

Getting social science students to engage with quantitative methods: Opportunities with real data

Mark Brown and Jo Wathan
Centre for Census and Survey Research
School of Social Science
University of Manchester

jo.wathan@manchester.ac.uk

Mark.brown@manchester.ac.uk

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ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

Quantitative Methods Initiative (Economic and Social Research Council)

‘Combat skills deficit in quantitative research methods across social sciences ... need to enhance quantitative skills across full breadth of educational lifecourse’

- A new focus on a problem at undergraduate level...
‘Many students view the acquisition of quantitative skills very negatively...’ (ESRC 2006)

Strategy included decision to fund a series of pilot projects aimed at ‘improving undergraduate training provision’

Manchester experience...

A measure of the problem...

- A compulsory module on quantitative methods for all Sociology students

But...

- Very few use any quantitative methods in their dissertations
 - ...despite having had basic training in data analysis (SPSS)
 - ...despite superb range of very accessible (quantitative) social survey data

Manchester – the norm rather than exception

‘British students are usually encouraged to collect their own data for final year undergraduate projects...This contrasts with the USA where most sociology students conduct secondary analysis of large-scale survey data...

The lack of use of secondary analysis in Britain is surprising given that such a large number of high quality national surveys are readily available and that expertise in the analysis and data management of large surveys is in great demand by employers.’

Sara Arber in Nigel Gilbert (2001) Researching Social Life

The (presumed) constraints?

- Fear / disinterest

- No confidence in quantitative skills
- Perceive it to be boring and lacking relevance

AND (or because of)

- **Lack of knowledge about the resources available**

A pilot project (ESRC)

'Increasing the Use of Large Scale Surveys in Undergraduate Dissertations in the Social Sciences'

- Inspired by the resources (specifically survey data) available from the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS)
- Project philosophy...let the resources speak for themselves
 - Conviction that low student use primarily a result of lack of knowledge about what was available
 - Our challenge – to get students to engage with the resources – make them relevant

The appeal of the ESDS survey datasets...

- Topics students are interested in...
- High quality data:
 - rich depth of questions
 - large and representative samples
- In a format that can be analysed with basic skills in data analysis that many undergrads have (SPSS)

... and increasingly accessible.

This talk...

