The way to Westminster
Who will be the winners and losers?

Fifty years of the ESRC: Health and wellbeing
Fiscal future: More cuts or more taxes?
Voices: Cities in the brave new world
Welcome

to the Spring issue of Society Now, the ESRC’s regular magazine which showcases the impact of the social science research we fund.

This issue is focused on politics in the run-up to the General Election. Experts from the British Election Study answer questions about possible outcomes and what might influence them.

Professor Matthew Flinders considers why fewer people than ever are planning to vote in the forthcoming election. Why has politics fallen out of favour?

Robert Joyce of the IFS looks at the difficult choices the winner of the General Election will face to reduce the deficit and public sector debt.

Professor Michael Bradshaw of the UK Energy Research Centre examines the future role of gas in power generation in the UK.

And in the year of the ESRC’s 50th anniversary in the first of three articles we explore the breadth and reach of ESRC-funded research, and the effect it has had on society. This issue, health and wellbeing and the study of what makes us happy.

I hope you find the magazine enjoyable and informative.

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Gender-blind selection could open infantry to women

The British Army is the only major NATO power which continues to exclude women from the combat arms. But successful integration of women into combat roles and specifically the infantry could be achieved if certain conditions were met, argues researcher Professor Anthony King.

“Two reasonable concerns are generally voiced to justify excluding women from the infantry,” Professor King points out. “First, women are simply not strong enough and so the physical selection standards would have to be lowered. Second, that the physical attraction between heterosexual men and women would undermine the cohesion and special solidarity required of the infantry unit.”

Based on a two-year study, including fieldwork and interviews with female combat veterans, Professor King suggests that the successful accession of women in, for example, the Canadian Infantry could be replicated in the British Army. “It’s a fact that most women are physically weaker than most men,” he explains. “A 2002 UK MOD Report based on extensive physiological testing concluded that only one per cent of trained female soldiers could pass the same courses to the same standards as infantry men. Just because only a small group of women can perform to the higher levels required of the infantry – standards which women combat soldiers themselves defend as essential for cohesion and combat performance – seems no reason to exclude those females who can do so.”

In terms of the feared negative effect of women on male cohesion, Professor King finds clear evidence that cohesion arises from training and professional competence, rather than any bond of male friendship. “It is precisely because cohesion is based on professional competence and not arbitrary personal or cultural judgements that ethnic minorities and homosexuals have been able to serve in the infantry without difficulty. Physically capable women might be integrated into the infantry if they are judged on their performance and not gender. Substantial evidence from Iraq and Afghanistan suggests this is what happened in terms of women on the frontline in specialist roles.”

Dangers of fraternisation, bullying and harassment clearly exist. The persistence of a masculine culture which stereotypes women, however competent, has to be recognised. Finally, in reality only a tiny proportion of women (three to six in each battalion) could pass the infantry tests. To minimise their isolation and dangers of fraternisation while opening the infantry to women, the optimal solution may be to assign this very small minority to more senior, specialist roles such as medics, intelligence officers or indeed commanders rather than expect them to serve as standard riflemen.
IN BRIEF

SCHOOL DROP-OUT
In Malawi, one of the ten poorest countries in the world, initial enrolment in school is high, but half of the children drop out by the end of year six, and only one third complete the eight years of primary school education. Based on data from both northern and southern Malawi, researchers aim to explore the pathways to drop-out and their causes.

ESRC grant number ES/L013967/1

DEMENTIA PARTNERSHIP
A five-day summer school in Rio de Janeiro aims to foster research partnerships between British and Brazilian researchers working on the theme of dementia, develop capacity in Brazil around this topic and improve the research infrastructure. Six months after the summer school, Brazilian researchers will visit the UK to develop the partnerships with UK-based researchers established during the Rio meeting.

ESRC grant number ES/M011658/1

SPACE PERCEPTIONS
Does human space travel have a positive impact on school students’ perception and uptake of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects? Researchers aim to assess pupils’ attitudes to STEM subjects and to space science, gather views on what influences participation in STEM subjects and provide an overview of current space science resources aimed at engaging young people in STEM subjects.

ESRC grant number ES/M011879/1

New police approaches to missing people

POLICE OFFICERS HAVE new guidance on how to deal with missing people following an in-depth study of people who have chosen to disappear. More than 350,000 persons are reported missing every year. “What police officers say to people – once they are found – about being a missing person matters hugely in helping the person cope and preventing it happening again,” researcher Dr Hester Parr points out.

Based on interviews with 45 people aged between 18 and 79 who had previously chosen to go missing in the Grampian and London areas, this study is the first of its kind to provide insight into why people go missing and where that journey takes them.

People go missing for a variety of reasons, researchers learned, including feeling unable to cope or trapped. Once missing, people are extremely resourceful in remaining so, Dr Parr explains. “Most do not stray away from their local area as they don’t want to become lost but many consciously avoid CCTV cameras, the police and public interaction. Remaining missing is exhausting, however, and most people are found within a week.”

Once people are found, the study suggests that police and charity services need to focus more on the process of return for the missing person and how they take care of these very vulnerable people at that moment. “At present, many people don’t understand what going missing means and don’t know whether they are committing a criminal act and could be arrested,” Dr Parr says. “If police are unsympathetic, people can be left feeling guilty and ashamed which can compound the negative feelings which made them leave home in the first place.”

People use mobility in the same way that others use alcohol or drugs to escape from their problems, researchers explain. Interventions to help break this cycle and reduce the chances of a repeat event include a helpful and empathetic return interview with the police, a thorough ‘safe and well’ check to ensure the psychological welfare of the located person, and a referral to an appropriate local agency or the Missing People Charity. These recommendations have recently been included in Police Scotland’s Standard Operating Procedure and College of Policing guidelines.

“Our hope is that this research will help broaden public and professional understanding of people reported as missing, lessen the stigma attached to the experience, and ensure missing people are treated empathetically and not as ‘time resource problems’,” Dr Parr concludes.

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Tackling modern forced labour

VICTIMS OF MODERN slavery in the UK could number between 10,000 and 13,000, according to the Home Office. Recently, awareness of this growing problem has been raised through the creation of the independent Forced Labour Monitoring Group (FLMG).

Drawing together government inspection agencies, policymakers, academics and representatives from business, the unions and the wider voluntary and community sector, the FLMG has substantially raised the profile of the extent and type of forced labour in the UK as well as the need for strengthening policy, legal, regulatory and political responses. The FLMG has strongly shaped debates about issues needing to be addressed in the Modern Slavery Bill (currently going through Parliament).

Researchers view the FLMG as a pilot for a potentially permanent network that could be independent and/or embedded within government (along the lines of either the Fair Employment Enforcement Board or an All-Party Parliamentary Group).

Media shapes views of Russian election ‘fairness’

ALMOST TWO FIFTHS of Russian voters considered the December 2011 elections unfair, according to surveys conducted by University of Glasgow researchers. And the belief in Russian election ‘unfairness’ appears to be growing (25 per cent in 2007 compared to 39 per cent in 2011), particularly among those who describe themselves as living on ‘poorer’ incomes.

Findings reveal that the media played a major role in shaping the Russian public’s views about the fairness of the election. The greater the frequency of watching television, the more likely the person was to view the elections as having been fairly conducted; but more frequent use of the internet was associated with seeing the election as unfair.

Watching television and reading newspapers regularly in Russia has been relatively constant over the decade, but internet use has grown exponentially. Just two per cent of people surveyed in 2001 reported regular internet use, but by 2011 that had climbed to 50 per cent, almost on a par with newspaper readership. Social media – Facebook in particular – proved important in disseminating information and helping to mobilise support for post election anti-regime demonstrations.

Increasing perception of election unfairness coupled with the growing influence of social media, particularly among the young, are not encouraging for the Kremlin or practitioners of ‘authoritarian elections’ elsewhere, says researcher Professor Stephen White.
IN BRIEF

SHARED READING
Family-based shared book-reading interventions work less effectively for children from disadvantaged backgrounds than originally thought, particularly when parents have lower levels of education. Researchers aim to develop a better understanding of how reading interventions work and how parents use them, to help educators design targeted, cost-effective interventions to improve language of under fives.
ESRC grant number ES/M003752/1

CLIMATE ATTITUDES
Public engagement with climate change, and support for policies to tackle it, are critical in creating a climate-proof Europe. Attitudes to climate change are well documented in individual European countries but not understood at a European level. An interdisciplinary team from the UK, Germany, Norway and France will address this through directly comparable and nationally representative surveys of public opinion.
ESRC grant number ES/M009505/1

LEARNING OUTCOMES
Children from disadvantaged backgrounds worldwide are likely to experience a poor quality of education that limits learning potential. Based on a project in India and Pakistan, researchers aim to identify strategies to raise learning outcomes for all children, regardless of background. The study will identify which aspects of teaching are most important for improving all children’s learning.
ESRC grant number ES/M005445/1

New access to living standards data

THE TYPE OF poverty experienced by one fifth of working households in 1904 had been almost completely eliminated by the late 1930s due to reduction in household size and an increase in real earnings, according to data held in a publicly accessible ‘virtual centre’ on living standards in Britain during the first half of the twentieth Century.

