Elimination: As Necessary as Acquisition
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OBJECTIVES
- To suggest resources for following up on findings (or the lack thereof) from researched documents, stories, and other evidence
- To introduce the use of elimination to move the research along
- To emphasize critical thinking, source citation, and record-keeping to help sort out research elements and to find information again, if necessary

You can't use a non-existence to prove that something doesn't exist
- If you don't find your ancestor in a particular location, that does not mean he/she didn't exist or ever live there (even in the year you are searching), just that, perhaps, the person was not present at that place at that time or even denied being whom he/she is
- If your DNA results do not show you have Native American ancestry, that does not mean that there were no Native Americans in your line; that ethnicity may have been filtered out over the many generations

Consider:
Doctor Question: did the medication I prescribed work for you?
My Answer: I don't know. There was no control group. I got better, but maybe that would have happened anyway.

> Inductive reasoning determines, given the same symptoms in the future, whether or not I take the medication again (as long as there were no, or very mild, side effects, among other variables, e.g., allergies, drug interactions, price, etc.).

● *Deduction: Generalizing from the whole to a single representative of the whole*
EXAMPLE: Everyone watching this video is interested in family history.
I am watching this video, therefore I am interested in family history.
● *Induction: Generalizing from a single entity to the group from which the entity belongs*
EXAMPLE: I am interested in family history and volunteer at the Family History Center.
All people who are interested in family history also volunteer at Family History Centers.

Obviously, this last statement is a fallacy (the fallacy of Hasty Generalization). When we identify the errors in reasoning, we have a chance of correcting research before it gets posted on the web, published, passed on to family, or otherwise disseminated.

See the big picture:
- Names (There can be more than one person with a particular name)
- Context (see next section)
  - What is possible, probable, or out of the question?
  - Are there regional norms and laws that give us hints of what to expect?
- Look at others in the records or neighborhood to eliminate other options for being that "other possibility" before settling on your conclusion

Situation and Context
Prior to accepting information, even from a credible source, ask yourself: "Does this reporting entity care?" (about the event, the person or family, the laws requiring accurate reporting, etc.)
- Is there another reason (beyond the obvious) for the data?
- Are there other people involved in the creation of the document who might "need" an alteration of the truth (e.g., inflating age to serve in military, hiding a prison term, etc.)?
- Is there something happening in the time period that might cause information to be adjusted (war, illness, season, disaster, etc.)?
- Has a period of time passed between the event and the creation of the data (possibly making a memory of the event skewed)?

> Hints to help the process along; organization should be what's best for you:
> - Use timelines of lives & social history
> - Tables of people, dates, places, & sources
> - Spreadsheets of people & dates & sources
> - Create a log of findings (and take along when doing research)

Critical Thinking & Unbiased Analysis involves . . .
- Putting emotional responses "on the shelf"
- Removing our prejudices from the equation
- Avoiding the temptation to stereotype
- NOT expecting a single piece of evidence to explain, reveal, or clarify all the information about a person/family
- Being willing to listen to others' interpretations (even if they contradict your interpretations; this does not mean accepting those interpretations without evaluation)
- Explaining our rationale and reasoning (including clear citation of sources)

> ". . . when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." – Sherlock Holmes (A. Conan Doyle)

Guidelines to consider before elimination
- Think about what you see when you look at something: it is dependent on how you interpret what is viewed, based on perception, combined with
  - Emotions
  - Prior experience/knowledge
  - Biases
- But, while these do involve thoughts and interpretations, the analysis of what is being viewed ought to be determined by
  - Facts as supported by evidence
  - Competency of the source (person or resource)
  - Any "hidden agenda"
  - Thorough investigation (with record-keeping for future reference – see box above)

ALWAYS cite sources & keep notes of those that have yielded no results.
Date findings (or the lack of them) and locations (repository, website, publication, etc.)
Remember: removing options is a step forward, not back

Online sources for negative evidence ideas (most dealing with fields other than genealogy)
(LISTS ACCURATE AS OF 2022)

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