

3.e.

From Observation to Hypothesis

As I've said before in class, there is no more important task for the scholar than asking questions. Asking questions – good, scholarly questions, is both a technique which can be learned, and an art which must be intuited. Let's see how the process begins. Consider the following primary source:

Affidavit of a Georgia freedwoman, 1866. My husband and I lived in Florida about four months. During that time he beat and abused me. I reported it to the officer in charge of the Freedman's Bureau. He had him arrested, and he got out of the guard house and left the place, remaining away until a new officer took charge. He then came back and beat me again. I had him arrested. He knocked the officer down and ran away and came here to Savannah. Since that time he has abused me and refuses to pay for the rent of my room and has not furnished me with any money, food, or clothing. I told him that I would go to the Freedmen's Bureau. He replied, "Damn the Freedmen's Bureau--I'll cuss you before them." On Saturday night, he came to my room and took all his things. He told me he would rather keep a woman than be married because she could not carry him to law and I could. I then told him that if he wanted to leave me to get a divorce and he could go. He said, "If I can get a divorce without paying for it, I'll get it for you. If I can't I won't give it to you, you can go without it." I said, "If you want to leave me, leave me like a man!" He has no just complaint against me.

Observation derived from primary source: This document depicts a freedmen's physical abuse of his wife.

Thought: *This seems like an instance of gender oppression. But we've been thinking about things in terms of race. Plus, this is strange: we've just seen enslaved African Americans become free; now we see evidence of gender conflict. (Why is this "strange"?) I guess it's strange because I expected the expansion of freedom for all blacks to have been shared equally among black men and women. Perhaps this was not so.*

Hypothesis: *Are these two things — emancipation and gender conflict — related? If so, how? Did emancipation cause gender conflict? If so, how? Did freedom intensify conflicts that existed before? Why would freedom have intensified conflict — what about it would do that?* (Note that this process is about mulling over possibilities. When I ask, "if so, how?" I then respond with several options. This process of considering alternative possible answers is crucial!)

The big question: *How did emancipation affect gender conflict between African-American men and women?* (But wait – that is too general a question! — you've already moved past that in your thinking.

This is more a statement of theme: the relationship between the general emancipation of enslaved African Americans and gender conflict between black men and women.)

Here is what else you've thought about:

There may have been a rise in gender conflict after emancipation

It may have been more than coincidental — there may be a causal relationship

Here is what I've not clarified:

What do I mean when I say *gender* oppression? Who oppressed who, exactly? (Of course, I mean that men oppressed women. This is obvious, but I've yet to say it yet.)

What do I mean when I say *oppression*? Is there just one kind of oppression? If not, how many kinds are there? What kind am I looking at here? (Many of these I can't answer yet, yet I do know that what I mean here by "oppression" is that the husband beat and abandoned his wife.)

So I could reformulate my question to make it more specific: What about emancipation caused an increase in the physical abuse and abandonment of African-American women by African-American men?

Questions to ask when asking questions:

- What words, phrases, or concepts in my questions have yet to be explored?
- What assumptions have I made (or are implicit) in the questions I've asked?
- What are the parts or components of my question?
- How would I go about testing my hypotheses?
- What would a possible answer or solution look like?