In a three-year project, researchers digitised data from the Board of Trade 1904 household expenditure survey, the Ministry of Labour 1957/8 and 1953/4 Household Expenditure Surveys and 1960 Family Expenditure Survey.

The British Living Standards resource now offers academics, teachers and the public greater understanding of the transformation which occurred between 1900 and 1960 as Britain moved from widespread chronic poverty into a modern consumer society.

Influences on family proximity

AS PAYING FOR child care and social care is prohibitively expensive for many, informal care-giving within the family is potentially important. Based on a two-year study of Understanding Society survey data, researchers find that education and ethnicity have the greatest impact on how close parents and adult children live to each other and hence how far support may be possible.

“Relatively few retired people move in the UK so whether or not parents are living close to their children is driven primarily by the residential moves of the younger generation,” says researcher Professor Tak Wing Chan. And as children get older they tend to live farther from their parents.

The major predictor of those moves is education. University graduates are much less likely than non-graduates to live near their parents. In the UK, the higher education participation rate index (ie, the number of home entrants to higher education aged under 21 relative to the average population aged 18-19) has risen from six per cent of people born in 1941-2 to 28 per cent for people born in 1991-92. “If this increases then we can expect the geographical distance between generations to increase yet further in coming years,” says Professor Chan.

Ethnicity is the second major predictor of intergenerational proximity with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis particularly likely to live with or near the other generation. As the fastest growing non-white ethnic groups are Black Africans, Pakistanis and Indians then this might suggest that older members of these communities could have more adult children to care for them. “It’s important to remember that while these ethnic groups may – through geographical proximity – be in a better position to provide care, it is not certain whether that is a burden which the younger generation will wish to carry,” Professor Chan insists.
Poor financial literacy not the only cause of debt

POOR FINANCIAL LITERACY and lack of self-control contribute to problem debt, according to a study of the relationship between self-control, financial literacy and over-indebtedness on UK consumer credit debt.

Researchers investigated how consumers’ understanding of financial information affects the way they use credit and debit including credit cards, personal loans and payday loans. To examine consumer financial understanding, otherwise known as ‘financial literacy’, researchers tested a sample of consumers on their knowledge of financial concepts such as interest compounding and real versus nominal returns, plus understanding of information such as Annual Percentage Rates (APRs) on credit agreements. Researchers also gathered information on, for example, the number and type of consumer credit products held and how well those surveyed were keeping up with credit commitments. Other questions explored individuals’ behaviour with regard to financial choices. For example, how far those surveyed agreed or disagreed with statements such as ‘I am prepared to spend now and let the future take care of itself’.

“We found that consumers who use credit and debt have worse financial literacy than those who save,” says researcher Dr John Gathergood. Moreover, borrowers with poor financial literacy hold higher shares of high-cost credit (such as home-collected credit, mail order catalogue debt and payday loans) than those with higher literacy. Also, consumers with poor financial literacy are more likely to lack confidence when interpreting credit terms, and to be confused over financial concepts.

But crucially the study found that poor financial literacy is not the only cause of credit repayment problems. Survey evidence from clients of a credit counselling charity showed that consumers with even severe debt repayment problems did quite well on financial literacy tests.

“Evidence also suggests that debt repayment problems are associated with over-borrowing due to impulsiveness and poor planning,” Dr Gathergood states. Those with self-control problems are likely to get into debt because they make more use of high credit items such as store cards and payday loans. This group is also more likely to suffer income shocks, credit withdrawals and unforeseen expenses on durables, suggesting that lack of self-control increases exposure to a variety of risks.

Poor financial literacy not the only cause of debt

PEOPLE BETWEEN 18 and 30 years of age, roughly 20 per cent of Britain’s voting population, have not yet experienced a time in their adult years when British troops were not engaged in conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan. Based on a representative national sample, researchers explored whether the foreign policy attitudes of the UK’s younger voters differ to older people.

When all age groups were asked whether the UK was right to use military force in Afghanistan and Iraq, those who disapproved of UK involvement outnumbered those who approved by more than a two-to-one margin. Younger voters were actually less sour about Britain’s involvement in these conflicts than the old. In terms of the Syrian civil war, 52 per cent of those 30 and under supported Britain enforcing a no-fly zone over Syria, compared to 45 per cent of over 43s.

“All told, currently there is widespread scepticism across all age groups concerning Britain engaging peacefully or militarily with other countries,” researcher Professor Thomas Scotto states. “Yet there are important differences in scepticism across different age groups. It remains to be seen whether, as the youngest portion of the electorate grows older, their attitudes will change or they will constitute a distinct cohort that is relatively less sceptical of British humanitarian or even military engagement.”

Young Britons less sceptical about foreign engagements

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Young Britons less sceptical about foreign engagements
A TOUCH-SCREEN computer designed to collect reliable data on diet can help detect malnutrition among older people, says a new study. Poor nutrition has a negative impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of older people, but spotting those at risk of malnutrition had previously been difficult.

Now, the NANA (Novel Assessment of Nutrition and Ageing) toolkit offers a simple monitoring system for older people to record what they eat and drink. This toolkit, researchers believe, could reap benefits in a range of institutional settings, including care homes and hospitals, where older people are at risk of malnutrition.

The study further revealed that older people were not only happy to use this new technology in their own homes and comfortable recording daily what they ate and drank, but were also prepared to record their mood, physical activity and complete cognitive measures every day.

“Our findings highlight the potential for early detection and intervention not only for older people at risk of malnutrition but also frailty, cognitive decline and mood disorders,” researcher Professor Arlene Astell points out. Data collected by NANA could address the desire of many older people to ‘see how I am doing’ as well as alerting, for example, their GP to any significant changes in their health.

NANA has policy implications, she continues, in respect of its potential for establishing prospective monitoring of older adults, particularly those identified as being at particular risk of health conditions associated with ageing.

In addition to the immediate benefits to the current generation of older adults, the information collected would provide a large dataset to profile the emergence of some of the major health conditions associated with ageing. Looking ahead, the technology could also be adapted for use with children or people with particular health needs, such as diabetes or weight management.
Positive experiences of surrogacy

SURROGACY IS STILL considered a positive experience by surrogate mothers and their children up to ten years after the birth of the surrogacy child, according to a small-scale follow up study of the experiences and psychological health of surrogate mothers and their families.

Interviews with 34 surrogate mothers in the original study published in 2003 revealed that while some found the weeks following the birth difficult, most did not experience psychological problems one year later. A decade on, none of the 20 surrogates re-interviewed expressed regrets about their involvement in surrogacy and their psychological wellbeing was unchanged. Findings further reveal that surrogates’ own children were not negatively affected as a result of their mother’s decision to be a surrogate.

Data shows Britain is pulling together not pulling apart

THE WIDELY HELD view that Britain is experiencing increasing social polarisation is challenged by a new study of the social closeness, or distance, between groups in the UK and Europe. Social distance patterns were shown to be largely stable for an extended period of time, and, if anything, change that did occur was in the direction of reduced social distance.

Using data from major UK and European social surveys, researchers investigated social distance between people, and whether this changed over the period 1970 to 2012. The study classified people into groups defined by their social positions, attitudes or lifestyles (for example, political values, leisure interests, or educational or occupational circumstances), then measured the frequency of social interaction between people with similar or different characteristics. Interaction was measured through marriage, friendship or the sharing of networks.

“Our evidence shows that in general there has been increased social intermixing and reduced exclusivity in the UK over the last 40 years,” states researcher Dr Paul Lambert. “In terms of social distance patterns, neither Britain, nor indeed Europe, was ‘pulling apart’. Rather for Britain it has been more a case of ‘pulling together’.”

