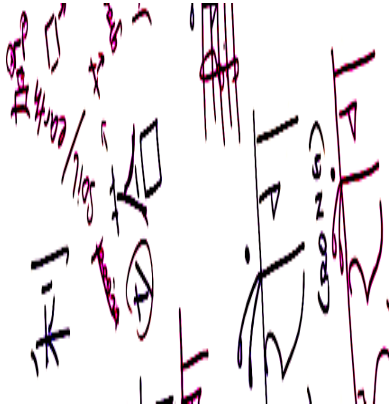




Primary research

Description

Researchers in the humanities and social sciences like to compare, contrast, synthesise, critique build and dissect theories, ideas and preconceptions. We attempt to formulate compelling arguments and narratives, drawing on relevant literature, reflections and insights from our intellectual communities. We sometimes encroach across borders between communities and frameworks to encounter *otherness* that challenges our own preconceptions. For some researchers that all counts as “critical literature review” • “secondary research” •

In the humanities and social sciences such research is even more powerful when grounded in practical engagement with the world, and draws on evidence from human observation and experience. It draws on *primary* research.

Here’s a standard definition of *primary research* from a chapter by Dana Lynn Driscoll entitled “Introduction to Primary Research: Observations, Surveys, and Interviews” • in a book about research methods.

“Primary research, is research that is collected firsthand rather than found in a book, database, or journal” • (154).

In primary research, scholars gather evidence in a systematic fashion to reveal or infer some new information, or to confirm or discredit a hypothesis.

The chapter includes sound advice about planning and evaluating methods to gather and analyse appropriate data and evidence in a way that addresses a set of research questions.

“The ultimate goal in conducting primary research is to learn about something new that can be confirmed by others and to eliminate our own biases in the process” • (154).

That’s a daunting prospect for trainee researchers who are constrained by time and resources: to construct a research project that produces results that can be confirmed by others, and exhibits

independence from personal opinion (biases). Students on a 20 credit course are amongst those who find that difficult, but so are most researchers.

Illustration

Illustration enters a research project as relatable examples, narratives, stories that bring the research problem, findings and conclusions to life. The psychologist Sigmund Freud provided copious *illustrations* from his experience with patients to illustrate his theories on how traumas from childhood reveal themselves in feelings and behaviours in adult life. Whatever their status as repeatable primary evidence, such observations provide relatable insights that ground his theories about human experience.

