

SCPR's Role in British Social Survey Research

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Abstract: After a brief description of SCPR, issues discussed include the relationship between theory and practice; tendering as a means of placing contracts; staffing and training; technological change; policy analysis; and ethical issues.

Key words: Research organisation; policy research; qualitative research; telephone surveys; computer-assisted interviewing.

1. Introduction

Social and Community Planning Research, more often known as SCPR, was founded at the end of the 1960s to fill what appeared to be a conspicuous gap in research in Britain at that time. There was no major survey-based organisation, outside government, that specialised solely in social research. In the United States, there were notably successful examples of this genre, such as the university-based Institute for Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan. In Britain, in contrast, there was no major organisation within the academic sector. Public sector surveys were undertaken by the Government Social Survey (now the Social Survey Division of the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys), by market research organisations and by relatively small academic or policy units that for the most part did not maintain full resources for carrying out surveys but either subcontracted the work or set up the necessary machinery ad hoc.

SCPR apart, the description above fits social survey research in Britain more or less

equally well in 1932 as in 1969. No other major new survey organisation has emerged to specialise in social research. But there have been large changes over this period, during the second half of which Britain went through the social and ideological upheaval of Thatcherism. The use of social surveys, both by social scientists and by government, has continued to grow more or less unchecked by changes in government or by social and cultural trends, although there have been shifts of emphasis from time to time. Early fears that the Thatcher administration might be less convinced than previous administrations of the value of survey research proved unfounded.

Surveys have become more sophisticated as well as more familiar. There has been a continual growth in their complexity. One contributory factor is the technological advance that has made possible many things previously out of reach. Another is an increasingly ambitious range of information requirements, due to a more sophisticated perception of the value of surveys and their uses for policy and social scientific purposes.

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2. A Profile of SCPR

2.1. *Funding sources*

As a non-profit institute, founded as a charitable trust, SCPR is eligible for funding from foundations, Research Councils and public sector bodies. A significant part of SCPR's income is grant-funded, though more than half comes from commissioned work for the public sector, either direct or via other institutes holding lead contracts. SCPR has never had an establishment grant, and all its income is project-based.

The responsive and the initiating modes of research co-exist satisfactorily within the organisation. But care is needed to ensure that staff on grant-funded studies, who may also be working on commissioned projects, set aside enough time for all the necessary reading and thinking, in the context of a culture where contract work is often carried out under severe costs and timetable pressures. One solution to this would have been to make grant-funded work the exclusive responsibility of researchers who handle no contract work, but it has been preferred to adopt a more integrated approach. This not only allows the undoubted attractions of grant work to be shared more widely, but also ensures that those handling such work are not cut off from the prevailing culture.

SCPR was expected by its founders to be, and to remain, a small institute. But it now has over a hundred permanent staff and a fieldforce of about a thousand.

Growth proved difficult to resist in the face of continual invitations to undertake challenging projects, the demands of maintaining national fieldwork resources, and the need to provide both a stimulating work environment and scope for career development.

At the heart of SCPR is the triangle comprising the research team, the field

department and the department responsible for data preparation and computing (backed up by administrative, personnel and accounting services). Within the research team there is a sampling and statistical unit.

But this core triangle does not represent the whole of SCPR. Several other units operate within, or in association with, the institute. These are the Qualitative Research Unit, the Joint Centre for Survey Methods, and the Joint Unit for the Study of Social Trends (JUSST), whose roles are of great importance to SCPR, and are now briefly discussed.

2.2. *Integrating qualitative and quantitative methods*

The bulk of SCPR's income is derived from quantitative social surveys, involving the selection of representative samples, the administration of structured questionnaires and numerical analysis of the resulting data. But from the outset SCPR has also undertaken qualitative research, and in 1985 this was formally recognised by the setting up of a Qualitative Research Unit within the institute. In studies undertaken by the unit, small numbers of unstructured (and tape-recorded) in-depth interviews or group discussions are carried out. The flexible format of such interviews, and the intensive analysis of each case, provide insights that are hard to obtain by structured questionnaire methods, to which they thus form a useful complement. The close integration of quantitative and qualitative work within the same organisation has been very fruitful, and both are regarded as essential to the institute. Even when a survey-based project contains no qualitative element, it will be informed by the lessons learned in other qualitative studies. Experience of quantitative surveys brings a reciprocal benefit to qualitative work.