SMART ECO-CITIES

Europe and China face the challenge of finding ways to promote economic transition towards a green economy. China and several European countries are planning and building experimental cities focused on the green economy. Researchers will carry out international, interdisciplinary, multi-method analysis of green economy-focused eco-city projects in China, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and France. ESRC grant number ES/L015978/1

DOCTORAL TRAINING

The new Cambridge Doctoral Training Centre will run a linked series of training courses for postgraduate and early career social scientists. These will explore the use of large datasets in the social sciences; examine approaches to the evaluation of social problems and offer the opportunity to learn about advanced analytical techniques in relation to geographical information about social issues. ESRC grant number ES/M005895/1

PENSION QUESTIONS

Radical changes have been announced to pension schemes across the public sector from April 2015. How will the changes affect remuneration in public-versus private-sector jobs in the UK and who will be most affected? Will the reforms induce employees to switch from public to private sector? Researchers will answer these questions using a newly developed methodology and simulation methods. ESRC grant number ES/L014920/1
Human health and wellbeing have been a concern for the ESRC and its predecessor, the Social Science Research Council, throughout their 50 years of existence. Today, as a glance at the website will show, the ESRC supports a lively range of research on these themes. But the same issues were a lifelong concern for the SSRC’s first chair, Michael Young, later Lord Young of Dartington. As principal author of the Labour Party’s 1945 election manifesto, and founder of many social enterprises from the Consumers’ Association to the Open University, he knew better than most that there is more to life than money.

Five decades on, health and wellbeing have been supplemented by ‘happiness’ as legitimate areas for ESRC research. And in a development which we can be sure Young would have welcomed, this research is being applied in policy and practice, influencing approaches to education, employment, and physical and mental health.

A veteran of this field is Richard Layard, now Lord Layard and emeritus professor at the London School of Economics, who wrote in 1980 about research on the relationship between income and happiness. The basic finding in this field, he says, is that beyond a certain modest level, more money does not make countries much happier. Because people tend to compare their income to those of people around them, very little extra happiness is produced if everyone tries to raise their standard of living.

Layard says: “This field became a genuine science in the 1980s because of US research, and began involving psychologists, neuroscientists and others as well as economists. It is really about recognising the importance of what [the philosopher] Jeremy Bentham believed in, ‘the primacy of feelings’.”

He adds that in recent times, people have come to regard it as normal to be consulted about things that affect them, such as health services. “We no longer think of health services just as a way of curing people, and we know that people’s satisfaction with these services has a lot to do with whether they think they are being listened to and spoken to properly. The idea of asking people about public services now has deep roots, and this extends to asking them about things that affect their happiness with their lives.”

For Layard, a concern for human happiness is “an argument for an active state that takes responsibility for what concerns people.” An example is mental health. He says: “We know that a person’s internal life is more important than their external one in determining their happiness, and that issues such as addiction, or family conflict, are central to happiness. They are certainly more important to people than many of the things politicians worry more about.” As a result, he has been a principal backer of Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, an initiative which now has UK-wide government backing.

He adds that a future priority is to extend such services more effectively to children and young people.

Layard also points out that happiness and wellbeing remain lively areas for research. He says: “The cohort databases run by the ESRC are an invaluable asset. The next step is to use this kind of data to understand the causes of wellbeing through life. We know that a lot of these features are laid down early on, so we need to have a special emphasis on parenting and schooling.” For the same reason, he is keen for child and adult mental services to be better-resourced and to have more trained professional expertise.

What works?
A sign that wellbeing is a growing political priority is the establishment of the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, one of a series of such centres in fields including local economic growth, better ageing and educational attainment. Its
establishment owes much to the influence of Lord (Gus) O’Donnell, the former cabinet secretary, who is described by Layard as “a hero” for his role in the growing acceptance that these issues are of policy importance. In addition, Prime Minister David Cameron has long supported wellbeing and happiness as a concern for government.

The ESRC is a partner in the Centre and leads its research commissioning. Nancy Hey, deputy director (development), says that while the organisation is still in the throes of being set up, it is clear that it will have a bridging function that involves bringing research evidence to a broad range of users. Among its 17 partner bodies, the ESRC will take a lead in research, Public Health England is heavily involved because of its work in the application of new knowledge, the Office for National Statistics will add expertise in the measurement of wellbeing, and the Big Lottery Fund will bring experience of supporting wellbeing interventions.

The aim of the Centre is to raise awareness of wellbeing in a wide range of contexts, including the workplace. Hey says: “There is broader support for the Centre than we had perhaps anticipated. Clinical Commissioning Groups, community organisations and public health directors are all showing interest. In Northern Ireland, local authorities have a duty to promote wellbeing, and we know that human resources professionals in local government and elsewhere are keen.”

Hey adds that businesses such as BT have got the wellbeing message and regard it as a priority. She hopes to spread the idea to other companies by a process of mutual learning. She says: “This issue goes a long way beyond whether employers provide fruit for the office. It started out with workplace stress, but has now extended into areas such as presenteeism.” The City Mental Health Alliance, for example, is pushing workforce welfare in possibly the UK’s most high-stress and long-hours workplace.

Measuring health interventions
The ESRC’s longest-running and arguably best-established research on health and wellbeing concerns health economics. The ESRC has been a key partner for the University of York, which has had a pivotal role in establishing health economics as a vigorous and influential subject and in training many of its top practitioners. The York MSc in health economics now has 40 students a year, and many alumni are in key jobs in the field around the world.

Professor Andrew Jones, head of the department of economics and related studies at York, says that health economics began there in 1963 and has grown rapidly since. A key innovation in the field, the QALY or quality-adjusted life year, was pioneered at York by Professor Alan Williams. It is a measure of the gain to be made by a specific health intervention, and is used in the NHS and other organisations to compare the value of apparently disparate choices.

The QALY has its critics. Professor Layard, for example, thinks it pays too little attention to mental rather than physical health. But Jones points out that it is a key tool for “priority-setting in a non-market system, where cost-benefit analysis is not
widely used.” He says: “Public policy sets the overall budgets and the health economics agenda is always about the best use of these resources. Austerity just makes the decisions more stringent.” He adds that while some areas of academic life make efforts to engage policymakers in their work, health economics has been close to policy throughout its existence.

Like Layard, Jones thinks that the next priorities for the field are in the world of Big Data. He says: “The ESRC longitudinal data for the UK is very rich and can now be linked to administrative data such as the Hospital Episode Statistics, to socio-economic data, and to genetic and biological data. This could allow us to track a birth cohort into later life and see lifestyle differences, for example in death rates and in conditions such as cancer.”

Despite these successes, issues of health, happiness and wellbeing are not straightforward. There are surprisingly sharp disagreements between rival camps even over whether these terms are too fluffy, or too prescriptive, to be useful measures of fulfilment.

But it is also clear that these concerns are being taken seriously around the world. Jones says that health economics varies according to the system it serves, so that in the US, it is more concerned with markets than it is in Europe. But he adds that players such as the World Bank and the World Health Organisation are pushing evidence-based approaches to health in the global south. Professor Layard is involved in work by the OECD to develop a life satisfaction measure that might be used alongside more traditional economic indicators, and adds that mental health and wellbeing may feature in the UN’s forthcoming Sustainable Development Goals.

Dr Sarah White, senior lecturer at the University of Bath, is directing an ESRC-DFID-funded research project on Wellbeing and Poverty Pathways in Zambia and India. She has researched international development and wellbeing in South Asia and Africa since 2002, beginning with a big ESRC award of £3.25 million. She says: “I have been trying to ask detailed questions that allow me to put numbers on how people think and feel about their lives.” But she adds: “It is vital to avoid the ‘numbers game’ and do qualitative research as well. The quantitative approach can be limiting when you want to find how people feel about their lives. In the South, economic wellbeing is of continued importance alongside relationships and more subjective factors. This work shows that it is vital to look at the local context, and not to import your own experience.”

The starkest difference between British views on happiness and those that typify the global South are in attitudes to community. White says: “UK replies to questions in this area are about whether individuals feel good about their lives. Elsewhere, people talk about the context in which they live. So if you ask British people whether they help others, they say they regret not doing so, but if you ask people in Africa, they say they did not have the means to do so. Partly this is because they have fewer resources, but it is also because they are less taken up with themselves and lack the massive sense of self that we tend to have in this country.”

The lesson, White believes, is that it might be worth thinking more closely about the scale on which research about happiness and wellbeing is applied. “It might make sense,” she says, “for a hospital to care about patient wellbeing. But it might be less feasible to apply these tools at the level of the nation state, because they are derived from findings from individuals and their relationships.”

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The latest audit of political engagement by the Hansard Society reveals that only half of the public surveyed suggest they are actually going to vote on July 7, only a third thinks that the political system works well, only a third thinks that Parliament holds the government to account, whereas some elements of the political process – like the weekly Prime Minister’s Questions – seems almost designed to make large sections of society “turn off” rather than “tune in”. And yet to talk about “disaffected democrats” is not exactly a new or novel theme. The influential Trilateral Commission report The Crisis of Democracy was published 40 years ago and in many ways democracy seems in perpetual crisis – stumbling from scandal to scandal and failure to failure. But is there something different or novel happening today?