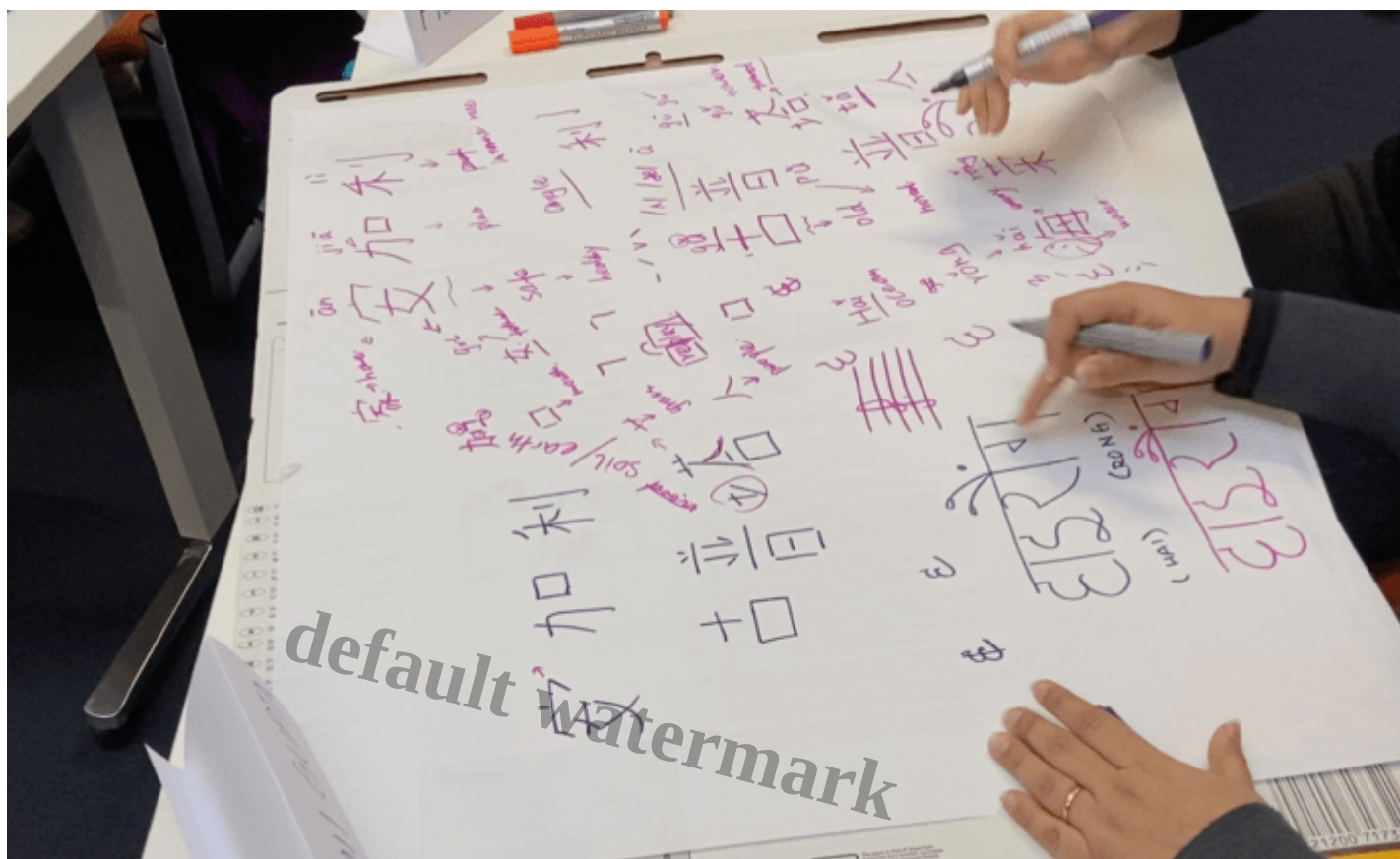
Illustration implies the opposite of unbiased research. Illustration suggests the researcher has already reached a conclusion. You know what you want to show and select examples to demonstrate that it is true. But for many scholars, such as Freud, illustration and evidence merge.

Illustration in lieu of evidence

What starts as a mere illustration can seed systematic evidence gathering. Illustrations can help scope and contextualise a study, identify research questions and trial a method. Illustrations are less costly and time consuming than systematic gathering of verifiable, repeatable and “unbiased” evidence.

Sometimes illustration is sufficient to ground a research project.

Here’s an example from my recent class on research methods. Imagine a research question: what does writing reveal about cultural difference? We videoed two people familiar with their respective non-English languages. I asked them to translate each other’s names into the language of the other, and explain the process.



Even from this still image it's apparent that the Chinese speaker had more to describe about her language than the practitioner of the Hindi alphabet. Such an illustration of course prompts inquiry about how representative the interlocutors are of their language communities. Of greater interest it prompts consideration of logographic and ideographic writing conventions versus alphabetic scripts, and the influence of each on cultural narratives. I'm sure more could be said, even from this illustration, and especially if analysed in the context of critical secondary research as described in my first paragraph.

See post: [Hunch, symptom, clue](#), and posts tagged [research](#).

Bibliography

- Burke Johnson, R., Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, and Lisa A. Turner. 2007. Toward a Definition of Mixed Methods Research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, (1) 2, 112-133.
- Driscoll, Dana Lynn. 2011. Introduction to primary research: Observations, surveys and interviews. In Charlie Lowe, and Pavel Zemliansky (eds.), *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing Volume 2*: 153-173. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.

Note

- I'm grateful to Hairong Wang and Anjali Gupta for permission to use their writing in the illustration above.

Category

1. Research related

Tags

1. primary research
2. writing

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