Much of SCPR's qualitative work is free-standing. But because it is an invaluable tool for exploring matters such as motivations and mental processes, qualitative research has often been used as a prelude to survey design. Increasingly, it is also being used after a survey, taking advantage of the survey results (and respondents) to examine important emerging themes in more depth.

2.3. Survey methodology

Given its aims and orientation, it was inevitable that, from the outset, SCPR would be closely involved in methodological work and experimentation. In due course this led to the establishment (in collaboration with the City University) of a Survey Methods Centre, granted Designated Research Centre status by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and, later, to its current successor body, the Joint Centre for Survey Methods (JCSM), co-sponsored by the London School of Economics (LSE). The Centre is based at SCPR, and its staff are SCPR employees.

The integration of a unit dedicated to developing methodology within a project-based survey organisation has proved to be a good model. SCPR's survey programme has provided a vehicle for experiment, and the accumulated experience of its project research staff has been a further resource.

The Centre publishes a range of papers, along with a regular Newsletter, to disseminate knowledge gained from methodological development. A quarterly seminar series run by the Centre since 1981, and funded by ESRC, has been a useful vehicle for discussion of methods among the wider research community. The Centre's staff, together with other SCPR researchers, have contributed for many years to methods

teaching, first at City University and latterly at LSE.

In 1978, before the establishment of the Centre, SCPR staff had collectively produced a textbook (Hoinville, Jowell and Associates 1978) about survey methods. Chapters covering each of the various aspects of surveys were contributed by different members of SCPR's staff. It is hoped to up-date it in the near future.

An aspect of methodology to which SCPR has always paid meticulous attention is sampling. The institute has always held firmly to the view that social surveys need to be based on probability methods, rather than on any of the alternatives such as quota sampling that are widely used in commercial research. Sample designs have become more sophisticated, partly in consequence of more ambitious survey briefs and partly because the increased availability of computerised sampling frames has expanded the range of possibilities.

A great deal of work remains to be done in this area, in spite of the well-established body of theory. For example, a substantial proportion of surveys use clustered designs, but comparatively few design effects have been published. The Centre holds a small library of such effects, and it is intended that in the future they should be published on most if not all SCPR studies. At present the amount of collective knowledge in the research community about this issue is still not large, relative to the substantial volume of survey work that is done in Britain.

Most of the recent progress made at SCPR on the methodology of sampling has resulted from solving the problems of individual projects, rather than through organised methodological programmes. However, SCPR has recently been able to fill a gap in the literature available to British researchers by summarising its experience of

using the main general population frames (Lynn and Lievesley 1991).

There are also recurrent methodological problems specific to certain policy areas. To take a few examples from SCPR's work, there are clusters of issues surrounding questions about training, or occupation, or recruitment, or housing finance, or disability, or political attitudes and behaviour. Special funding is sometimes available for evolving recommended techniques for dealing with issues of this sort, with the aim both of raising standards and of increasing comparability between future studies.

The institute's reputation for survey design, enhanced by the presence of a methods centre, has led to a number of major design and development studies for projects of particular importance or difficulty. This type of work is attractive to researchers because of the challenge it poses, and such projects are central to SCPR's research.

2.4. British Social Attitudes and JUSST

The annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) series, started in 1983, has become perhaps the most widely known of SCPR's projects.

It began with funding from the Nuffield Foundation and ESRC, and in 1984 the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts became core funders. The Sainsbury Trusts have continued their support, and still provide about 40% of the annual funding. Other funders have joined in as the series has become better known: one important category of funds is now derived from government departments who want to look at broad trends in social attitudes relevant to their policy areas. All government funding is effectively by way of grants, and not on a customer-contractor basis.

The survey is organised on a modular basis, with some modules being repeated

every year, and others from time to time, depending on their importance and on assessments of the rate of change in attitudes.

A successful feature of the survey has been the inclusion of a 20-minute self-completion questionnaire which is left behind with those who have been interviewed. About 90% of these questionnaires are completed, and greatly extend the survey's coverage.

