

**Survey Methods Centre : 35 Northampton Square, London EC1V 0AX ... /
Social and Community Planning Research.**

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SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY PLANNING RESEARCH

**SURVEY
METHODS
CENTRE**

**35 NORTHAMPTON SQUARE
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1981

SCPR

Survey Methods Centre

The Survey Methods Centre is a division of Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR), funded as a designated research centre by the Social Science Research Council. It was set up in October 1980, in association with The City University, primarily to undertake research into survey methods.

To complement its research programme, the Centre is developing teaching courses in survey methods and provides a base for student training. As far as resources allow, it also provides advice on request to people who are designing and analysing their own surveys. The Centre administers a survey methods seminar series sponsored by the SSRC, and produces a newsletter to improve communication generally among those interested in methodology whether in government or the academic, commercial or independent institute sectors.

The location of the Centre within a survey research institute that carries out forty or more large scale surveys each year provides an appropriate setting, closer in concept to some American institutes than to anything in the United Kingdom. The Centre is able to graft methodological experiments onto SCPR's project work; it has firsthand contact with interviewers and those who train and supervise them; it can draw on the skills and experience of research staff who undertake sampling, questionnaire design and data analysis on the survey projects, and has access to an ever-growing body of data of methodological interest (such as sampling error and response rate data for a variety of survey designs).

The Centre has strong overseas links. In particular, SCPR has a well established relationship with ISR, Michigan. Professor Leslie Kish is a member of the Centre's Advisory Committee and a frequent visitor to the Centre. Professor Graham Kalton, formerly at the University of Southampton and now at ISR, played a central role in SCPR's earlier methodological work and is a Visiting Research Fellow, working closely with the Centre. Other ISR methodological researchers have visited the Centre and will collaborate on the research programmes.

Gerald Hoirville is Director of the Survey Methods Centre, **Martin Collins** and **Jean Morton-Williams** are assistant directors.

For further information about the Survey Methods Centre, or the Survey Research Centre, contact Jennifer Butler, Social and Community Planning Research, 35 Northampton Square, London EC1V 0AX (telephone 01-250 1866). SCPR publications list, copies of the Survey Methods Newsletters and The Report on the 1970s, are available on request.

Survey Methods Research Programme

Before the Survey Methods Centre was set up, SCPR completed a five year programme of methodological work funded by the SSRC. That work concentrated on non sampling errors and included detailed studies of interviewer variability, question wording, coder variability, non response and the use of self completion supplements.

The longterm, separate funding for the new Centre has enabled it to embark on more extensive research programmes. A number of themes are being pursued; in each the aim is first to define the coverage of, for example, the interviewing or coding process, to identify what work has been done and where the gaps remain, and then to concentrate in depth on aspects of that research.

Another general feature of the research programme is the emphasis on finding practical solutions that can be incorporated into survey work. In the setting of a survey research institute, researchers have an opportunity to develop and test practical methods of improving data quality or operational efficiency. The preparation of interviewer training films, the assessment of sampling frames, and the application of new computer technology to data processing will receive as much attention as research studies designed to provide a firmer understanding and foundation for survey methodology.

The main themes of the research programme include:

Sample design

The first stage of this programme is the compilation of a list of design effects for the complex sample designs used in SCPR surveys. The list will provide data to examine sampling errors associated with different types of questions, different population subclasses and different degrees of clustering. An experiment has been carried out to compare design effects for ward and polling district clusters and further experiments of this kind will follow. The longterm aim is to link design effect data with cost data to reach conclusions about the optimum efficiency of sample designs.

Interviewing methods

The Centre is currently pursuing the first of two broad objectives of its interviewing methods programme:

- to develop a model of the interview process that takes into account the tasks required of both the interviewer and the respondent and the interaction between them;
- to provide information that will help improve interviewing techniques both in terms of the accuracy of the data and of response rates.

The first objective is a prerequisite of the second: it will reveal problems in interviewing and lead to hypotheses about the ways in which interviewers' performance and technique can be improved.

The work has already included discussions with training officers and supervisors to identify performance criteria, and discussions with interviewers to see how they perceive their role. The next steps will be analyses of tape recorded interviews, laboratory work with video equipment, followup interviews with respondents and analyses of tape recorded doorstep introductions. The findings from the initial phase will form the basis for experiments in interviewing methods and training.

Open questions

As a first stage in the programme on open questioning, a broad classification of question types has been developed so that experiments can be structured to take account of various types of questions. The classification is based both on the form of question (the extent to which it is "closed" for both respondents and interviewers) and its purpose (whether it seeks factual, attitudinal or explanatory information).

