

A woman with long dark hair is sitting at a desk, looking down with a distressed expression. Her hands are pressed against her temples. In front of her is an open book and a white coffee cup on a saucer. To her left and right are tall stacks of books. The background is dark and out of focus.

Some Random Reflections on Research Methods

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Doing research has been called a 'craft' skill, rather than a science or technology. Like learning to ride a bike, it is picked up by doing it, gets better and (possibly) easier with practice, and is difficult to describe in a formal way.

(Adapted from Tonkiss, F. 2004 Content and discourse analysis, in Seale, C. (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*, Sage: 377)

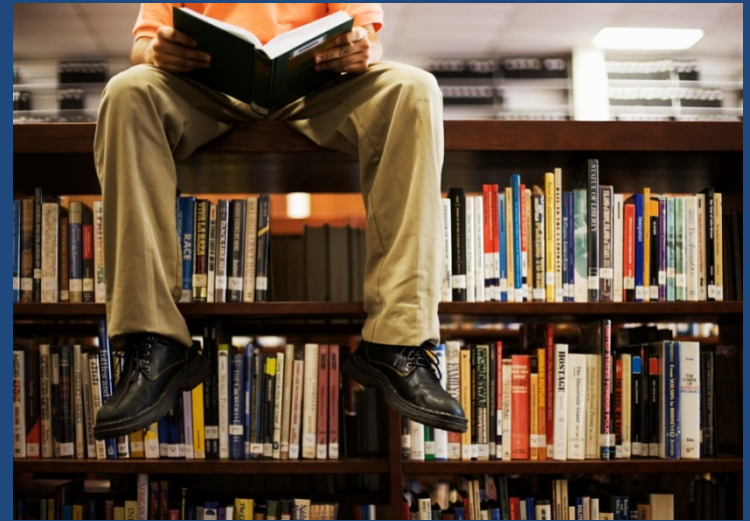
Introduction

The Thesis

Data and Evidence

Critical Reflection

The Thesis



Cultural and academic differences

But generally, a thesis is:

a proposition laid down or stated, especially as a theme to be discussed or proved or to be maintained against attack.

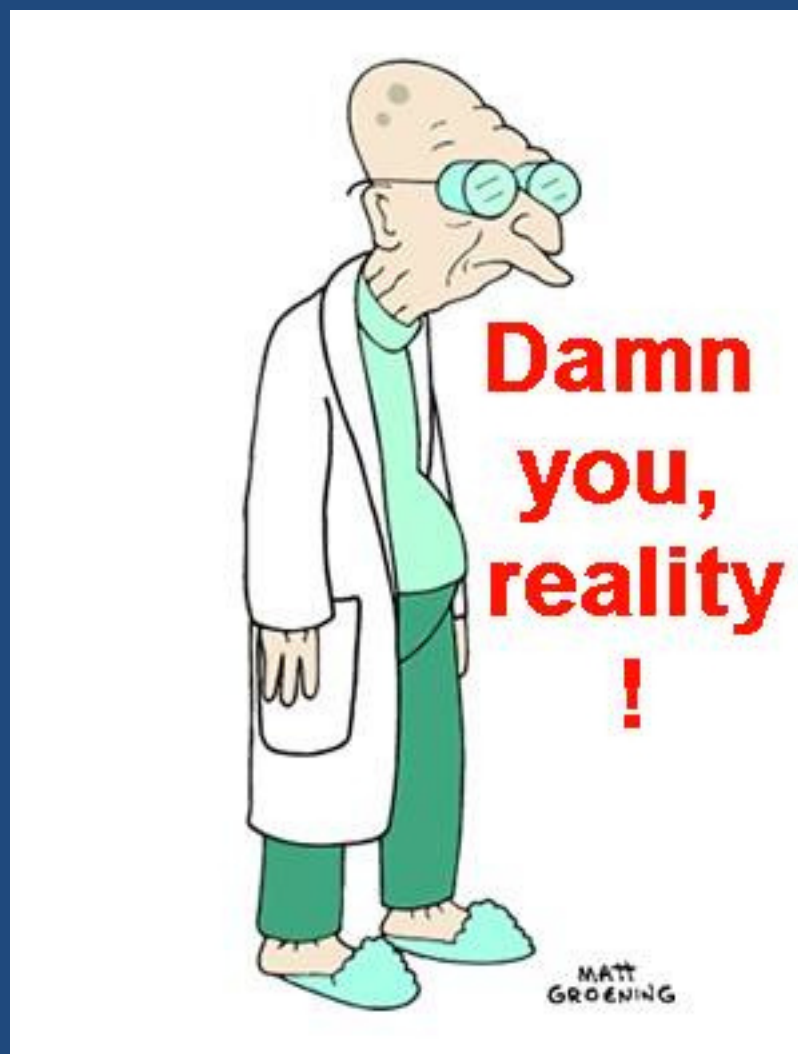
a dissertation to maintain or prove a thesis; especially one written or delivered by a candidate for a university degree'.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