The British Social Attitudes team also carries out the British Election Studies, in association with Nuffield College Oxford. A new unit, the Joint Unit for the Study of Social Trends (JUSST), was established in 1989 to provide a focus for the linked work of the two parent organisations. Its aims are to provide a rigorous description of the changes in social and political values and identities in Britain, to identify differences between Britain and other industrial societies, to make good some of the defects in previous work by developing improved measures of values, and to explore the changing relationship between social structure and social values.

The BSA series is also part of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Research teams in different countries undertake an annual jointly designed self-completion survey on a rotating set of topics. Initially there were three other members in addition to Britain, and there are now twenty-one, spread throughout the world. More than 50 articles or books based on ISSP data have already appeared.

3. Recurring Themes in Social Survey Work

3.1. Theory and practice

Surveys are rarely simple when they deal with social issues. Unfortunately, they often

appear to be simple. There is thus a general tendency to underestimate their difficulties. Questionnaire design is particularly prone to this, since asking questions is a part of everyday life and tempts people to think survey questions are closer to social interchanges than they really are.

Unfortunately, there are no established criteria for assessing the adequacy of survey questions. The literature on question (and questionnaire) design is patchy and inconclusive. It demonstrates a number of particular effects convincingly, and newcomers to surveys would, if they studied it, usefully avoid many mistakes. But it would not, on its own, enable them to write good questionnaires.

Researchers learn about the properties of questions in a variety of other ways, mostly experiential. These include training themselves to think through the issues they are researching; thinking about alternative ways in which questions could be asked about a particular issue; learning from qualitative studies; discussing questions with colleagues; observing (or conducting) survey interviews; listening to interviewers' comments; studying the pattern of responses in completed questionnaires; and examining distributions and inter-relationships. And they learn by repeating these processes many times in different contexts.

Unlike question design, sampling does not have close analogues in daily life, and does have a well developed theoretical basis. But good sample design is also heavily dependent on practical considerations. There is thus a need for organisations in which theory and practice are united, and where methodological development is driven by the need to find solutions to a wide variety of real, and often difficult, problems that demand a grasp of practical detail as well as sound theory.

3.2. *Tendering*

The case for tendering is easy to make: social surveys cost large sums of money - usually public money; they can to some extent be specified in a brief; there are a number of survey organisations that can compete for the work; and competition will secure value for money.

But there is also a case against tendering. Many surveys are not determinable products, and cannot be fully specified with precision in advance. The attempt to specify them at too early a stage, for tendering purposes, can easily prove counter-productive. It is sometimes necessary to embark on the work in order to establish the optimum design. There is an element of the organic in the design of many surveys: the various features may need to evolve, rather than be fully blue-printed at the outset.

More insidiously, tendering implicitly promotes the belief that nothing that cannot be specified has any value. The tender concentrates on measurable externals, such as the sample size, rather than on less tangible but no less important factors such as the calibre and experience of the research staff or the amount of work they are going to put into the design of the questionnaire. It is true that briefs usually request information on these issues, and that decisions usually "take such factors into account." But the need to appear to be even-handed, and the involvement in the decision of people who may have less understanding of the nature of surveys - notably those responsible for financial control - inevitably makes cost a key factor.

Tendering is not universal. It does not apply to grant-funded projects. And although British government departments regard tendering as the norm, they depart

from it occasionally. SCPR has received a number of single-tender commissions in situations where it was judged to have particularly appropriate resources or expertise.

But in a context of tendering, an organisation that regards the carrying out of surveys as a serious scientific activity rather than a purely commercial operation is likely to find that the market price for a survey is often below the cost of undertaking it in the "proper" way. And insistence on maintaining standards is likely to involve a continual battle to survive.

The sceptic might at this point suggest that in practice the uses and value of surveys are perhaps not very heavily dependent on their quality. This may sometimes be true, but an institute cannot turn quality on or off according to the particular case: it must be a permanent - if expensive - habit.

