Research Skills

Research Skills Foundations -- Case Studies: Themes

Using Primary Sources to Research Marginalized Groups

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Abstract

This case study will help with suggestions and methods to explore the history of marginalized groups over the course of the mid-twentieth century. It will explore these methods by focusing on a case study of publications and reports by social movements that advocated for the rights and interests of marginalized groups. By the end of this case study, you should be able to identify and navigate a range of materials produced by social movements as they relate to issues of discrimination. You should be able to use this study to help provide insights into the analysis of primary sources that relate to histories of race, racism, and intersectional experiences with discrimination broadly conceived.

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this case study, you will be able to:

- Recognize different types of social movement documents as they relate to marginalized groups and assess them in the context of wider historical political and social debates.

- Ask questions concerning the context, content, and aims of a collection of resources that relates to and/or marginalized groups and use these questions to establish the document's historical significance.

- Identify the authors and/or key interest groups represented in the documents and consider critical perspectives that could be taken on source materials.

- Produce critical arguments that explore the history of marginalized groups and the social movements that have advocated for them and driven change in public policy.

Initial Steps and Questions

Before reading this piece and evaluating the primary source in full, you may want to reflect on these questions and initial steps:

1. There are many types of records that relate to marginalized groups.

These records showcase perspectives that both support and/or antagonize and can represent a diverse positionality from both within and external to such groups. They might provide a record of past events that demonstrates how power structures (like governments or corporations) have concerned themselves with marginalized groups. You should first determine the type of source(s) you are looking at. You can use the following questions to do this:

1. Establish the nature of the documents in front of you. Determine how they fit together.

    a. Are you looking at a single document or a corpus of material with a range of different authors and dates?

    b. How are the documents aligned and organized? For instance, are they ordered chronologically or thematically? Is there a table of contents that describes or lists individual documents?

    c. What do the documents look like? Are they typewritten reports or publications or more informal notes? Do you see any comments or editing marks on the documents?

2. Is the document the work of a single individual, or has it been created by a particular group?

    a. Pay close attention to the use of document headings and titles in the source and think about what could have motivated the author

or authors to create the document.

b. Ask yourself, is whoever produced the source affiliated with a particular interest group or aligned with a particular organization or institution? If so, would the author's
relationship with this group lead them to be biased toward a particular opinion? How might this potential bias impact how you analyze the source?

c. What were the circumstances surrounding the document's creation?

3. When and where was the source created? Start to contextualize the document by looking for relevant dates and regional references within the text. Is the document that you have in front of you a single document, produced on a single date? Or is it a collection of shorter documents, created over a period of time? Remember, perspectives can often change over time, so be attuned to how the source material might reveal biases and changes in views surrounding events and themes referred to throughout.

Contextual Information

There is vast literature on the histories of marginalized groups. In approaching this large body of knowledge, scholars might consider the overlapping triumvirate of race, class, and gender as potential lenses of inquiry because they provide the largest thematic areas for analysis and understanding of how social marginalization takes place. Relatedly, many scholars and contemporary social activists often think about how the concept of intersectionality relates to these categories for understanding human marginalization. As the prolific legal studies scholar Kimberle Crenshaw indicates, the experiences of class and sexuality "are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color."[1] So race, class, and gender are inherently connected, overlapping categories of social experience. Each of these areas is worth considering on their own, but also because they intersect in ways that demand sustained attention to subtle nuances, differences, and complexities that come with specific lived perspectives. Relatedly, the intersectional method also helps account for issues of power and privilege for how social marginalization takes place—such as efforts to address racism or sexism in 1960s America. Born of movements against sexism and for racial justice that emerged in the mid-late twentieth century, intersectional analysis helps clarify how systems of domination, discrimination, and control persist over time.

