

Spreading knowledge about key data resources on health and lifestyles

Richard Deswarte, Social History Data Manager, Economic and Social Data Service

Beate Lichtwardt, Senior Data and Support Services Officer, Economic and Social Data Service

'Studying Lifestyles: Resources Past, Present and Future' was a popular and successful one-day seminar held at the British Library, London, on 9 March 2009. The event was designed around health and lifestyles, two key research topics. Its aim was to raise awareness of existing UK-based research resources and encourage their use by both academics and students for postgraduate dissertations and research projects.

Four core UK resource providers - the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS), the British Library (BL), The National Archives (TNA), and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) - showcased key resources relevant to analysing aspects of lifestyle. Each of these presentations was followed by a 'how I did it' style presentation by a prominent academic researcher. These presentations covered both quantitative and qualitative research. An interactive panel discussion at the end of the day encouraged the postgraduate researchers to probe the presenters about their experiences and ask for specific advice in relation to their own student projects. This was extended and developed in small breakout groups in a research surgery session. A guided tour of the BL concluded the day.

After a welcome by the chair, Richard Deswarte (ESDS), who led proceedings throughout, Jude England, Head of Social Science Collections and Research at the BL, set the scene for the day: outlining the broader picture; highlighting existing resources; and describing efforts to keep up with changing demands, especially in the light of new resources that are increasing exponentially. In the opening session Beate Lichtwardt (ESDS) gave an overview of the versatile ESDS resources and support services available for the full range of datasets held at the UK Data Archive (UKDA). Graham Smith (Royal Holloway), who has re-used oral histories from Paul Thompson's famous 100 Families study held at the UKDA in combination with data from the BL Sound Archive, presented insights from his research on 'contextualising sociologists' claims of change in food and family'. Paul Vickers (ONS) introduced the Neighbourhood Statistics Service (NeSS) in the second session illustrating its potential particularly with regards to research results that inform local policy making.

In the final session of the morning Ian Cooke (BL) gave a taste of a number of varied resources relating to lifestyles and health held at the BL. Julia Twigg (Kent) then provided a fascinating insight into her ongoing research on 'clothing, the body and age: interrogating women's magazines' primarily based on magazine images from the BL. In the final core session Ann

Morton (TNA) introduced a number of the TNA's resources focusing on unstructured data (correspondence and papers). David Green (King's College London) then gave an intriguing example from his research on 'gender investment and the life course in England and Wales, c.1870-1930'. Slides of the presentations are available at:

www.esds.ac.uk/news/eventdetail.asp?id=2146

The interactive question and answer panel session that followed raised a range of pertinent questions: best methods – how to choose and should it be either qualitative or quantitative research (including the pros and cons of each method); measurement differences between countries; advice on day-to-day research issues; and how to deal with data gaps and other research obstacles.

Judging by the feedback, this popular event proved to be a much appreciated source of information and encouragement for student researchers. It highlighted the rich resources at hand in a number of British institutions and illustrated not only the potential of data re-use for secondary analysis, but also the complementarity of the resources. Although there are gaps in the collections of the various libraries and archives, the "dustbins of history" as Graham Smith lovingly put it, the UK research community has numerous, diverse and rich resource dustbins on its doorstep waiting for new researchers to pick through them.

A clear indicator of the positive response and success of the day is the fact that the attendees explicitly requested more theme-based seminars of this type. ESDS and the BL plan to host a joint annual event of this kind with the TNA and ONS, centring on a different theme each year.