The answer would appear to be ‘yes’.

The first and arguably most significant shift is not so much in relation to high levels of political disengagement but to an increasing polarisation within society. Put slightly differently, political disengagement would be less of a problem if it were spread fairly evenly across society. But it is not. Democratic inequality is growing in ways that risk creating a vicious spiral of apathy and withdrawal.

As the IPPR’s recent research on ‘divided democracy’ reveals, if you are young or poor you are far less likely to vote than if you are older or wealthy. In 2010 just 44 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted in the General Election, compared to 76 per cent of those aged 65 and over (the gap was only 18 per cent in 1970 compared to 32 per cent in 2010). At the moment just 10 per cent of those aged 18-25 state that they are certain to vote in the 2015 General Election and in the United States the ratio of young to old voting is likely to be 1:4 by 2020.

This ‘gap’ matters for at least three reasons:

First, there is increasing evidence of a ‘cohort effect’ in which young people do not take the participatory habit into later life; second, there is an understandable ‘policy effect’ in the sense that politicians tend to cater their policies to benefit those members of the public that are most like to vote (i.e., the older and wealthier) thereby creating a spiral of cynicism on the part of the young and the poor, therefore further depressing turnout. Finally, there is an issue about roots and meaning and citizenship and notably about political recruitment as those from the most deprived and disengaged communities feel little commitment to broader society, let alone any aspiration to ‘step into the arena’ themselves.

‘The arena’ itself – the political institutions and mechanisms through which politics is conducted in the UK – is also under huge pressure in a manner that is arguably unique in British constitutional history. The Scottish independence referendum has not ‘solved’ a problem but has simply set in train a number of major constitutional tensions and pressures that the post-2015 government will somehow have to manage. More powers for Scotland, more for Wales and Northern Ireland, more to the northern powerhouses of Manchester, Sheffield and several other cities.

But what kind of democracy are we trying to build? How do the people of England have a say in the future of the UK? The European question and the surge in support for UKIP raises a host of related issues that each in their own ways suggest that the UK is unrelenting from above and below.

Increasing political disengagement and institutions under pressure is hardly a novel theme. Some might argue it’s an inevitable and strangely positive element of democratic politics that cannot be avoided. My concern – taken from a reading of the available data – is that healthy scepticism and institutional pressure have mutated into corrosive cynicism and institutional failure.

The British way of ‘muddling through’ is no longer working but the dominant political culture seems unable to think of new ways of breathing life into politics. The contemporary and archetypal example of this is the planned ‘Renewal and Refurbishment’ of the Palace of Westminster. This will start after the 2015 General Election and is currently estimated to cost the British taxpayer somewhere between £2.5 and £4 billion.

The link with political disengagement and the dominant political culture is that this massive investment in the machinery of democracy is not being used to redesign and modern Parliament but simply to replace like with like. Designing for democracy has not been embraced despite the fact that the current facilities and procedures are both dated and inadequate. Given the levels of public disengagement and frustration this may well turn out to be a missed opportunity.
In the run-up to the 2015 General Election, members of the ESRC-funded British Election Study (BES) and their colleagues answer questions about the possible election outcomes and what might influence them. Which parties will do well and why?

**From which parties will Ukip win votes in 2015?**
“We find that Ukip will inflict much more damage on the Conservative Party in the 2015 General Election than on Labour. Many of Labour’s core supporters, who could be expected to support anti-EU and anti-immigration positions of Ukip, had already deserted their party between 2001 and 2010 as a reaction to Blair’s New Labour project. They have since moved to UKIP, in many cases stopping off at the Conservatives on the way. So while much of the damage has already been done to Labour, the switch from the Conservatives to Ukip is still happening: in Labour constituencies Ukip can be expected to take far more votes from opposition parties than from Labour itself.”

**Professor Geoff Evans and Dr Jon Mellon, University of Oxford**

**How big is the representation gap?**
“A sizeable segment of the British public sees none of the political parties as electorally attractive, and is thus not well represented. One of the most important drivers of this lack of representation is perceived lack of differentiation between the parties, particularly between the Conservatives and Labour. The consequences of this representation deficit are strongly depressed rates of attention, involvement and participation.”

**Professor Cees van der Eijk, University of Nottingham**

**Where will the parties do well and badly in 2015?**
“Dramatic changes are in store for the geography of electoral competition in May 2015 with important implications for seats. The doubling of SNP support in Scotland presages big Labour losses north of the border and potentially a pivotal role for the SNP in a hung parliament. The geography of Liberal Democrat support in the BES suggests even greater losses for the party than the already dire overall vote share in the polls. And despite the important effects of the substantial rise of Ukip on the shares of the vote for the two main parties, Ukip are not set to win many seats nor have a disproportionate effect on the competition for seats between the two main parties in their key marginals.”

**Dr Stephen Fisher, University of Oxford**

**Does it matter how your friends vote?**
“The smaller parties are at a disadvantage insofar as fewer people have Ukip or Lib Dem discussion partners and are therefore less likely to hear positive messages of support about those parties. This matters because having no friends to corroborate a party preference leads to higher chances of defection. Conversely, having friends and family who support a party substantially increases the chances of switching to that party. The trouble for less well established parties is that despite the larger parties being increasingly unpopular, there is a very long way to go before any more than a handful of voters can say “if they’re good enough for my friends, they’re good enough for me.”

**Professor Ed Fieldhouse, University of Manchester**

**Is Ukip reaching the parts of the electorate that other parties cannot reach?**
“It’s not necessarily true that Ukip is winning votes from the disillusioned who think politicians are all the same and who have stopped participating in British elections. Our BES data show quite clearly that Ukip isn’t reaching the parts of the electorate that other parties cannot reach. It does show that Ukip is picking up support from those who distrust politicians, but crucially this support is significantly higher among those who tend to vote in general elections. Political distrust and disaffection is an important part of Ukip’s success. However, to assume that Ukip is outperforming all other parties in reaching those disengaged from politics is either premature or simply incorrect.”

**Professor Jane Green, University of Manchester**
of treaty agreements with the EU and announce a referendum sometime after his assumed re-election? But the facts revealed by the third wave of the online panel data of the BES are sobering. When controlled for general Left-Right orientations, the EU issue does not add much to our understanding of voting decisions; it adds least for the party of the PM.

“Looking at the importance of Europe, there are three lessons. The first is that though ‘Left and Right’ is definitely a feature of European politics, this dimension is not integrated into all aspects of the political discourse. Second, the electoral potential of the Conservative Party is, surprisingly, the least affected by the question of Europe when compared to the other major parties, including Ukip. But third, Europe is still key to Ukip’s electoral potential, though other issues in the Left Right debate are equally important.”

Professor Hermann Schmitt, University of Manchester

How is Ukip’s support evolving?

“The third wave of the BES reveals that UKIP continues to hold on to many of the voters it picked up in the run-up to the 2014 European elections. Though the party has experienced modest declines in loyalty since early 2014, still more than one in two of the party’s 2014 voters say they would vote UKIP in a general election. And even though UKIP’s supporters continue to be motivated by concerns over immigration and Europe, the party has made gains among a wide range of groups in society, including groups where the party has traditionally struggled to gain support. Moreover, UKIP’s gains outweigh those made by the other major parties during the same period, which suggests that that party continues to mount a strong challenge to the established political system heading into 2015.”

Dr Matt Goodwin and Dr Caitlin Milazzo, University of Nottingham

Can the Conservatives win the ethnic minority vote?

“Since 2010, Labour’s ethnic minority vote has collapsed, and the party can no longer take these voters for granted. In particular, just less than a quarter of Indian voters have abandoned the party: the numbers identifying with the Labour Party fell from 77 per cent in 1997 to 45 per cent in 2014. But it does not follow that those ethnic minority voters who abandoned Labour will turn to the Conservatives, despite Tory attempts to woo them. Ethnic minority voters who live in diverse areas, are rarely exposed to party campaigning and are aware of racial prejudice, are still unlikely to vote Tory.”

Dr Maria Sobolewska, University of Manchester

How satisfied are voters with their MPs?

“The claim that while people don’t like politicians as a species they do like their own MP has now become a political truism. You hear it a lot from some MPs, for whom it has become a bit of a comfort blanket; battered by years of press and public hostility, they can reassure themselves that the animosity is nothing personal, that while other politicians may be disliked, they personally are OK. But the idea that we really rate our local MP whilst hating MPs in general is wide of the mark.”

Professor Phil Cowley, University of Nottingham
Over 1,600 images from 270 UK schools, sixth forms and further education colleges were entered in the ESRC’s Changing World photographic competition. The competition challenged young people aged 14-18 to show how the world has changed over the last 50 years, and imagine how it may continue to change in the future.

