part-days.

If you have any queries, please contact Lindsay:
lindsay.adams@the-sra.org.uk

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

Evaluation

(All with Professor David Parsons)

22 SEPTEMBER

Foundations of evaluation

24 SEPTEMBER

Impact evaluation

8 OCTOBER

Research and evaluation project management

26 & 27 OCTOBER (2 MORNINGS)

Theory-based evaluation: options and choices

Qualitative

11 AUGUST

Qualitative interviewing
with Professor Karen O'Reilly

20 AUGUST

Interpreting and writing up your qualitative findings
with Professor Karen O'Reilly

1 & 2 SEPTEMBER (2 MORNINGS)

Reporting qualitative data
with NatCen

9 & 10 SEPTEMBER (2 FULL DAYS)

Depth interviews, with NatCen

14 & 15 SEPTEMBER (2 PART-DAYS)

Managing challenging interviews
with NatCen

21 SEPTEMBER

Digital qualitative interviewing
with Dr Karen Lumsden

23 SEPTEMBER

Conducting online focus groups
with Dr Karen Lumsden

29 & 30 SEPTEMBER

Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative research
with Dr Nicole Brown

4 TO 6 OCTOBER (3 PART-DAYS)

Analysis of qualitative data
with NatCen

7 & 8 OCTOBER (2 MORNINGS)

Creative methods in qualitative data collection, with Dr Nicole Brown

NEW COURSE

13 & 14 OCTOBER

Analysing data from creative research methods, with Dr Nicole Brown

NEW COURSE

26 OCTOBER

Narrative analysis
with Dr Karen Lumsden

28 & 29 OCTOBER (2 MORNINGS)

Introduction to qualitative research
with NatCen

Quantitative

1 & 2 JULY (2 MORNINGS)

Web survey design, with NatCen

7 & 8 SEPTEMBER

21 ways to test your survey questions
with Dr Pamela Campanelli

15 & 16 SEPTEMBER

Cognitive interviewing, with NatCen

23 & 24 SEPTEMBER

Questionnaire design, with NatCen

24 SEPTEMBER

Introduction to sampling for social surveys, with Dr Alex Cernat

28 TO 30 SEPTEMBER

Regression analysis using R (Advanced), with Dr Pamela Campanelli

12 & 13 OCTOBER

Introduction to evidence reviews
with NatCen

15 OCTOBER

Understanding statistical concepts and essential tests, with Dr Valerija Kolbas

19 TO 21 OCTOBER (3 PART-DAYS)

Advanced questionnaire design
with Dr Pamela Campanelli

Other research skills

21 SEPTEMBER

Data visualisation and infographic design, with Nigel Hawtin

22 & 23 SEPTEMBER (2 MORNINGS)

Introduction to applied behavioural science, with Dr Chris Perry

5 OCTOBER

Participatory action research
with Dr Karen Lumsden

NEW COURSE

6 & 7 OCTOBER

Research with children and young people, with Dr Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham

3 & 4 NOVEMBER

Public involvement in social research
with Dr Louca-Mai Brady and Berni Graham

4 NOVEMBER

Writing effective research reports
with Professor Simon Haslam

5 NOVEMBER

Consultancy skills for social researchers, with Professor Simon Haslam

11 NOVEMBER (1 AFTERNOON)

Making the most of your research journal, with Dr Nicole Brown

NEW COURSE

12 NOVEMBER (1 AFTERNOON)

Introduction to embodied enquiry
with Dr Nicole Brown

NEW COURSE

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

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

No face-to-face conference this year, but the virtual one is in the week of 22 November (see call for presentations on page 2).

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

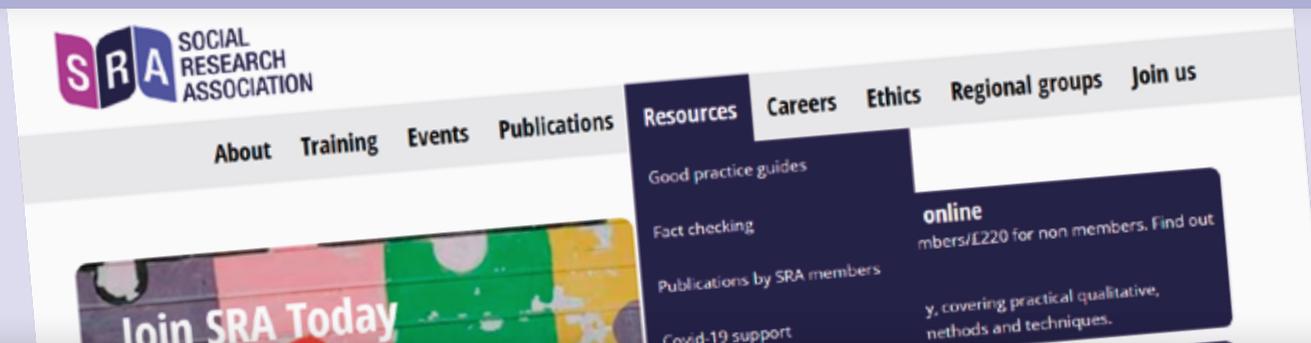
<https://the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Ethics>

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

Member resources

Go to www.the-sra.org.uk then see 'members' section.

Free access to 5,500+ social science journals, and more.



research matters

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

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