Studies of any primary sources related to marginalized communities also need to account for the ways any source material can potentially represent the subject positions of any specific and socially defined group of human beings. To do this in a comprehensive or judicious manner, scholars might consider other important social indices beyond the intersectional triumvirate listed above. One could equally consider themes like sexuality, religion, disability and ableism, childhood, homelessness, and poverty, and perhaps other social indicators to provide additional, often equally important lenses for initial forays into the study of specific primary sources. Such methodological considerations should be considered before proceeding into any study of sources that pertains to marginalized groups.

This case study considers source materials that sought to represent and support marginalized groups through the mid-twentieth century and how

sources might best be identified, approached, and studied. Scholarship on these matters is quite interdisciplinary, so it helps to read broadly in secondary materials when delving into thematic subject areas related to this sort of case study. This means reading not just widely in history but also in fields like sociology, anthropology, geography, political science, modern languages, philosophy, and literary studies. It also helps to consider questions of positionality, audience, and social experience when reading both primary and secondary source materials.[2]

Historically, the concerns of marginalized groups are deeply intertwined with questions of democracy and citizenship as well as human migrations between rural and urban regions. For the United States, sociologists Omi and Winant-authors of the classic text *Racial Formation in the United States*—examine processes of "racial formation" which they describe as "the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings."[3] Histories of peoples of color in the Americas have been intimately connected to these processes of racial formation, notably because of the ways trans-Atlantic slavery and European colonization impacted patterns of exclusion, inequality, and access to resources and opportunities over the modern era. Movements that challenged these exclusions have been limited in part by "state-based coercion" and sometimes "reactionary" practices based in "civil society"—such as mob violence and racial lynching. Omi and Winant echo many scholars of American history when they suggest that there have been "two great" moments of "upsurge" when more thorough-going democratic reforms seemed possible—the post-Civil War period of Reconstruction (1865–1877) and the post-World War II civil rights period (1948–1970).[4]

The source considered in this case study is best situated in the latter context of the post-World War II period of US civil rights upsurge in the urban north. The world wars featured the mass migration of Black Americans as well as Latin(x) southerners to urban areas around the United States—especially to the urban north and west during World War II and its aftermath. In these locales, many new migrants sought out new employment, educational, and housing opportunities.[5] The source under examination comprises digitized primary sources in the form of reports and publications by the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination from mid-1949 through

the early 1950s. These were produced during this period of mass migration and social change. The council was founded by an ecumenical group of activists in 1943 in Chicago and notably featured the activities of liberal Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic religious and lay leaders who sought to advance "intergroup relations" through a combination of educational activities, legislation, and direct action.[6]

This case study will focus on images 1–8 of the newsletter *Against Discrimination*, to highlight some of the local campaigns for fair employment, housing, and antidiscrimination policies that the council helped support from 1949 to 1950. However, the historiographical and theoretical approaches suggested here are likely applicable to all the images contained in this collection of Council documents as well as others that relate to marginalized groups. In addition to the scholarship listed in the citations and noted above, students of this theme might benefit from considering specific works of local and regional history, like Arnold Hirsch's *The Making of the Second Ghetto* or Lilia Fernandez' *Brown in the Windy City* as well as works that provide nice overviews for civil rights struggles in the urban north such as Thomas Sugrue's *Sweet Land of Liberty*.[7] Students may also want to consider the religious motivations of some of the activists and organizations noted in these sources and how the perspectives most expressed in these sources might be limited by certain cultural or political ideologies. For example, given the presence of liberal religious leaders like Catholic Bishop Bernard Sheil—highlighted in the masthead of *Against Discrimination*—it is likely the perspectives of secular radical leftists, as one example, might be excluded from the pages of the publication.[8] A good question to consider following such an observation would be what sorts of ideological underpinnings do the source seem to reflect? What sorts of cultural, political, or social perspectives are most reflected by the source material? Further research into the specific histories—particular to the names and organizations mentioned in any source would be helpful.

These studies could help students to better situate source material in its appropriate regional and temporal contexts. Indeed, the struggles against discrimination highlighted by the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination do much to demonstrate the ways these manifested in areas of employment, housing, and education. This is a region of the country that ostensibly did not suffer from *dejure* (legal) forms of racial

segregation and discrimination against marginalized groups which occurred prolifically in the American South. These sources show that in fact, this region did share much in common with the Jim Crow racism that was most prevalent in the US South of the same period because of the *racial discrimination* existed throughout much of the mid-twentieth century.