The judges were Sophie Batterbury, Picture Editor of The Independent on Sunday, Ollie Smallwood, freelance photographer and writer, and, from the ESRC, Chief Executive Jane Elliott, Jacky Clake, Head of Communications and Susie Watts, Head of Public Engagement. The winning entries were displayed at The Menier Gallery, London from 10-14 March and are also shown here. See also news page 30.

Left to right from top to bottom:
Through the looking glass – Winner: Environment and overall winner
Rachel Coleman, Bishop Stopford School

Ophelia – Winner: Opinions and beliefs
Greta Gillham Wright, Simon Langton Girl’s Grammar School

Is anonymity so bad? – Winner: Community and friends
Nadia Rouhipour, Torquay Girls Grammar School

Height – Winner: Interests and hobbies
Josh Cooper, Bishop Wordsworth’s School

A tiny moon-landing – Winner: Technology and media
Henry Vincent, Twyford C of E High School

The living room – Winner: Family
Jennifer Riley, The North Halifax Grammar School
The public finances remain in a far less healthy state than was planned by this stage back in 2010 when the coalition government came to power. The government is still spending about five per cent of national income more than it raises in revenue, and public sector net debt is set to peak at over 80 per cent of national income.

This slower-than-planned deficit reduction is largely due to the poor performance of the economy at the start of this parliament, rather than any failure to implement the set of planned tax rises and spending cuts. Since the original tax and spending plans were laid out by the Chancellor back in 2010, growth has turned out lower than expected. This means lower tax receipts and more social security spending.

The growth we have had has also been less ‘tax-rich’ than was expected. For example, it has comprised more employment but lower earnings for those employed: we estimate that this different composition alone has cost the Exchequer £6.5 billion per year.

The Chancellor has responded to this unexpected weakness by pencilling in further policy action – almost entirely in the form of spending cuts – after the coming election; hence increasing the duration of the fiscal consolidation, rather than increasing its intensity over the current parliament. In fact real spending cuts have been substantially less than originally planned over this parliament, because inflation has turned out lower while the cash-terms spending plans have not been reduced.

The result of all this is that difficult choices still lie ahead. Some countries have so far implemented much bigger austerity packages than the UK, but the UK is currently planning the largest fiscal consolidation out of 32 advanced economies over the period from 2015 to 2019. Virtually all of this – according to the December Autumn Statement plans – is to come from spending cuts. If these plans were implemented we would see real cuts of 14.1 per cent to departmental spending between 2015-16 and 2019-20. This would come on top of the substantial cut (9.5 per cent) that has already been made to departmental budgets between 2010-11 and 2015-16 and could lead to public spending falling to its lowest share of national income since at least 1948. Further cuts will surely be harder to make, given that so much of the lowest-hanging fruit has presumably been picked off already.

However, we are in a slightly odd situation. The three main UK political parties could each cut spending by less than is implied by the Autumn Statement plans and still meet their fiscal targets, and we might consider that to be a better guide to what will actually happen. Importantly, the differences between the parties here are substantial. If they implement the tax cuts and £12 billion cut to social security that they have suggested, to meet their target of budget balance the Conservatives would need to reduce departmental spending after 2015-16 by 6.7 per cent – not the 9.5 per cent implied by the Autumn Statement plans. Labour and the Liberal Democrats would need to impose departmental spending cuts of much less – 1.4 per cent and 2.1 per cent respectively – to be consistent with their fiscal targets and stated intentions on tax and benefit policy.

Smaller spending cuts are easier to deliver than larger spending cuts, but of course there is a trade-off. Continuing with Labour’s target (to borrow only for investment) over the 2020s would result in debt falling by nine percentage points of GDP, compared to a 19 percentage point fall under the Conservatives’ proposal for overall budget balance. Higher debt means more spending on debt interest and potentially greater vulnerability to any future adverse shock.

A future government could also ease the pressure on departments – without requiring...
higher borrowing and higher debt – by finding additional social security cuts or raising taxes. But again there are few easy answers.

Finding an additional £12 billion per year of social security cuts – as the Conservatives have suggested – would be roughly equivalent to freezing all benefits and tax credits other than state pensions for all five years of the next parliament. This would cut spending by £13 billion and take an average of £800 a year (in today’s terms) from 16 million families. To cut spending on this scale while protecting pensioners entirely would require more severe cuts to working-age benefits. So far the Conservatives have proposed freezing most working-age benefits for two years; even if this was extended to five years, this would reduce spending by only £6.9 billion. And the revenue raised from other potential cuts in spending suggested by the Conservatives and Labour – withdrawing winter fuel payments from higher- and additional-rate taxpayers, cutting housing benefit for young people, reducing the benefit cap, and increasing child benefit by one per cent for a further year – would pale in comparison.

So far there has been much less discussion among politicians of tax increases than of benefit cuts. But the first year after each of the last five elections has seen the announcement of net tax rises of at least £5 billion per year in today’s terms: this is approximately equivalent to a one percentage point rise in all rates of income tax, or in all employee and self-employed National Insurance contribution (NIC) rates, or in the main rate of VAT.

All the main parties have suggested they would like ‘the rich’ to bear their ‘fair share’ of any additional fiscal adjustment. Tax revenues are already highly concentrated – for example just three per cent of the adult population already pay half of all income tax. Though there is genuinely large uncertainty, our best estimate suggests that there is little scope to raise large additional sums in income tax from the very highest-income individuals by raising their marginal tax rates (because they are likely to respond in ways which reduce the yield to the Exchequer). Instead a government looking to raise more tax revenue from the very well off might look at extending the reach of inheritance tax or capital gains tax, perhaps abolishing some existing reliefs.

Property tax is an area in need of reform, and is also an area that politicians have mentioned in the context of raising more from the ‘better off’. Rather than introducing a separate ‘mansion tax’ as Labour and the Liberal Democrats propose, the deficient council tax system could be brought up to date and refocused on higher-value properties.

Further cuts to income tax relief on pension contributions are probably best avoided, as this relief exists precisely because pension income is taxed later when people receive it in retirement; but there are subsidies for pension saving that ought to be reduced, and this could potentially raise substantial revenue.

In summary, it is difficult to predict the evolution of the state and the public finances in the years to come. As ever, of course, it depends crucially on the performance of the economy. In addition, though, the main parties differ substantially going into the election in terms of the levels of borrowing that their fiscal rules would allow; and they have only scratched the surface in laying out the specifics of what they will do. ■
We present an at-a-glance overview of the key issues in Britain today. In this issue our focus is on households and family. All statistics are from the ONS Families and Households 2014 Statistical Bulletin unless otherwise stated.

Household size

There were 26.7 million households in the UK in 2014. The number of households has increased by 7% since 2004, similar to the growth in the UK population during this period. Percentage of households by household size 2014.

56% 20%
56% 30%
91% 16%
30% 29%

Households containing two or more families were the fastest growing household type in the decade to 2014, increasing by 56% to 313,000.

In 2014 there were 2 million lone parents with dependent children in the UK. Women accounted for 91% of lone parents with dependent children.

Cohabiting couple families grew by 38% between 2004 and 2014. This is the fastest growing type of family in the UK.

Dependent children

Fifty-eight per cent of lone parents with dependent children have only one child. Only 12% of lone parents have three or more children. Married couples with dependent children have more children on average than other family types, and only 39% have only one dependent child. Families with dependent children by family type and number of dependent children 2014 - percentage.

"After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relations" Oscar Wilde

"Home is where you are loved the most and act the worst" Marjorie Pay Hinckley

The total number of families in the UK has increased from 17.3 million in 2004 to 18.6 million in 2014 – a rise of 8%. The number of married couple families increased by 266,000 between 2004 and 2014, to 12.5 million in 2014. The increase in opposite sex cohabiting couple families rose from 2.3 million to 3.0 million between 2004 and 2014. And in 2014 there were an estimated 84,000 families consisting of a same sex cohabiting couple and 61,000 consisting of a civil partnered couple; the latter has increased since the introduction of civil partnerships in the UK in December 2005.
**Living with parents**

In 2013, over 3.3 million adults in the UK aged between 20 and 34 were living with a parent or parents. That is 26% of this age group. 

Young adults aged 20-34 living with their parents, three-year average 1996-2013. Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

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**Babies born within cohabiting union**

The proportion of all babies born within a cohabiting union has almost doubled, from 16 per cent in 1991 to 30 per cent in 2008. Percentage of live births to married, cohabiting and other/lone women, England and Wales. Source: Population Trends, No. 140, Summer 2010, ONS

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**Multi-family households**


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**Living alone**

In 2014, 7.6 million people in UK households lived alone, of which 4.1 million were aged 16 to 64. Of those in this age group, the majority (58%) were male. People living alone, by age group, 2004 to 2014 - millions. Source: Labour Force Survey, ONS

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"I have learned that to be with those I like is enough"  
Walt Whitman
During the 1990s the UK experienced a ‘dash for gas’ as bountiful supplies from the North Sea enabled the power sector to replace coal with cleaner natural gas. This process of decarbonisation played a major role in the UK meeting its Kyoto Protocol emission reduction target.

