Use of Evidence: Examples of Outcome (a)

(Slide 1) The last lecture explained the first learning outcome that relates to the concept of evidence. This lecture gives some short examples to help illustrate and clarify the ideas contained in that lecture.

(Slide 2) The first example considers textual sources. Often authors will characterize, to some extent, the sources that they rely on, and this provides an easy starting place for describing the evidence adduced in a text. Consider, for example, William Glass' book on Southern fundamentalism in the first half of the twentieth century, *Strangers in Zion*. His bibliography divides his sources into two categories, Primary Sources and Secondary Sources, each of which has several subdivisions, as shown here:

Primary Sources

- Manuscript collections
- School publications, records, and miscellanea
- Religious periodicals
- Newspapers
- Government documents

Secondary Sources

- Books and articles
- Dissertations, theses, and unpublished papers

Clearly there's a logic underlying this division: each category represents a genre, a type of thing. Each type of source, according to this division, requires different treatment from the others. Manuscripts, for example, might include things like diaries and letters, and as you probably know from experience, you read a diary differently than you do a newspaper. Diaries are more personal, they may include references that the average person won't understand, and they tend to not present a complete account of their subject; rather, they often represent whatever thoughts the diarist managed to put down in writing, so they are continuations of private thoughts. Newspapers, in contrast, are aimed at a general public, and a newspaper article is intended to be complete, to explain what it's about, and to not require much in the way of background.

This categorization by genre might be analogous to describing a person's physical appearance: the author provides you with a method of categorizing his sources, and it's a traditional one. A lot of works on history use the same basic categorization, though the details differ.

(Slide 3) Of course, classing sources by genre isn't the only way to describe evidence. It might not even be the best way. In his biography of Mozart, Piero Melograni very relies heavily on letters. Letters are, admittedly, a genre of literature, but when describing Melograni's sources you might decide to focus your description just on this one genre and talk about it in some detail. A viable answer to the question "how would you describe the evidence adduced by Melograni?" would be to focus on characterizing the

letters referenced in the biography, and maybe look for a general way to characterize all the rest of his sources: in other words, find a way to characterize the different letters he cites by somehow subdividing the genre of letters, and maybe treat his remaining sources as a single class, one not based at all on genre. You may find it useful to subdivide the letters that he cites based on the dates, authors, and recipients of those letters, for example.

As it happens, none of the letters to Mozart from his father have survived from after he left his father's home in 1781; Melograni suggests that the later letters, which may have numbered a hundred, were perhaps destroyed after Mozart's death by his wife to influence posterity's recollection of their relationship (p. 284). If this is true, then it matters greatly to the historian, who wants to get at the real relationship between these two men and not settle merely for what Mozart's wife wanted people to know, and it makes sense for anyone attempting to describe Melograni's sources to pick up on this fact regarding the dates of his father's letters.

(Slide 4) It's worth saying a few words here about the term "source." We have thus far used it in two rather different ways. First, we talked in general terms about the sources of our knowledge, and then we used the word in a more narrow sense to talk about specifically textual sources. In this course you'll be reading what other people have written and focusing on the arguments that they have produced. This means that one of the main type of evidence you'll be attending to is <u>other</u> written texts that serve as sources (in the narrow sense of the term) for the texts that you <u>are</u> reading. But you'll have to address other sources of knowledge (in the more general sense of the term) to some extent in this course, and more so in some of the other courses you may take in college. Two examples may illustrate some of the variety of evidence that you may encounter in your studies.

(Slide 5) First, let's look at the double-slit experiment, one of the most famous experiments in physics. In the seventeenth century Isaac Newton had argued that light consists of particles, and he used this model to help explain properties such as the reflection and refraction of light. In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Young demonstrated that light exhibits wave properties. Imagine you shine a light on a blackened sheet, which has two narrow slits cut into it, and you put a screen on the other side from the light, so that only light passing through the slits can reach the screen. If light were composed of particles, then you'd see two patches of light corresponding to the slits, two narrow lines of light.

In fact what you see are a series of lines, some darker than others, arrayed in parallel to the slits. This indicates that the light that is hitting the sheet is not composed of particles, some of which pass through the slits but most of which hit the sheet and are absorbed by it. Rather, it is composed of waves that spread out after they pass through the slits, and the pattern you see on the screen represents the addition of these waves. Thus, the stronger lines indicate places on the screen where light from both slits is at the peak of its waveform, whereas the areas that show no light are caused by the peak of one wave being added to the trough of another, and thus cancelling each other out.

In this case, an author you may read who describes this experiment may be relying on textual sources for his account, but ultimately a vital source of evidence is the experiments themselves, and in order to

give an adequate description of the sources on which the author relies, you'll have to address these experiments themselves, not accounts of them.

(Slide 6) Let's now move to anthropology. In 1953, Jane Belo published a short monograph (the word "monograph" is used for short, academic books on technical subjects) called *Bali: Temple Festival*. As the title indicates, it describes the performance of a festival at a temple in Bali, an island in Indonesia, as observed by the author. Thus Belo's main source of evidence is her direct perception (or observation) of events. She did talk to people who participated in the festival to learn how they understood what they were doing, so for example on p. 27 she describes the "invitation of the demons," providing a translation of part of what the priests says at this point in the ceremony, and then gives in both Balinese and English translation the final words, which are: "May there be honor. Hail!"

She then adds that the priest (later, presumably) explained to her that this simple phrase is intended to indicate to the demons that they should not go after him if in some way he has made a mistake in the ceremony. Her translation of what the priest said is based on her own experience, but the explanation that she provides is based on what the priest reported to her. [You may want to pause this movie and read the text of the slide, which is a reproduction of Belo's text, before continuing.]

(Slide 7) You shouldn't be mislead by the fact that she quotes the priest's explanation. This explanation is an oral text that comments on the words of the ritual, which Belo heard directly during the course of the performance. Because the invocation is part of the performance, the fact that it is spoken doesn't matter. It's the object of Belo's study just as much as the feast (a non-verbal action) that she describes on p. 34 is. The priest's explanation of the invocation, on the other hand, isn't part of the festival. What's important about his explanation isn't that he spoke it to her, but that she got the explanation on the authority of the priest, rather than directly experiencing it herself during the performance of the festival.

(Slide 8) These two examples illustrate evidence other than written sources that would have to be described if you were discussing a text that addresses them. Fortunately, outside of this course it's unlikely that someone is going to ask you to describe the sources adduced in a text. However, when you're reading a source critically, this is something you'll almost always do anyway. It's a skill that should become second nature to you, because when you are thinking about some else's account of a topic, you need to know whether to believe, and how to understand, what you are being told. Part of that involves thinking about the person's evidence – good conclusions are unlikely to come out of bad evidence, after all. In any case, thinking about the facts that are presented to you, and not simply accepting them without question, is a key element of critical thinking.