Source Analysis Questions

1. Who and/or what organizations produced the document, and what are their purposes/aims?

2. What does the source tell us about wider public debates of the time concerning race, politics, and religion?

3. In what context was the source created? We know that the sources considered in this case study were created during periods of civil rights insurgency in the United States after World War II (late 1940s/early 1950s). What might this suggest about the movements for reform and social change represented in these sources?

4. What audience(s) was the source created for?

5. Can you identify any factors that would limit the usefulness of the source?

6. What other information would be helpful to have to better understand or assess the significance of the source?

Critical Evaluation

Introduction: Identification and Overview

Start by identifying the format, style, and structure of each source document. This should help indicate something about the purpose of the document and how it fits into a larger collection of materials. Use this information as a starting point to carry out a more detailed analysis.

Go to image 1, which is the first available page from this file showing the cover of the newsletter *Against Discrimination*, published by the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination. You can see that this file was also stamped "received" from the Chicago Urban League, which is another civil rights organization active from this period in the United States and one that has a particularly important standing in Black communities. It helps to make a note at the outset of names on mastheads, bylines on columns and/or event notices, and any notations that have been imprinted or written on primary sources. For example, when examining image 1, it might help to do some additional research into the Chicago Urban League (CUL) and what it was doing at this time.[9]

All sorts of biographical information can be uncovered about the people and organizations listed on the masthead or in columns and notices from a publication like this, with some additional research. In image 1, one could consider what sorts of studies have been done related to local histories that involve the activities of Dr. Preston Bradley and Bishop Bernard Sheil, listed as "co-chairman" of the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination in 1949. For example, a number of studies have been done about the activities of Bishop Sheil and other Catholic liberals of this period, which might be worth consulting as you further make sense of this particular source.[10] Names of people and organizations, especially if they were involved in producing the source are important for further establishing why it might be significant to understanding the situation of marginalized peoples at any time or place.

What Are the Larger Issues the Source Helps Uncover?

Once you have made a note of who was involved in producing the source, it helps to see how it connects to larger public debates related to issues that concerned marginalized groups. In this case, it will help to understand how those who produced the newsletter for the Council relate to events noted in the source that convey aspects of the post-World War II US civil rights movement and the evolving urban contexts of this era.

Further to this end, it would help to scan the entire document (in this case, images 1–8) to see what sorts of topics are covered to get a general sense of what the Council wanted to achieve and who and what other organizations it associated with. In this case, the newsletter *Against Discrimination* covers a variety of issues related to the situation that marginalized groups in Chicago faced when it came to racial discrimination, such as employment discrimination and segregation in housing and in schools along with the associated racial violence that impacted these areas. In addition to concerns about African American communities facing racism in the urban north, the newsletter also mentions other racialized communities in Chicago, such as Mexicans. Indeed, image 4 advertises a "Mexican American Reception" to honor Antonio R. Sarabia as the "first" Mexican American to graduate from the University of Chicago Law School.

A brief perusal of column headings on the images should give you more insight into what the Council's main aims were over the time this newsletter was published through 1950. Public notices published besides the editorial column contributions can also be helpful. For example, there is a "Work conference on Human Relations" advertised in image 1 that tells of an event that profiled the "Special Role of the Chicago Council." In image 3, "The Great Housing Rally" is listed which features civil rights and liberal civic leaders active in Chicago, like Industrial Areas Foundation director Saul Alinsky, Chicago Housing Authority head Elizabeth Wood, and University of Chicago professor Louis Wirth. A keen observer will note that the "Housing Rally" was jointly organized by the Council and the local B'Nai B'rith Lodge—demonstrating the event's ecumenical orientation.