Inter-connectors were built to link the UK to the continental gas market, allowing gas to be exported from the UK. Yet in 2000, production on the UK continental shelf peaked and by 2004 the UK found itself a net importer of natural gas. By 2014 the UK found itself having to import half of the natural gas it consumed meaning that in just a decade the UK has effectively ‘globalised’ its natural gas security, leaving consumers exposed to market volatility and geopolitics.

A recently completed project funded by the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) – which is supported by the ESRC – has examined the consequences to the UK of increased global market exposure. Because of events in Ukraine and the domestic debate over shale gas development, the issue of gas security is seldom far from the headlines, but should we be concerned and is shale gas the answer?

Today, natural gas plays a major role in the UK’s energy system. According to figures from the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), in 2013 natural gas accounted for 32 per cent of the nation’s primary energy consumption and it was responsible for 27 per cent of electricity generation – a share that has been depressed by the return of cheap coal. Natural gas consumption in the UK is shared more or less equally between three sectors: power generation, industry and households. It is important to remember that more than 80 per cent of households use natural gas. Thus, the future of gas demand in the UK is about more than power generation.

Although the UK’s import dependence has increased significantly, it benefits from a diversity of supply sources. In 2013, production from Norway accounted for 58 per cent of imports carried by pipeline directly to the UK and a further 23 per cent came from continental Europe via the interconnectors.

These imports mean that UK gas security is increasingly exposed to pan-European developments and the policies of the European Commission to create a single European gas market. But in 2013 the remaining 20 per cent...
We are unlikely to see shale gas development of any scale until the mid-2020s.

developed to export LNG. With the loss of the US market, a lot of that new LNG production found its way to the UK. Thus we saw a significant increase in the role of LNG in UK imports. This peaked at nearly 47 per cent of imports in 2011.

In March 2011 the earthquake in Japan and the disaster at the Fukushima Diiachi nuclear power plant had a dramatic impact on the global LNG market. The closure of all of Japan’s nuclear power plants post-Fukushima, combined with high oil prices, meant that Japanese utilities have been willing to pay a high price to attract additional LNG to Japan. The net result is that the ‘surplus’ LNG that was coming to the UK went to Japan instead. This was not a problem because UK gas demand was falling due to the depressed economic situation. Additionally, the shale gas revolution in the US created a surplus of cheap coal, which replaced a lot of gas in the UK’s power generation mix. This set of events demonstrates how the UK is intimately connected to events in the global gas market.

Natural gas has a part to play in the UK’s low-carbon energy transition, but its role is changing from providing base load supply to backing up the intermittency of renewable power generation. At the same time, both industry and households will continue to demand significant amounts of gas throughout the 2020s. Just how much gas will depend on the progress made with energy efficiency and demand reduction, as well as the arrival of a new generation of nuclear power stations, the expansion of renewable power generation and low-carbon alternatives for heating.

Where our gas will come from in the 2020s is a different matter and DECC is suggesting that without the development of shale gas the UK will be 70 per cent import dependent by 2025. This in itself is not a problem as there is sufficient infrastructure to handle this, particularly if total gas demand continues to fall, but there are obvious economic and geopolitical concerns that are raised.

Can shale gas make a difference?

Our project was not about shale gas in the UK, though we did monitor the debate. The first thing to say is that shale gas in the UK is in the early stages of development. We need a programme of exploratory drilling and appraisal to know the full extent of potential reserves. Although the current Government is going ‘all out for shale,’ recent protests make it clear that the industry does not yet have a social licence to operate. To gain that it must demonstrate that it can minimise the impacts of its operation on human health and on the environment. At the same time, the Government must convince the public that the regulatory regime is fit for purpose. Only a carefully monitored drilling programme will provide the necessary evidence of the effects of shale gas on health and the environment, and test the regulatory regime.

It is difficult to see how a moratorium on drilling can progress the debate. What is certain is that we are unlikely to see shale gas development of any scale until the mid-2020s and it also seems unlikely that the level of production will do more than compensate for falling offshore production. Slowing the rate of decline in the North Sea can help, but the best way to reduce the UK’s gas import dependence is to promote energy efficiency, reducing overall demand. This is not just a matter for power generation, but also for industry and households. Whatever happens, there will still be a need for significant amounts of gas in the UK energy mix and the majority of that gas will need to be imported. We need to continue to be vigilant of developments in the global gas market, which is currently fraught with uncertainty.
Digging in data

Analysis of data from local government and businesses can lead to understanding challenges in society and show potential solutions – from improving urban decision-making to helping businesses flourish – that help to shape society.

THREE DATA CENTRES within the ESRC-funded Big Data Network Phase 2 are making data, routinely collected by business and local government organisations, accessible to a wide range of users and academic researchers in order to undertake research of mutual benefit to data owners and in ways that safeguard individuals’ identities.

ESRC Business and Local Government Data Research Centre

**Business and Local Government Data Research Centre:** Led by Professor Vania Sena at the University of Essex

Big data are the talk of the day. As the joke goes, everybody likes to talk about them but in reality not everybody is entirely sure about what they are and how or if they can be of any use.

In reality most organisations do not seem to be able to fully exploit these data and equally they do not seem aware of the techniques that would help them. The ESRC Business and Local Government Data Research Centre allows local governments and businesses to benefit from the big data revolution.

To help companies and local authorities explore and understand their data more effectively, the Centre is collaborating across academia, business and local government drawing together theory and practice.

The Centre is overseeing the creation of a physical repository based at the University of Essex where the big data provided from both businesses and local authorities will be securely stored and will also provide users secure access points to the data.

The research programme will draw on these data providing methodological advances for the analysis of big data, as well as an innovative, substantive and interdisciplinary research programme on smart, sustainable and inclusive regional economic growth. To help local government and businesses make the best of their data, bespoke training and a Knowledge Exchange programme offer users a suite of big data solutions to use data more effectively. Understanding big data is a big deal for everyone. By exploiting and understanding data we can help businesses grow and help inform public policy for a better society.

ESRC Urban Big Data Centre

**Urban Big Data Centre (UBDC):** Led by Professor Piyushimita (Vonu) Thakuriah at the University of Glasgow

Cities are complex and dynamic, constantly challenging urban planners, city managers and policymakers to develop and implement robust urban policy. But city dwellers and organisations (government agencies, business, voluntary organisations, citizen scientists, urban planners using computer simulation models) also generate a wealth of information.

Through the analysis of such urban ‘big data’, analysts can yield new understanding of trends, patterns or relationships about the social, environmental or economic activities of a city. This leads to data-driven urban planning, policymaking and business innovations by helping analysts better understand the challenges facing their city and potential solutions.

The ESRC established the Urban Big Data Centre to provide a framework and support for UK data owners and users to interrogate and extract useful information from urban data for policy, business and citizen engagement. In addition to compiling and providing access to urban data through an online portal, the UBCD also provides services to link and curate data, and expert support and training for users in advanced analytics.

The UBCD is also committed to developing innovative methods relating to urban data management and analysis, and new data products. For example, the Integrated Multimedia City Data (iMCD) project, will collect and analyse urban data...
from three interconnected data strands leading to novel, linked data: a representative household questionnaire-based survey on travel, literacy, energy use etc; sensing data through participants’ use of GPS and lifelogging; and internet-based visual and textual information. These and other data collected by the UBDC will provide opportunities for social scientists wanting to understand the complexity of urban decision-making as well as the possible influences of contextual factors.

Consumer Data Research Centre: Led by professor Mark Birkin at the University of Leeds and professor Paul Longley at University College London

‘Big data’ provide a shared focus of interest between academia, policy research and business. Key to this is the vast amount of consumer data (loyalty schemes, telephone records etc) collected by businesses on a daily basis. Analysis of these data can help us to better understand society and the challenges we face in a range of areas, including health, crime and the economy.

To date, these data have not been widely analysed by academics for two reasons. First, unlike data provided by central or local government, there has previously been little perceived advantage within business organisations and therefore no strong downward pressure to make data available for wider re-use. Second, few business organisations are monopolies so their data only offer part of the picture, making it necessary and requiring skills to link business sources to more inclusive and exhaustive data sources such as the census, or to adopt other methods, such as modelling.

