

# Old Dog, Old Tricks

**Using SPSS syntax to avoid the mouse trap**  
(Abstract and summary of contents)

**John F Hall<sup>1</sup>**

Presentation to ASSESS (SPSS Users) York, Dec 2006



(Photo: JFH, 25 Dec 2005)

The presentation<sup>2</sup> draws on my experiences: first, of using SPSS (from 1972 to 1993, and on a range of mainframe computers) to process and analyse dozens of surveys: second, of training several hundred researchers and students in the use of SPSS via the hands-on **Survey Analysis Workshop<sup>3</sup>** I developed and taught at the Polytechnic of North London from 1976 to 1992 when I took early retirement: third (from 2002 to present) of using SPSS11 for Windows to restore, convert and update surveys and training materials: fourth, of using SPSS to explore data files from major surveys in the public domain: fifth, of wrestling with the wretched mouse to replicate drop-down menu exercises from the early part of Julie Pallant's **SPSS Survival Manual** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Open University Press, 2005) when, most of the time, it's much easier and far quicker to use direct syntax. It covers:

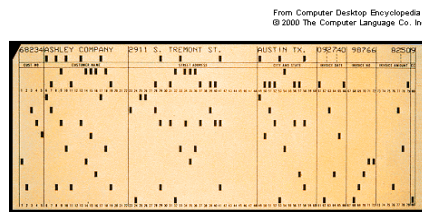
- 1: Survey processing before SPSS (and computers). Origins of SPSS and its arrival in the UK.
- 2: Conventions for design and construction of SPSS saved files, layout of SPSS setup files, naming and labelling of variables, documentation, and a trick or two. Changes to SPSS syntax and output format over the years. Development of, and constraints on, design and delivery of courses and training materials.
- 3: Critical examination of SPSS usage in major surveys (eg British Social Attitudes 1987, European Social Survey 2002)
- 4: Comparisons of syntax with point-and-click for ease of use, clarity and speed.
- 5: Execution of, and detailed commentary on, exercises from Julie Pallant **SPSS Survival Manual** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2005)

...and all with no previous experience of Windows, Word or PowerPoint, let alone SPSS for Windows: altogether a very personal journey, and now extremely painful without a wrist pad!

From this...



to this...



to this...



to this<sup>4</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Thankfully retired: previously Senior Research Fellow, SSRC Survey Unit, 1970-76; Principal Lecturer in Sociology and Director, Survey Research Unit, Polytechnic of North London, 1976-92.

<sup>2</sup> Specially prepared for ASSESS 2006, the full presentation is available to delegates and other interested colleagues via the ASSESS website <http://www.spssusers.co.uk/Events/2006/> (MS-Word large document: 31,000 words; 113 pages; 4.8 mb) together with three associated PowerPoint slide shows (3.1mb, 1.6mb and 1.8mb).

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for syllabus and specimen assessment. Training materials from **Survey Analysis Workshop** are currently being converted and updated from SPSS-X 4 on a Vax mainframe to SPSS 11 for Windows on a PC. Some are already available and can be obtained from the author on [johnfhall@orange.fr](mailto:johnfhall@orange.fr)

<sup>4</sup> What happens when the mouse takes over SPSS? See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYAKBgJnM24>

## Old Dog, Old Tricks: Using SPSS syntax to avoid the mouse trap.

Page	CONTENTS
<b>1</b>	<b>1: Introduction</b>
2	1.1: Before SPSS
4	1.2: The origins of SPSS
5	1.3: Quantitative Sociology Group
6	1.4: SSRC Survey Unit (1970-1976)
7	1.5: Polytechnic of North London (1976-1992)
8	1.6: Training materials
<b>10</b>	<b>2: Layout, usage and changes</b>
12	2.1: Evolution of SPSS syntax
14	2.2: Other developments in SPSS
15	2.3: Variable Names
17	2.4: Variable Labels
21	2.5: Value Labels
<b>23</b>	<b>3: European Social Survey 2002<sup>5</sup></b>
23	3.1: Variable names and labels
27	3.2: An example of awkward labelling
31	3.3: Multiple response
<b>36</b>	<b>4: Syntax or drop-down menus?</b>
36	4.1: Data input
38	4.2: Utilities
41	4.3: Data Analysis
41	4.4: Data transformation
42	4.5: First checks on raw data (and on data transformations)
42	4.6: Using functions to generate groups
44	4.7: Complex calculations taking account of missing data

---

<sup>5</sup> Details of, and data from, the European Social Survey can be obtained from <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>

45	<b>5: Exercises from Pallant 2005<sup>6</sup></b>
51	<b>1: Reversing scores of items</b> (2005, pp79-80)
56	<b>2: Adding up items to yield scale score</b> (2005, pp80-81)
58	<b>3: Grouping the values of a continuous variable</b> (2005, pp85-87)
70	<b>4: Correlation</b> (2005, pp78ff)

### Appendix 1: How SPSS came to UK

### Appendix 2: Survey Analysis Workshop (Syllabus & Specimen Assessment)

### Appendix 3: Forensic notes<sup>7</sup>

These notes are reproduced, unedited and in chronological order of surveys tackled, direct from contemporary logs whilst using unfamiliar software to retrieve, restore and convert files from lineprinter output and WordStar4 to MS-Word and from various mainframe versions of SPSS to SPSS11.0 for Windows on a (very old) PC. Hopefully readers will find them both interesting and useful, and gain an insight into some of the intellectual and technical processes (and frustrations!) involved in preparing and preserving SPSS files and associated documentation for questionnaire surveys. These and other studies owe their very existence, not only to the high professional standards practiced at the SSRC Survey Unit, the PNL Survey Research Unit, and elsewhere, but also to the existence of national and local archives.

**Playground to Politics 1981** (Oct 2002 and Oct 2004)

**Quality of Life in Britain: 1<sup>st</sup> pilot, March 1971** (Jan – Feb 2004)

**Quality of Life in Britain: 2<sup>nd</sup> pilot, Oct-Nov 1971** (Jan – Feb 2004)

**Attitudes and Opinions of Senior Girls, Feb 1973** (Jan – March 2004)

**Quality of Life in Britain 1973** (Jan – Feb 2004)

**Quality of Life in Britain 1975** (Feb 2004)

**Quality of Life: Sunderland 1973** (April 2004)

**Quality of Life: Stoke-on-Trent 1973** (June 2004)

**Last updated by JFH 10 Jan 2007**

<sup>6</sup> Julie Pallant **SPSS Survival Manual** (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Open University Press, 2005)  
See <http://www.allenandunwin.com/spss/book.htm>

<sup>7</sup> The **Quality of Life in Britain** series was designed and conducted at the SSRC Survey Unit by the the late Dr Mark Abrams and myself (who also did all the processing and analysis with SPSS). Both of us gave advice and technical assistance (on methodological grounds, of course!) to Mark's daughter, Sarah, with her survey of **Attitudes of Senior Girls** at St Paul's Girls' School. The **Playground to Politics** survey (of fifth formers at Wood Green School, a mixed 11-18 comprehensive in North London) was designed and conducted, under my direct supervision, by three of my undergraduate students at Polytechnic of North London. All these surveys replicate items measuring subjective well-being and various psychological and attitudinal scales.

All data and documentation were routinely deposited with the then SSRC Survey Archive (now UK Data Archive) at Essex University, together with their associated SPSS system files on magnetic tape. Some of the latter files can no longer be read at Essex, but raw data and original SPSS setup files were retrieved from the tapes, copied to CD-Rom and the surveys regenerated as SPSS portable files and re-deposited with UKDA at Essex <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>.