Experiments are planned to test alternative question forms — within the different purpose categories — to evaluate the relative effectiveness of open and closed questions. The evaluation will take account of response errors arising in interviewing and coding.

Coding

This programme has included studies of coder reliability and variability and experiments with different coding frames. Subsequent work will examine more closely the way coding frames are compiled and tested. A computer program is being developed to enable coding staff to test the consistency of application of a coding frame in a pilot exercise before the main coding operation. This will identify weaknesses in the frame and pinpoint potential problems that need to be incorporated into coder briefing and training.

Data editing

Preliminary work on this programme has shown that a systematic classification of errors made by interviewers on questionnaires is a useful way of exposing questionnaire design faults. Developments of this work should enable it to be used for questionnaire design and piloting and as a quality control procedure.

Non response

As another example of the way in which results from SCPR projects can be used to accumulate data of methodological value, the overall patterns of nonresponse can be compared for different survey designs and populations. Characteristics of non respondents can also be compiled and techniques for increasing response (including call backs) can be studied and evaluated. A longer term aim of the programme will be to establish reasons for non response that will help to identify the extent to which non respondents can be regarded as a random subset of population subgroups.

Publications

Published papers arising from SCPR methodological work are available from SCPR as a series of working papers. Developments on the methodological research programmes are reported in the SCPR Survey Methods Newsletters as they occur.

Survey Research Practice (Hoinville, G., Jowell, R. and Associates, 1978), published by Heinemann Educational Books, deals with the formidable practical and organisational problems of conducting sample surveys. All the stages of a survey are covered, from planning to the production of clean data. Topics include unstructured design work, questionnaire construction, sampling, interviewing, organising fieldwork, postal survey procedures, data preparation and classifying respondents.

Education and Training

The Centre is planning a series of *advanced workshops in survey methods*, to bring together 30 or so research workers with a specialist interest in a topic. The workshops will offer an opportunity for discussion and exchange of information as well as providing more formal teaching sessions.

The theme of the first workshop, in September 1981, is survey sampling. A series of lectures and discussions will cover sample design, sampling errors, sampling frames, non response, imputation, statistical matching and small domain estimation.

The second in the series, on questionnaire design, will take place in September 1982.

The SCPR *teaching programme* at The City University began at the Business School, where the market research BSc Course includes a series of lectures on survey research practice. Statistics students (both B.Sc. and M.Sc.) taking the survey methods option also attend these lectures. The next major development will be the introduction of a post-experience, part-time *Diploma or M.Sc. in Survey Methods*. This will be aimed at people working in government, commerce and universities. They will study survey methods at postgraduate level on day release over two years.

The Centre is recognised by the SSRC as a base for *postgraduate training* and has been given a linked studentship award from October 1981 for a postgraduate student to work on the survey methodology programme.

Discussions have taken place with several universities about SCPR housing students for short periods as part of their training. The students can obtain experience within the survey operations departments and work alongside both project and methods researchers.

Social and Community Planning Research

The institute was registered as a charitable trust in April 1969, with the principal object of undertaking research in the social, political and economic sciences. It specialises in the design, conduct, analysis and interpretation of sample surveys and has its own interviewing and data processing departments. These resources are employed both for its own research programme and for other organisations that require social survey facilities.

Research has been carried out on a wide range of subjects. In SCPR's latest report on its activities (*SCPR: A report on the 1970s*) published in 1980, the 400 or so projects undertaken are grouped under eleven headings:

- Employment
- Health and social services
- Ethnic groups
- Housing and migration
- Planning
- Public involvement
- Environmental disturbance
- Transport
- Shopping and consumer services
- Political attitudes
- Leisure and recreation

By far the greatest number of projects has been funded by government departments, principally by the departments of Employment, Environment, Health and Social Security, Transport and the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys. Other funding organisations include international bodies, foundations, research institutes, nationalised industries, the media, quasi-government agencies, voluntary organisations, local government, planning consultants, Royal Commissions and universities.

The co-founders of SCPR, Gerald Hoinville and Roger Jowell, are the co-directors of the Institute, and are attached to The City University as visiting professors. **Roger Jowell** is Director of the Survey Research Centre, the other Division of SCPR, responsible for substantive project work and for the survey research operations.

SCPR Executive Committee: G. Hoinville and R. Jowell (Co-Directors), C. Airey and B. Hedges (Deputy Directors), J. Morton-Williams. Charity No. 258538.

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