

Invisible Evidence¹

Robert Klitgaard²

August 2006

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the 2006 Stauffer Symposium, “What Constitutes Credible Evidence in Evaluation and Applied Research?”

One thing we share, not only the evaluators and researchers in this audience but everyone in academia, is this: *our work is deriving meaning from evidence*. This is true for literary critics and physicists, for historians and anthropologists, for Leonard Bickman as well as Michael Scriven. What sometimes separates us is what we mean by “meaning,” what we count as “evidence,” and how we proceed from the latter to the former. This separation can become almost cultural, in the sense of differing implicit rules and systems of communication. And as in all cases where cultures differ, cultural misunderstandings may result.

The French anthropologist Raymonde Carroll wrote a book whose American title is *Cultural Misunderstanding: The French-American Experience*.³ She is married to an American anthropologist, and while doing field work in the Pacific she and her husband rediscovered their own cultural differences. What proved liberating about this discovery was transferring a personal issue to a cultural issue, and eventually turning what could have been a perennial source of personal conflict into a shared task of cultural discovery and appreciation. Her book is fascinating for what it says about French and American implicit rules and systems of communication, and also for the hints it provides about how to do cultural analysis in other areas, including perhaps understanding differences across academic cultures regarding evidence.

What is “cultural analysis”? Carroll says, “I see cultural analysis as a means of perceiving as ‘normal’ things which initially seem ‘bizarre’ or ‘strange’ among people of a culture different from one’s own.” (p. 2)

But in order to understand this, I must first become aware of my reading, of the interpretation I bring to the cultural text, of the filter through which I learned to perceive the world. In other words, before learning to understand the culture of

¹ Welcome to the 2006 Stauffer Symposium, “What Constitutes Credible Evidence in Evaluation and Applied Research?” Claremont Graduate University, August 19, 2006.

² President and University Professor, Claremont Graduate University.

³ Trans. Carol Volk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

the other, I must become aware of my own culture, of my cultural presuppositions, of the implicit premises that inform my interpretation, of my verities. (p. 4)

The first step [in cultural analysis] consists of clearing the deck, so to speak. I must, above all, avoid all attempts at discovering the deep-seated reasons for the cultural specificity of such-and-such a group. That is to say that I must avoid the temptation of psychological or psychoanalytic explanations (“because American mothers...,” “because French people can’t stand authority...”). (p. 5)

She also wants us to set aside explanations that are ecological, geographical, demographic, economic, religious, historical, or even sociological. They do not deal with culture, but belong to another domain, as closely connected as that domain may be to culture.

Indeed, I am not using cultural analysis to find out why things are as they are or to uncover their deep-rooted nature (“what they are”). Rather, I seek to understand the system of communication by which meaning is produced and received within a group. (p. 6)

Might we apply Raymonde Carroll’s suggestions to our debates over what constitutes evidence? Let us bracket all explanations of our opponents’ views that reduce their views to products of politics, quantitative aptitude, aesthetic awareness, disciplinary origin, or field of application. Let us begin with our own views. With regard to the debate about evidence, what are my so-to-speak cultural presuppositions and implicit premises about the meaning I am hoping to derive from “evidence” and the methods or processes I almost automatically use to do the deriving? Then, I can ask the same questions about my opponents. Are they seeking the same kind of meaning? What are their assumptions about methods and processes of derivation? And how do these implicit premises affect what they see as good evidence?

Such questions return us to the roots of the debate. They may force us to ask almost etymological questions. Evidence, defined in one dictionary as “a thing or things helpful in forming a conclusion or judgment,” comes from the Latin *evidens* clear, obvious, from *e-* out of, from + *videns*, present participle of *videre* to see. Evidence, in other words, shares a root with evident, defined as “easily seen or understood; obvious.” The reason many debates are so frustrating is because to one of us an answer seems “evident,” just as to the other a different answer is equally “apparent or obvious to the mind or senses.” Our antennae should quiver in exactly such debates; it means that the debate is not joined, that we do not share a common meaning or a common method for deriving meaning from evidence. And in these situations, understanding our “cultures” can be the first step toward a different kind of dialogue, one that works toward appreciation of different ways of rendering and communicating meaning.

Raymonde Carroll's book was originally published in French. Its title was *Evidences Invisibles*, in the plural.⁴ What a strange title, participants in this conference might join me in thinking. How can "evidence" be "invisible," when we have just seen that the word comes from something apparent?

Her answer is precisely those unexamined assumptions, those implicit rules of communication, which shape our views in ways we do not see until we make an effort to do so. That which is most "evident" to us may have roots in something we do not see at all, which within our culture is to us invisible, and which to other cultures may be perceived as something to do with us personally (or with one of the correlates or pseudo-explanations Carroll asks us to avoid). Thus, the search for that which is evident but invisible in ourselves can be the beginning of understanding of the other's invisibles, and then to a deeper understanding of our debate.

From there it may be possible to move to a constructive new engagement. If we can agree we are trying to derive such-and-such a kind of meaning through this general method, we can together probe the costs and benefits of collecting and using different kinds of evidence.

Our answers will be specific to the context. They will depend on the importance of the decisions at stake, uncertainties about the benefits and costs of different alternatives, the costs (and sometimes the feasibility or ethics) of collecting additional evidence of different kinds, and so forth. Different contexts will, I think, lead us to value different kinds and amounts of evidence. Depending on the context, we may favor experimental designs for some situations and non-experimental designs for others; we may appreciate qualitative evidence in some cases and quantitative evidence in others (and both in many other cases); and so forth. We may discover that when it comes to evidence we need not be culturally monolithic.

Again, a hearty welcome to all of you to Claremont Graduate University. I wish you success today in understanding the deeper dimensions of the debate over evidence and in suggesting ways for new, constructive collaboration across academic cultures.

⁴ *Evidences Invisibles: Américains et Français au quotidien* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1987).