The Consumer Data Research Centre (CDRC) is working with business organisations to open up these data resources, in a safe and secure way, for use by the academic community, and increasing understanding in the industry of the potential value of the data they hold and how it can be utilised to improve the strategic decision-making process.

The Centre is working on driver projects particularly relating to mobility patterns and sustainable consumption, exploring areas such as:
- The geography of fuel poverty and how better targeting of home insulation incentives may alleviate it.
- How the health of local communities is affected by the availability of healthy eating choices.
- How the future vitality of the UK’s high streets is affected by online retailing and how new shopping behaviours can co-exist with the old.

The Centre is working with key partners to establish a network of high-impact research projects using big data, and is always keen to speak to colleagues with new ideas.

The three Centres within the Big Data Network Phase 2 have distinct focuses but are all concerned with using ‘big data’ to help local government and businesses develop new understanding of trends and relationships within society. Data really is helping shape our society for the better.

For more information or to get involved with the work of the Centres, please see:
- www.ubdc.ac.uk
- www.blgdataresearch.org
- www.cdrc.ac.uk
If you had to select three fundamental issues that cities in the UK and internationally are grappling with, what would they be and why?

Technological lock in: We inherit the city our parents leave us — the transport systems that favour the car; the sewage systems made to combat cholera rather than value the resources of clean water they waste, the historical failure to minimise the ecological footprint of the city. Understanding the consequences of these forms of technological lock-in is central to making the 21st-century city able to adapt to new pressures of environment and economy.

Social justice and inequality: There is a moral obligation to ask for whom the city is being refashioned, understand the consequences of technological and economic dynamism, and recognise, contest and reform the ethical basis of city life.

Economic flexibility: As the pace of economic change accelerates the propensity of the city to reinvent itself, to flex its economic and social infrastructure is never more important.

What role does social science play in addressing these issues?

We might think of a spectrum that runs between technocratic knowledge and critical thought. Social sciences at one end of this spectrum gather the data, model the system and provide knowledge of economic specialisation, technological expertise and analytical precision that improve the working of the machine of the city. At the same time, at the other end of this spectrum theory and empirical investigation explore the consequences of the architecture of the machine, who the winners and losers are, and provide a way to think differently about alternative urban futures.

A lot of current interest focuses on Smart Cities and the opportunities afforded by new technologies. What is the potential of these opportunities? And what benefits might they bring to the public?

The generation of swathes of new information, big data and an ‘internet of things’ provides very different ways for understanding cities and the relation between the human and the non-human. At the same time buzz phrases and popular concepts such as smart cities, eco cities, digital cities, or liveable cities become ‘brands’ in their own right, used to rationalise particular urban interventions. So when we look at the attempt to create a number of smart cities in a location such as contemporary India we need to understand both the technological potential of what might be possible and the economic and political dynamics of how such transformation is realised.

Will changing transport habits have a big effect on urban design? How will a community full of driverless cars feel different?

One thing we know from the history of technological innovation is that the smallest changes in the configuration of the city can generate entirely new ways of living in the city. The ability of the first lift to carry large numbers of people to new heights revolutionised architecture. The air conditioner made possible urban concentrations in hot regions such as the American South that were previously hostile. But many of the consequences of technological innovation are rarely understood in full at their time of introduction.

Contrary to predictions, the rise of the internet and digital communications didn’t spell the end of the city but an even greater concentration of people, journeys, face-to-face meetings and sociality. So we are sure that changing transport habits will have a major impact on future urban design but we would be foolish to make simplistic predictions. The possible arrival of driverless cars is just one example where the consequences of technological innovation on culture and society demand an interdisciplinary approach.
As immigration continues are cities seeing a trend for multicultural integration, or are there clusters of monocultural communities? What factors influence this?

This is not an either/or phenomenon. Migration is one of the major drivers of change in the city. Strangers see the city and its possibilities differently. But the tendency to maintain cultural distance sits alongside the city’s capacity for mixing up new and old, arrivals and long-term residents. Cities nurture social life that can be both parochial and globally connected. What is important is to recognise why different people are drawn to cities and also to encourage a healthy debate about how cities might be shared in future.

Devolution needs to recognise the tensions and different interests that exist within a city.

And what implications does the growth of cities as almost separate states have on the extra-urban areas – are cities concentrating too much money and resources?

Cities and extra urban areas are invariably connected but the prosperity of cities isn’t necessarily at the expense of other areas. Social science can follow, track and trace such connections and networks through an understanding of social pattern and economic development.

There seems to be momentum behind devolution of cities but differences in how to deliver it — what are the implications of the different models?

Cities are so different that we should be wary about a one-size-fits-all approach to policy interventions. Successful policy innovations have the capacity to reflect and to learn so that they become more effective, and this requires appropriate checks and balances.

This is the tension between bureaucratic and political worlds. We need to examine how the tensions between different scales of city organisation – the city region, the metropolis and the local neighbourhood – all require different processes of governance. So devolution needs to recognise the tensions and different interests that exist within a city to design a system of governance that can be more flexible than the nation state but still works in a wider political context.

How much power do city authorities actually have when it comes to shaping city development in real terms?

For instance, if some inner-city areas are sliding into deprivation and neglect, is it possible to turn this around through purely political measures? Or are we at the mercy of the ebb and flow of people, communities and economy?

The autonomy of cities differs vastly across the globe. The constitutional position of the city and the city regions in the USA, Germany, China or the UK are all very different. The UK is notoriously centralised but this does not mean that to counter this all metropolitan areas should be accorded the same powers and degrees of autonomy. The spirit of experimental policy intervention must come with a sober recognition of the finite rationing of major public investment and the inevitable emergence of new patterns of urban hierarchy.

What are the threats to towns and cities?

There are numerous threats to towns and cities but resistance to change is not an option. Cities must develop the capacity to evolve as historical, ecological and economic circumstances demand. The future of any metropolis depends on its capacity for flexibility and adaptation.
SCIENCE MINISTER Launches Year of ESRC Anniversary Celebrations

Politicians and business leaders gathered with some of the country’s leading social scientists at an event on 14 January to launch a year of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the ESRC.

As part of the event at the House of Commons Terrace Pavilion, Minister for Universities, Science and Cities the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP reflected on how the social sciences have developed since the council was granted its Royal Charter in 1965, when it was known as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), and what a difference the research has made to society.

Speaking ahead of the event, Greg Clark commented: “Since 1965, the ESRC has played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of important issues including health, justice, education and the economy. On their 50th anniversary we’re reminded not only of the quality and value of social science research in the UK, but also of the central role the ESRC plays in maintaining and advancing the strength of social science, making the UK a partner of choice for world-class research.”

The Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee and Sir Andrew Dilnot, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, also spoke at the event, providing their views on the importance of social science research to the understanding of society today.

The event is the first in a series to mark the anniversary year, which will include competitions for students and researchers and the annual Festival of Social Science in November: www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/50-years-of-ESRC

ESRC STRATEGIC PLAN 2015

The ESRC plays a central role in maintaining and advancing the strength of UK social science, making the UK a partner of choice for world-class research. The Strategic Plan 2015 sets the principles for how we will work over the coming period, setting out the ESRC’s commitment to focus on those areas where we can add the most value and collaborate with a range of partners to maximise the value of our investments.

The plan complements and builds upon the more immediate priorities set out in our annual Delivery Plan.

The Strategic Plan 2015 was informed by a consultation held in 2014 – we are grateful to all respondents for participating in this exercise. To download a copy of the Strategic Plan, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/publications/strategic-plan

NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS IMPACT IN 2013/14

The Research Performance and Economic Impact Report demonstrates the impact of our investment, support for infrastructure and postgraduate training programme. The excellence of UK social science provides the foundation for high-quality knowledge exchange activity and growth in societal and economic impacts. Collaborative research and connections with business and local government, both in the UK and internationally are the key features of the report. Published along with those of the other UK Research Councils, the report highlights our contribution to world-class social science research and postgraduate training in the UK between March 2013 and April 2014. To download a copy, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/RPEI_report_2014_tcm8-33436.pdf

NEW RESEARCH TACKLES DISASTER RISK IN URBAN AFRICA

A new programme of research, which aims to reduce disaster risk in urban sub-Saharan Africa, has been awarded £3.3 million of funding from the ESRC and Department for International Development (DFID).

Urban Africa Risk Knowledge (Urban ARK) is a three-year programme which will work in cities in Senegal, Nigeria, Malawi, Kenya and Niger to better understand the nature and scale of disaster risks in urban centres. By studying the interaction of environmental hazards, such as earthquakes and temperature extremes, in areas with poor housing and marginalised communities, the research aims to break the cycles by which vulnerability and the incapacity to cope with hazards accrue in society.

