

Methodological Research Needs Consultation 2009

RESPONSE FROM THE BRITISH SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods is undertaking a consultation exercise to identify key areas of research need in relation to research methodology. This follows on from a previous consultation exercise that was conducted in 2006 (see <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/outputs/publications/documents/Report%20on%20Research%20Needs%20Draft%20to%20ESRC.pdf>)

Methodological research needs in this context are to be interpreted in relation to ESRC's strategic objectives "to provide the ... methods needed to meet future social science challenges" and "to ensure the availability of sufficient first class capacity, including ... methodology, for the UK to undertake top class social science".

Research needs may relate to different stages of methodological development: from the creation of new methods, through the development and refinement of existing methods or their transfer across subject areas or disciplines, to the investigation of specific practical applications of methods as exemplars in a training and capacity building context.

Please respond to the following questions about research needs. Please address some or all of the topics, as appropriate to your own areas of expertise. For any needs you identify, please provide as much detail as possible about why this need is important in relation to the strengthening of UK social science research capacity.

1. Substantive research areas

a) What key needs for methodological research are generated by the fields of **substantive social and economic research** with which you are most familiar? These may be needs that emerge from new research questions or from challenges faced within substantive social-economic research.

The British Sociological Association takes this to mean the methodological implications of some of the more pressing new areas of substantive social research and recognises the importance of continuing current areas of research and development. These issues below are not in rank order.

1. Health and social policy research to a) explore the impact of welfare state cuts on the ability to meet people's health and welfare needs, and b) chart the likely extent and nature of the increased demands on the NHS as a result of socio-demographic shifts in the population, particularly ageing, for example the impact on the prevention and recovery from loss of mobility in later life and the use/availability of rehabilitation services. This is important because the narrowing of the welfare state is occurring in the midst of a financial crisis which limits its growth and at a time when demand will increase as a result of population dynamics. Renewed research on ageing is essential to this, especially likely health and welfare needs in the future, but also amongst other key users of the welfare state, particularly the newly unemployed, refugees, residents in 'sink' estates etc. This calls both for small scale qualitative research amongst key users of the welfare state and larger scale and demographic research to understand broader issues of demand.
2. The integration of environmental science and sociological research in order to explore the impact of climate change in society. There is need for qualitative sociological research to explore the effects of climate change in specific environmental regions in Britain where its effects are most expected (coastal towns, Southern urban areas, farming areas etc), looking at its impact on social life, population relocation, leisure patterns, patterns of employment, housing needs and the like. Environmental scientists and sociologists should be combining to undertake community-based studies to anticipate likely impacts locally. Large quantitative studies are also needed to provide survey

data on people's anticipation of future impacts and the parameters of acceptable social change they envisage in their own lives. This is important in order to raise the level of awareness in ordinary people of the extent to which climate change will drive social change. This can supply useful information on how people's social behaviour is able to respond to the climatic needs to change car use, for example, or to use more expensive renewable energy sources and the like.

3. Research amongst the diaspora, international labour migrants and refugees, and human trafficking, including the trafficking of children. The increase in organized violence in various conflict zones, the fragility and failure of most peace processes and the tremendous pull of first world economies and way of life, will increase the flow of population to the developed world. Research is needed on the impact of this labour and skills loss in the sending countries as well as on the needs of refugees in receiving countries. Small scale ethnographic research is required amongst the diaspora in order to capture their social lives and needs, as well as large scale health and social policy research on employment, housing and schooling needs, etc.

4. Research on the diminished status of childhood is needed in light of the rise in exploitation of children, manifested variously in repeated child care atrocities, 'domestic' abuse, the use of children for sexual gratification, the sexualisation of childhood through consumption, forced child soldiers in conflict zones, sex tourism involving children and child trafficking, amongst others. This calls for a better methodological understanding of the specific skills, techniques and methodological approaches needed when children are research respondents. It also implies wider social research on how the status of 'child' is understood in society and amongst certain key groups who relate most to children. Sociological research can inform the public discussion that is needed on the rights of the child and is capable of exploring how key groups understand the status of childhood and its associated rights.

b) Why are these developments important?

This has been addressed above in each case but broad processes of social and climatic change, in conjunction with a narrowing economy and welfare state and large-scale

population relocation, throws up several social problems for the future that will be exacerbated by financial constraints.

2. **Data sources**

a) What specific needs or opportunities for methodological research arise from new kinds of **data** or other research resources which are becoming available to researchers or which might become available following methodological development?

Two forms of methodological capacity building are essential for the future use and exploitation of social research data:

1. enhanced quantitative skills in order to equip people to interpret, understand and fully exploit large scale secondary data sets that are relevant to the above substantive concerns (international labour migration statistics, unemployment figures, population projections, projections of future likely health and welfare demands etc);
2. enhanced skills to engage in secondary data analysis of existing qualitative data sets. A large reservoir of qualitative research has been accumulated; qualitative research has been one of British sociology's major strengths. But people need to be enskilled to engage in secondary analysis of it. The special methodological implications of this need to be understood and the procedures for doing it established and disseminated.
3. enhanced skills to engage in longitudinal studies to chart social change but also the long term impact of some of the phenomena noted above.

b) Why are these developments important?

In the context of declining resources to fund primary data collection, we need to enhance skills in secondary data analysis, both qualitative and quantitative.

3. **Methods**

a) There may also be needs for research that arise from the field of research methods itself. What needs for research are there in relation to **methods**? Needs might be identified from emerging developments and innovations in methods or the need to improve and better understand existing methods.

1. GIS methods need wider dissemination as part of sociological research skills to enable social researchers to incorporate and integrate environmental sciences, as well as local and regional geographic data in their studies.
2. Research is needed to understand the best methods to use to study hard-to-access groups on the fringes of society, especially for those who demand considerable sensitivity, such as former forced child soldiers, abused and sexually exploited children, illegal refugees and the like. We need to know the right methodological approach associated with these sensitive groups and topics.
3. The reinvigoration of the old community study method. Community studies were associated with post-war British social research on poverty and urban redevelopment and went out of favour once the question of poverty lost its centrality in social science and as urban redevelopment occurred. The method needs to be reinvigorated in order to chart the social impact of climate change on specific localities and regions.

b) Why are these areas important? What contribution would research in these areas make to social science research capability?

See above.