3.3. Staffing and training

Surveys have come to be recognised as an essential tool of social science and policy, and there is a good deal of academic discussion of methodological issues. Such discussions are often about very practical matters, rather than being abstractly theoretical. But in spite of that, the role of experience has been, and continues to be, undervalued. There has been little progress towards institutionalising practical survey experience as a desirable component of the training and general development of government and academic researchers, and the pool of researchers with the particular kind of specialist experience needed to fill a senior research post within a social survey organisation has remained small, at least in Britain.

Practical training in survey methods, which would provide an underpinning for subsequent research experiences in academic

or public research, needs to happen early in a research career. It also requires complete immersion in a working environment, not just participation in taught courses with work experience.

Much current academic thinking in Britain, however, does not appear to recognise the need for such training. There is a widespread, if implicit, assumption that when academics need to do surveys, they will be able to do so satisfactorily whether or not they have had any special training or experience. Surveys are not always considered to call for special skills that the academic might not possess - or if they are, they are regarded as trade skills that can be bought in, like plumbing. The principal reason for calling in outsiders is usually the even more mundane one that it is administratively impractical for an academic department to recruit and train the necessary labour force.

This attitude seriously underestimates the difficulties of good survey design and conduct. There are of course many academics who have acquired experience in it. But the decentralised character of academic research, coupled with the lack of adequate controls on what is done and the absence of adequate review and appraisal procedures for completed projects - unlike grant applications - means that academic survey standards are not always as high as they should be.

SCPR has been remarkably successful in retaining its senior staff, providing valuable continuity. But it has had difficulty in expanding its research staff at senior level because of the general shortage of suitably trained people. The alternative of training staff up to senior level from scratch is a slow (and expensive) process, and many people do not stay long enough in their first jobs to advance to senior positions.

3.4. *Technological change*

SCPR has become involved with computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) as a result of a number of recent studies both in the Joint Centre for Survey Methods and on the project side. The programme used, after extensive evaluation of alternatives, has been Blaise, developed by the Netherlands Central Bureau of Statistics.

During the last year or so, the laptop computer market has undergone major changes, with greatly increased power, lower prices and lighter weight. Those used for SCPR's current work are mostly 386-SX PCs.

Our experience so far has been extremely encouraging, and we anticipate a large increase in the use of CAPI in our future surveys. It will affect not only the conduct of the fieldwork, but a variety of other aspects of surveys. It is interesting to speculate, for instance, as to whether the use of CAPI, which involves a very different set of constraints from those applying to conventional interviews, will have an appreciable effect on questionnaire design. It is difficult to step back from the conventional mode sufficiently far to assess the extent to which the design of questions, and sequences of questions, is mode-driven. CAPI releases the researcher from many of the familiar constraints, but it is not yet clear whether this new freedom can be exploited to any great extent in terms of questionnaire design.

The use of CAPI can certainly play an important part in ensuring that the data collected is much freer from various important kinds of error. Routing errors are virtually eliminated. The ability to build in edit checks during the interview means that problems that would normally be detected much later in the office will now have a chance of resolution on the spot. Data can be transmitted by interviewers via a modem

during the night following the interview, and will be largely if not entirely clean, thus making it possible to cut down the gap between interview and analysis.

In view of the widespread acceptance of computer interviewing by both interviewers and respondents, and the continuing downward trend in the real costs of computing, it is highly likely that CAPI will be increasingly widely used during the rest of the 1990s.

Telephone interviewing has not enjoyed the wide acceptance in Britain that it has in, say, the United States, Canada and Sweden. Although SCPR has a telephone interviewing unit, it has not so far invested in a CATI system. Telephone ownership in Britain lagged behind those of the countries mentioned, and when it reached a level at which population surveys by telephone seemed to be feasible, attempts to conduct them found that the characteristics of the publicly available frames were not such as to permit satisfactory samples to be drawn. There is still a far from negligible proportion without a telephone, and many of those who do have telephones do not appear in the telephone directories. And the British telephone system does not readily lend itself to random digit dialling, for example, because of the varying lengths of telephone numbers and the difficulty of obtaining specific and accurate information about the numbering system (Foreman and Collins 1991).

The population sub-groups addressed by SCPR's research are in any case often those who are the least likely to have telephones.