Led by Professor Mark Pelling of King’s College London, the project engages the private sector and will work with community organisations and local research partners to provide recommendations to manage and reduce risk in these challenging urban environments.

The project is funded as part of the ESRC-DFID Poverty Alleviation Programme. For more information, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/international-funding/esrc-dfid
NEW DIRECTORS FOR UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY AND CLOSER
New Directors have been appointed for two of the UK’s leading longitudinal resources.

Professor Michaela Benzeval has been appointed as the next Director of Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal study, while Alison Park is the new Director of the Cohorts and Longitudinal Studies Enhancement Resource (CLOSER).

Michaela is currently the Deputy Director of Understanding Society and will replace current Director, Professor Nick Buck when he steps down later this year.

Alison Park, who was previously head of the Society and Social Change team at NatCen Social Research, picks up the reins from Professor Jane Elliott, Chief Executive of the ESRC, who joined from CLOSER last year. Jude England has been Acting Director.

NEW YEAR HONOURS 2015
A number of prominent social scientists and ESRC grant-holders have been honoured in the New Year Honours list. We are pleased to offer our congratulations.

Knights Bachelor - Knighthoods
Professor Julian Le Grand, FBA, Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy, London School of Economics and former member of the ESRC Research Grants Board and grant holder. For services to Social Science and Public Service.


Professor Nigel John Thrift, FBA, Vice-Chancellor, University of Warwick and former member of the ESRC Research Priorities Board and grant holder. For services to Higher Education.

Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Teresa Rees, CBE, Professor of Social Science, Cardiff University and lately Director for Wales, Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Also former member of the ESRC Research Grants Boards (1993-97) and Strategic Research Board (2002-06) as well as recipient of ESRC research grants. For services to the Social Sciences.

Commander of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Heather Joshi, OBE FBA, Emeritus Professor, Centre for Longitudinal Studies and former Principal Investigator on the Millennium Cohort Study. For services to Longitudinal and Women’s Studies.

Officer of the Order of the British Empire
Professor Robert Millar, Emeritus Professor, Centre for Innovation and Research in Science Education, University of York and former ESRC grant holder. For services to Science Education.

Member of the Order of the British Empire
Dr Michael Jubb, Director, Research Information Network and former ESRC grant holder. For services to the Social Sciences.

NEW ESRC COUNCIL MEMBERS APPOINTED
Greg Clark, the Minister of State for Universities, Science and Cities, has appointed Professor I Alan Winters and Karin Woodley as ESRC Council members.

I Alan Winters CB is Professor of Economics at the University of Sussex, CEO of the Migrating out of Poverty Programme Consortium and Chairman of the Board of the Global Development Network.

Professor I Alan Winters is a specialist on the empirical and policy analysis of international trade, especially in developing countries, and has also studied migration and economic growth.

Karin Woodley has 30-years’ experience at chief executive level in public-facing charities tackling social and cultural injustice and inequality. She is currently Chief Executive of Cambridge House, a South London charity established in 1889 by Cambridge University to tackle poverty and social injustice.

CHANGING WORLD PHOTO COMPETITION WINNERS
The winners of the ESRC’s 2015 Changing World photographic competition were announced at an awards ceremony on 10 March at the Menier Gallery in London.

There were six winners across categories exploring issues including family, technology and media. Five additional winners picked up a Judge’s Favourite award. The overall winner of the competition, and winner of the environment category, is 16-year-old Rachel Coleman from Bishop Stopford School in Kettering, Northamptonshire. Her photograph, of the view from a train window in Iceland, was named ‘Through the looking glass’ after the Lewis Carroll novel.

Other winners included Josh (17) from Bishop Wordsworth’s School in Salisbury, Wiltshire for his photo ‘Height,’ a dramatic action shot of a BMX rider performing a stunt, and 18-year-old Jennifer Riley from the North Halifax Grammar School in West Yorkshire, who won for her image ‘The living room’. Her picture shows a modern family isolated from one another by the intrusion of technology into the home.

Nadia Rouhipour, aged 16, from the Torquay Girls Grammar School in Devon, won the Community and Friends category for her photograph ‘Is anonymity so bad?’ It shows two best friends reuniting after a long time apart. The image is taken from behind frosted glass, letting the friends enjoy their anonymity and privacy.

For the winning photographs, see: www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/photographic-competition
Publications

The Politics of Green Transformations

Multiple ‘green transformations’ are required if humanity is to live sustainably on planet Earth. Recalling past transformations, this book examines what makes the current challenge different, and especially urgent. It examines how green transformations must take place in the context of the particular moments of capitalist development, and in relation to particular alliances. Green transformations must be both ‘top-down’, involving elite alliances between states and business, but also ‘bottom up’, pushed by grassroots innovators and entrepreneurs, and part of wider mobilisations among civil society.

The Politics of Green Transformations by Ian Scones, Melissa Leach, Peter Newell (eds). ISBN 9781138792906, (paperback), 248pp @ £22.94. For more information see: www.routledge.com/books/details/9781138792906/

Lived Economies of Default: Consumer Credit, Debt Collection and the Capture of Affect (CRESC)

Consumer credit borrowing — using credit cards, store cards and personal loans — is an important and routine part of many of our lives. But what happens when these everyday forms of borrowing go ‘bad’, when people start to default on their loans and when they cannot, or will not, repay? It is this poorly understood, controversial, but central part of both the consumer credit industry and the lived experiences of an increasing number of people that this book explores.

Lived Economies of Default: Consumer Credit, Debt Collection and the Capture of Affect (CRESC) by Joe Deville. ISBN 978-0415622509, (hardback), 230pp @ £85.00. For more information see: www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415622509/

Working Childhoods: Youth, Agency and the Environment in India

This book draws upon research in the Indian Himalayas to provide a theoretically informed account of children’s lives in a remote part of the world. The book shows that children in their pre-teens and teens are lynchpins of the rural economy, spending hours each day herding cattle, collecting leaves, and juggling household tasks with schoolwork. By documenting children’s stories, songs, friendships, fears and tribulations, the book offers a powerful account of youth agency and young people’s rich relationship with the natural world.


Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space

Across Europe, multiculturalism as a public policy has been declared ‘dead’ but everyday multiculture is alive and well. This book explores how people live with diversity in contemporary cities and towns across Europe. Drawing on ethnographic studies ranging from London’s inner city and residential suburbs to English provincial towns, from a working-class neighbourhood in Nuremberg to the streets of Naples, Turin and Milan, chapters explore how diversity is experienced in everyday lives, and what new forms of local belonging emerge when local places are connected to so many distant elsewhere.

Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space by Mette Louise Berg, Ben Gidley, Nando Sigona (eds). ISBN 978-1138795358, (hardback), 144pp @ £85.00. For more information see: www.routledge.com/books/details/9781138795358

EVENTS

16 APRIL

Food Options, Opinions and Decisions (FOOD), seminar 2/9

This seminar will focus on consumer behaviour and food security with an emphasis on health, safety, and sustainability. It will draw together leading researchers and practitioners in these respective fields. The emphasis will be placed on forging interdisciplinary connections to gain a greater understanding of the connections between different fields of practice and academic enquiry. lubswww.leeds.ac.uk/cdr/seminar-series-on-food/

22 APRIL

Green Innovation: making it work, seminar 1/6

This first seminar will provide an overview of the subject matter covered by green innovation, whilst introducing some important themes prior to more detailed consideration in later seminars. This will involve exploring the origins and scope of green innovation, comparing definitions and identifying contributing academic disciplines.

www.ntu.ac.uk/ibs/news_events/index.html

20 MAY

Exploring long-term trends in social attitudes and crime

Exploring why change takes place and the implications of both changes and stability is of growing importance for social scientists. Yet the limited availability of datasets which enable these sorts of analyses hampers efforts. This free one-day workshop will introduce a series of linked datasets which will enable analysts to explore long runs of repeated cross-sectional datasets.

ukdataservice.ac.uk/news-and-events/eventsitem/?id=4020

4-5 JUNE

Secondary analysis of qualitative data: An advanced training course

This two-day workshop is designed for qualitative researchers aiming to re-use secondary data in their own work. Through presentations and practical sessions, participants will learn about the key issues in secondary analysis, including: research ethics, methodological challenges, data context and sampling.

shortcoursesgateway.essex.ac.uk/Portal/Home2
The ESRC magazine *Society Now* aims to raise awareness of our research and its impact. It addresses a wide range of readers, from the MP to the businessperson, the voluntary worker to the teacher, the public through to the social scientist, and is published three times a year (spring, summer and autumn).

*Society Now* offers a readable, intelligent, concise overview of current issues concerning society.

To subscribe to the magazine, please send an email including your full name and address to: societynow@esrc.ac.uk