A thesis or dissertation should demonstrate:

- *Knowledge and understanding* relevant to your dissertation topic or research problem;
- Skills in *planning, organising, managing and conducting* an original, independent project;
- Ability to *apply* knowledge and understanding to investigating the topic;
- Ability to *assemble or produce* relevant *information or data* (note: it may not, in fact, support your argument), and to *justify the methods* used for doing so (the 'methods' chapter);
- Skill in *analysis or interpretation* of your material drawing out the relevant findings, points or perspectives;
- Skill in *presentation of evidence* (both for and against your argument, or hypothesised answers to your initial questions) in a convincing and concise way;
- Ability to provide a *persuasive, plausible conclusion* to your dissertation that brings together all the elements of your research and *reflexively comments* on its contributions, difficulties or shortcomings, and possible future directions.

(Adapted from Bhatt, C. 2004 Doing a dissertation, in Seale, C. (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*, Sage, London: 410).



Data and Evidence

- What is the research about?
- What evidence / data is needed?
- How will relevant information be selected, produced and assembled?
- How will the data be handled and analysed?
- How will the findings be presented?



(Adapted from Tonkiss, F. 2004 Content and discourse analysis, in Seale, C. (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*, Sage: 376)

Reflections on Research

What is the research about?

Not just the field or topic, but the kind of questions is the research asking.

Quantitative and large-scale survey and some kinds of interview methods are good for *looking for explanations*, the nature of which can be relatively well-specified in advance.

Qualitative and interpretative methods are best for *exploring how both the problem and possible solutions are constructed*, and what is thereby occluded; what the research is about it more driven by the nature of the data.

Reflections on Research

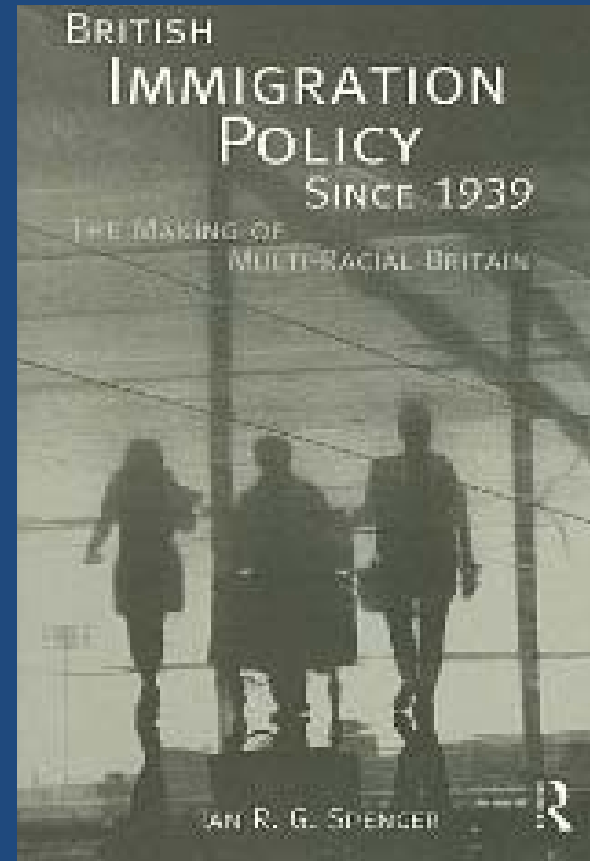
What kind of Evidence or Data?

An example from immigration research: the focus might be

- Immigration policy, or
- Immigrant identity, or
- Media representations, or
- Public attitudes.

and this would influence the choice (and availability) of the kind of information needed.

Statistical, numerical, surveys, interviews, documents, policies, press and popular media, party political statements, visual, artefactual (material objects), participatory, experiential, observational, etc.



Reflections on Research

Two possible ways of approaching research on immigration

(adapted from Tonkiss 2004: 377)

Research looking for explanations or solutions

- Statistical data on the number of people entering the country each year, countries of origin, changes over time;
- sample people settled in a particular place and interview to research their experiences of immigration: e.g. the bureaucracy, local reactions, cultural difference, ideas of 'home'.

Interpretive / qualitative research looking at how 'immigration' is constructed

- Debates surrounding immigration legislation;
- press reports on immigration issues;
- anti-immigration pamphlets and speeches.

Reflections on Research

How will the data be handled and presented and the thesis concluded?

'We cannot make data *say* what simply is not there'

(Tonkiss 2004: 377).

Any interpretation of data - whether numerical, oral (interviews) or textual - has to be convincing according to the criteria of the conceptual or theoretical approach taken.

The Conclusion

And at the end of it all, the conclusion (or conclusions, depending on the type of research) should provide a satisfying rounding up of the argument or interpretation:

return to the discussion of research in the field and the chosen theoretical perspective;

show what contributions to knowledge – theoretical and/or practical – the thesis has made.

Critical Reflection



Being critically reflexive does not only mean being *self-reflexive* – although this is very important too.