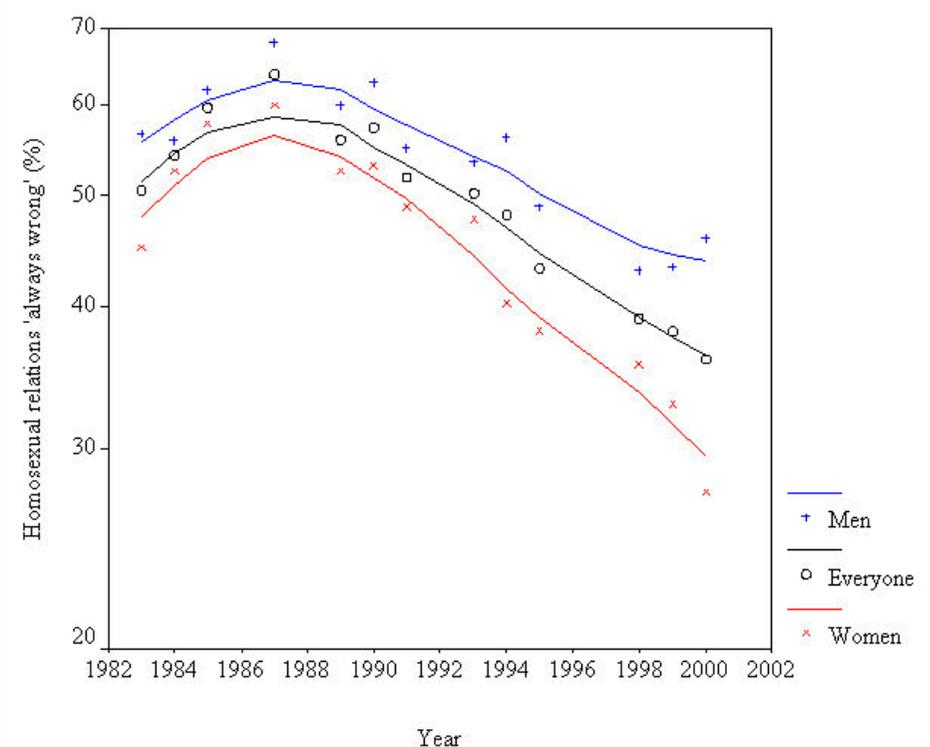
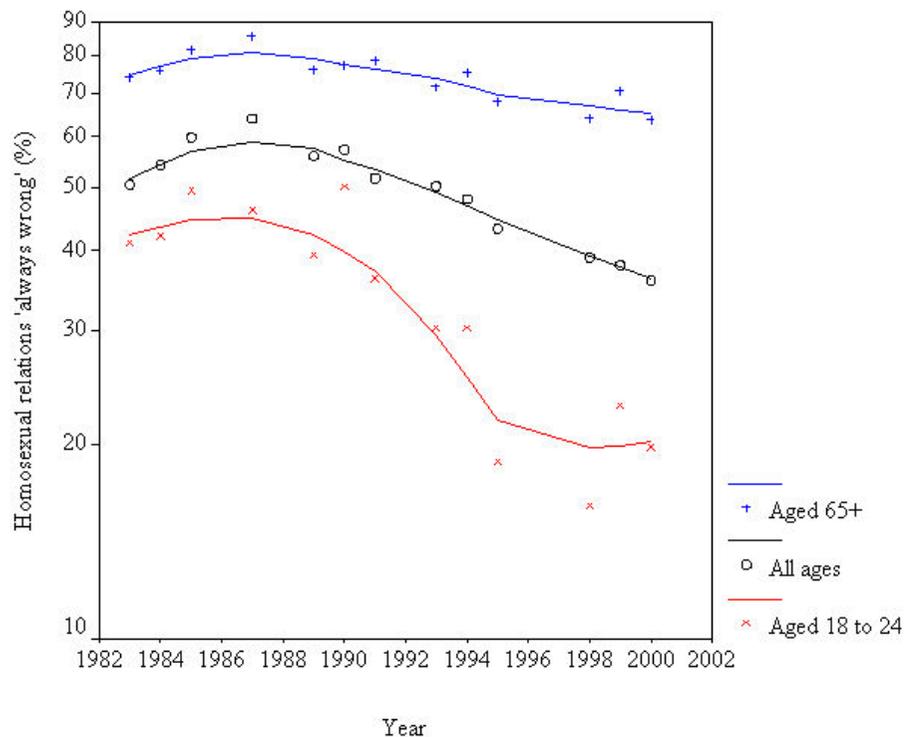
- Look at our model for harnessing these resources in the classroom (the ESRC pilot project)

Bringing it to the classroom

Let the resources speak for themselves

- Don't start with 'what's a standard deviation?' or 'how to do a cross-tab'
- First engage students – showcase the resources
 - make the links between topics students are interested in and relevant surveys
 - then equip them with the skills to operationalise a research question for secondary data analysis
 - learning that is personalised, hands-on, and using real data

Attitudes to homosexuality by age and sex using British Social Attitudes Survey



Crockett A and Voas D (2003) 'A Divergence of Views: Attitude change and the religious crisis over homosexuality' *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 8, no. 4, <<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/8/4/crockett.html>>

Training programme structure..

Mimic the research process

- Research topics/questions
- Search for Data
- Data evaluation:
is it fit for purpose?
- Operationalisation
- Data Analysis
- Interpretation

PILOT

5 Workshops

Sociology students at
end of Year 2

(financial incentives)

3 themed workbooks:

