

*ESRC Research Methods Programme One Day Conference*

**“Survey Research in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Opportunities”**

Report by Dr Patrick Sturgis, University of Surrey

This one day conference took place at the Royal Statistical Society premises in Errol Street, London on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2007. There was a great deal of interest in the event, with 80 delegates and a further 50 individuals on the waiting list. It was very pleasing to see that interest was spread across the different sectors, with academics, government researchers, charities, and social and market research agencies all well represented. As is always the case for events such as these, and despite reminder emails, not everyone was able to make it on the day. However, there were more than sixty delegates in the audience.

The aim of the conference was to elicit the opinions of leading international figures in the world of survey research on whether and how survey research might meet the challenges posed by a range of factors including: declining response rates; demographic, societal, and technological change; analytical limitations of standard cross-sectional designs; and the growth of administrative and transactional data. The day began with an address from Dr Sturgis, in which these issues were detailed. Speakers were encouraged to focus on how changing the types of survey that we conduct, as well as the way we conduct them, will be key to maintaining survey research's position as the pre-eminent social science research methodology.

The first speaker was Professor Mick Couper from the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan). Mick's presentation focused on the growing use of web surveys, their advantages and disadvantages and their potential for continued growth in the future. Although web surveys have many cost efficiencies, relative to traditional modes, professor Couper was not convinced that the internet would prove to be a general panacea for the problems facing survey research.

Professor, Roger Jowell, Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University spoke next on the topic of 'Obstacles to Equivalence in Comparative Surveys. His paper argued that equivalence is the sine qua non of all good comparative measurement, whether sub-national or cross-national. Although perfect equivalence is unattainable, Professor Jowell argued that it must remain a key aspiration of all serious surveys. He used the The European Social Survey (ESS) as an exemplar in this regard. Learning from the experience of other pioneering studies, its twin aims are to monitor and analyse change in European social values over time, and to do so on the basis of improved comparative measures. It has not only survived but thrived during its first six years, winning the support of over 30 funders across Europe, a major European science prize, two long-term infrastructure grants from the European Commission, and over 14,000 data users worldwide. Professor Jowell concluded by setting out his '10 golden rules' for conducting comparative survey research.

The third speaker was Professor Nick Buck of the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex. Nick's talk was titled 'opportunities and challenges for the future of longitudinal surveys: designing the UK Household Longitudinal Study'. He focused on the many challenges facing designers of panel studies, ranging from the practical issues of

sample design and mode choice, to representing the views of the research community in the questionnaire design phase, and ensuring the research community possesses the skills to analyse increasingly complex data structures.

Our 4<sup>th</sup> and final speaker was Professor Jon Krosnick, Department of Communication, Stanford University. Professor Krosnick drew on his experiences of designing the innovative new 2007-2009 American National Election Study Panel, which will contain a number of novel components, primary amongst which is an online only, random panel sample. He presented some of the challenges and opportunities that arise in the American electoral system where the date of elections is fixed in advance.

The final session of the day was an open discussion with contributions from the audience (audience members had an opportunity to ask questions of each speaker at the end of their respective presentations). This opened up a very lively debate and drew out some points of disagreement between the speakers, particularly on the suitability and cost-effectiveness of web surveys for general population surveys. At the end of the day, the discussion turned to a consideration of the relative merits of quota and random probability sampling, when response rates for the latter are very low. Despite the focus of the conference on issues facing survey researchers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this was a salutary reminder that debates imitated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still not fully resolved today!