Moreover, it seems likely that an increasing number of people will have answering machines or other devices for monitoring incoming calls, leaving the recipient the option to respond or not. This is likely to make population surveys by telephone even more difficult than now. So we do not see the telephone as likely to become the major

data collection vehicle for social surveys, even though some of the comparative evaluations made by the Survey Methods Centre showed that, for interviews of moderate length and for most types of question, the choice of data collection mode did not have a major effect on the quality of the data obtained.

Telephone interviewing has a very important part to play, however, as an ancillary to personal interview or postal-self completion surveys, and for surveys of particular groups such as employers, among whom telephone ownership is high and for whom it is a normal, even a preferred, mode of communication.

3.5. Policy analysis

Units specialising in policy research, in fields such as labour markets, health policy and social services, have come to play an increasingly important role in Britain.

Policy analysis is in some ways a natural extension to the work of carrying out policy-orientated surveys. Dissociation from the implications of the research involves the risk of abrogating responsibility, and it can be argued that the stance of SCPR, which has not yet moved significantly in that direction, has been too passive.

But it is difficult for a single organization to combine policy analysis with the management of social surveys. The personal characteristics and skills required to design and manage complex surveys are not the same as those needed by the policy analyst. Perhaps more seriously, policy analysis implies subject specialism, whereas few survey organisations can afford to restrict their work to only a few fields if they are to get a sufficient volume and variety of work. Nonetheless, it is obviously possible to graft expertise in a few chosen areas on to the solid base provided by an organisation's survey

resources and skills, and to some extent this has happened at SCPR, notably in housing, employment, political research, studies of social attitudes and (increasingly) health research. But the potential has not yet been exploited to anything like its full extent.

3.6. Ethical issues

Surveys perennially raise a variety of ethical issues, confidentiality being the most frequently discussed.

There is, of course, a conflict between confidentiality and the need for data. The practice of archiving anonymised data sets is widespread, and SCPR is a major contributor to the ESRC Data Archive at Essex University. But archiving almost inevitably involves a risk, however small, that an individual's responses might be identifiable. Such issues are constantly discussed in the course of SCPR's work, in terms both of current data protection legislation and of ethical standards that demand more than mere compliance with the law.

There would be a potentially serious problem for social research if access to the wide variety of files needed for sampling became more restricted. Examples from SCPR's work of the use of such files include surveys of populations such as the unemployed, recipients of benefit, participants in government training programmes, applicants for local authority housing, hospital patients, university lecturers, students and others.

Usually, but not always, it is the client organisation itself that holds the list and makes them available for sampling purposes. The institutional attitudes of list-holders vary. Schools and universities, who are often not the clients for the research that is to be conducted among their students, are usually reluctant to disclose names and

addresses, even without any other information. Many other bodies see less difficulty in cooperating, provided that a letter is first sent to the potential respondents, allowing them the chance to withdraw at the outset. A more restrictive stance is to require that the potential respondents must give their written permission before their names and addresses are disclosed to the research institute. This can have a devastating effect on response rates. Experience shows that people who are very willing to be interviewed will nevertheless not send an affirmative reply to such a letter, either through inertia or from uncertainty as to what is likely to be involved. In view of the need for societies to have information to underpin policy debate and decision-making, it is to be hoped that attitudes on this issue do not become more restrictive. The voluntary character of social surveys, and the elaborate safeguards introduced to maintain their integrity, make it unnecessary for additional constraints of this kind to be imposed bureaucratically.

3.7. Europe

Apart from the International Social Survey Programme, referred to earlier, SCPR has rarely been involved in international research projects. But circumstances are changing, particularly in view of the EC's increasing rôle in social research. The

institute is currently undertaking pilot work for the British component of the European Household Survey Panel. Along with four other European research institutes, SCPR is part of a newly formed consortium known as COMPASS (Comparative Social Surveys) whose aim is to do regular cross-national projects. COMPASS has already received funds under one of the EC Framework programmes and is contemplating other programmes of work. As integration between European countries increases, the demand for cross-national social surveys will grow. Genuine comparability between surveys in different cultural contexts is not easy to achieve, and SCPR looks forward to applying its accumulated survey design skills and experience to the new research problems that are likely to arise.

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