www.esds.ac.uk/government/resources/sass/

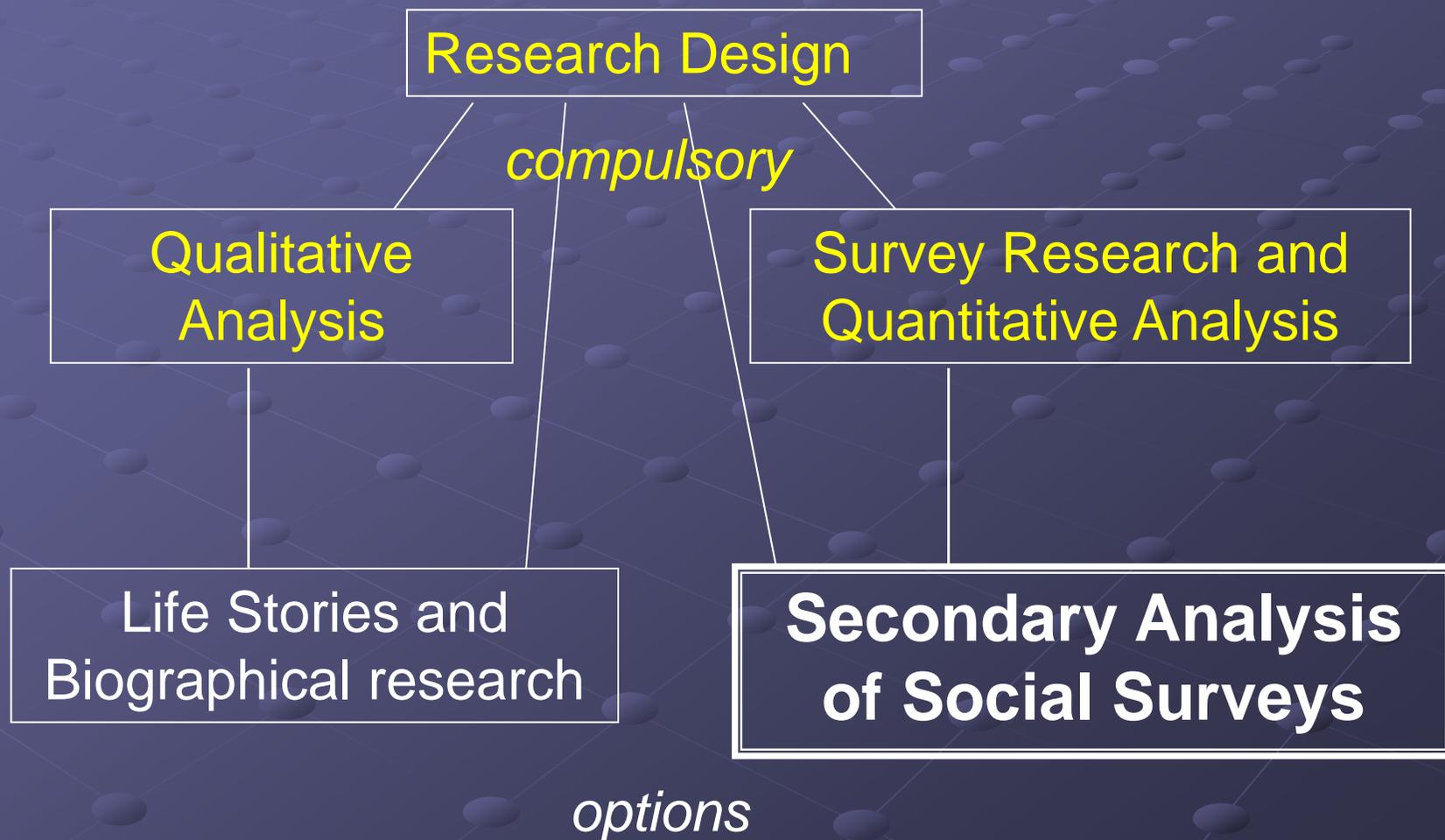
	Topic	Dataset used	More...	Download
	Exploring the fear of crime	British Crime Survey Teaching Dataset 2000	Fear of crime (pdf) Fear of crime (Word)	Crime.pdf Crime.doc
	Exploring differences in health	Health Survey for England Teaching Dataset 2002	Health (pdf) Health (Word)	Health.pdf Health.doc
	Exploring attitudes towards same sex relations	British Social Attitudes Survey 2005	Same sex relations (pdf) Same sex relations (Word)	Attitudes.pdf

Building from the pilot

- Major objective was to bring training within the formal curriculum – develop a credit-bearing course

Bringing into the formal curriculum From pilot to credit bearing module

(Manchester Sociology (BSocSc) – Year 2 methods training)



How is it going?

The positives...

- First year: 6 students
- Last year: 21 students (1/3 of compulsory class)
- Very positive student feedback

But...

- Few are following through to a dissertation?
- A course alone is not enough to convert interest
- need follow up support/encouragement from supervisors

In conclusion

Why do so few students do quantitative dissertations?

Real questions

Real data

Data analysis
(SPSS)

Just this is not enough

Where's the relevance?



In conclusion

Q. How to make it relevant?

A. Help students make the connections



A suitable question for secondary analysis?

Is there data on my topic?

How do I access it?

How do I operationalise my research question?