Any research needs to demonstrate a critically reflexive attitude to 'the literature', to the methods chosen, to the material assembled, and particularly, to the topic or problems in need of research.

Example 1. Immigration

Does the category 'immigrants' include international Chief Executive Officers, academics, (or in the case of UK, people from 'developed' nations like Canada, Australia, New Zealand) and their families – whose exits are often not recorded?

Or does the term usually imply only 'problematic' populations of low paid workers, refugees, asylum seekers?





Example 2. Participatory Action Research

Distanced, critical reflection on how certain taken-for-granted relations, categories, discourses come to define the situation for the individuals involved, is an important counter to romanticised aspirations for the outcomes of participation.

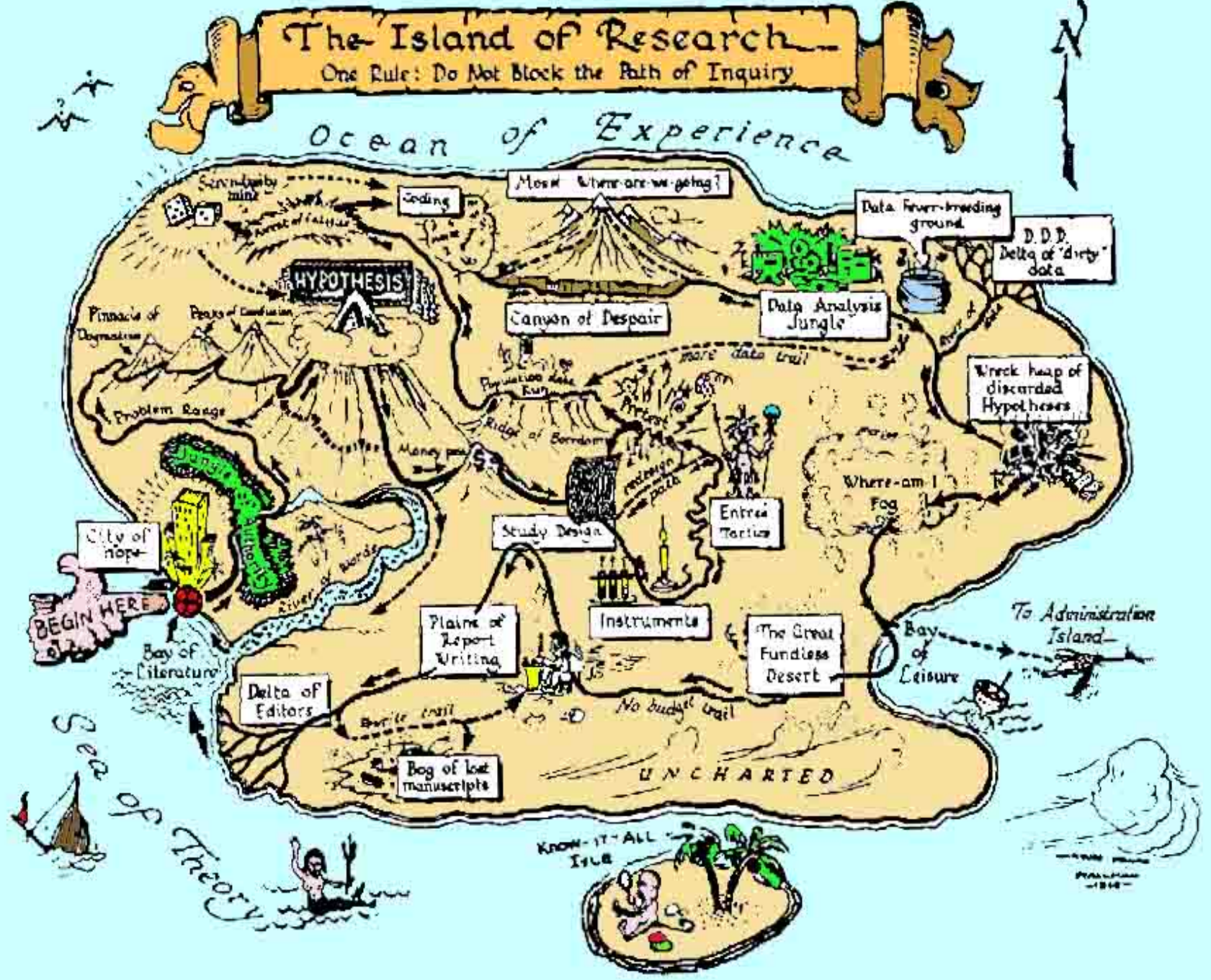
Reflexive skepticism also avoids easy assumptions about the nature or cause of the problem (e.g. the state, the planners, capitalism) and the obviousness of solutions (community self-management, collaborative planning practices, revolution). It encourages lateral thinking about open-ended, flexible strategies.



The Island of Research

One Rule: Do Not Block the Path of Inquiry

Ocean of Experience



Some Useful References

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