Ultimately, this source is helpful for uncovering and explaining the depth of racial discrimination and injustices that existed in major US cities like Chicago

during the mid-twentiethcentury. It would be useful to any researchers interested in studying how racialized populations have faced discrimination in housing, education, and employment.

Considering the Politics of Urban Housing

In image 1 alone, we can see reports of mob violence and racism in Southside Chicago neighborhoods like Park Manor. The image details how the Council has taken the lead in appealing to Chicago's mayor at the time, Martin Kennelly, as well as to the local police department, about reforms and policies sought to prevent future riots and racial tensions. We can see right away that the Council is mainly aligned against local white residents who have reacted violently to the arrival of southern migrants into what they viewed as "their" communities. For example, the Southside neighborhood of Park Manor was apparently one that had "been marked by years of opposition to Negroes' coming" including past use of Restrictive Covenants, racially exclusive features of property deeds only recently outlawed by the US Supreme Court a year earlier in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948). If you turn to image 7, you can see a report of Ku Klux Klan violence reported in Alton, Illinois to "remind" the people of the state that "racial hatred and violence…. Was not dead—even in their 'Northern' state." These sections of the source help explain the high levels of racial strife that marked Chicago's history over this period, as well as the ways some liberal activists sought to oppose racist violence.

If you turn to image 4, you can see how the Council sought to publicize what it viewed as potential success stories in terms of areas of the city where more peaceful "human relations" had been achieved. For example, Hyde Park-Kenwood residents were praised for establishing a Community Conference that offered suggestions for what to do in situations of discrimination against newcomers to their neighborhood, whether from local businesses or through local real estate practices. A follow-up article from the newsletter later that year in May–June of 1950 (image 8) positively reflected on a report made by the Hyde-Park Kenwood Community Conference which convened a gathering of 750 residents who heard that "all races, creeds, and national backgrounds had joined in a concerted program to maintain and advance community standards." Here we see the ways those who supported the council promoted multi-racial coalitions capable of potentially transcending the racial divisions that existed in this time. With any source materials related

to the issues of marginalized groups, it is helpful to see how efforts towards positive change were envisioned and imagined.

Such positive perspectives can be helpful but should be qualified by what might have been left out of such a source. Researchers would benefit from learning more about why such a conference was deemed a successful "community effort" as compared to other areas of the city where racial violence seemed to persist over the same period, such as Park Manor. Extra research into specific neighborhood regions can help here, such as, for example, consideration of any available secondary source materials like Arnold Hirsch's *Making of the Second Ghetto*—which focuses in part on the conflicted history of Hyde Park and Kenwood and the areas around the powerful University of Chicago, which also did much to limit the integration of working-class Black American communities from surrounding areas into these neighborhoods. This qualification also brings up an important question about how far a civil rights coalition from this period mainly staffed by white liberals, such as the Council, could represent the interests and aspirations of marginalized groups. It would help to consider to what extent the source material is limited from drawing more extensive conclusions about the fuller scope of civil rights struggles from this period without direct mention of marginalized voices themselves in the source material.

Connected to these apprehensions about the scope of source materials might be an analysis of what the Council clearly wanted its readers to focus on. Image 2 indicates the Council's central concerns with the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC)—a federal government agency started under the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It was one of the first American government agencies created in the mid-twentieth century to address discrimination in areas of employment. If you encounter the names of government agencies, committees, and organizations in the source material, it is helpful to consider what they were. Look up acronyms in secondary materials and consider what information has been written about them. For example, one can easily look up the FEPC in histories of US civil rights in relation to local settings.[11] You can see from the entries about the FEPC, in images 2 and 3, that the council had a critical position towards the Republican party's views on fair employment—and is particularly critical of the Chicago Association of Commerce and Chicago Chambers of Commerce who claimed "credit" for the defeat of FEPC legislation in the federal senate. At the top of image 3, which features the first page of the January–February 1950 issue of

Against Discrimination, a notice from the Illinois Fair Employment Practices Committee appears prominently and implores readers to petition congress to pass FEPC legislation. It helps to look for other related materials from the same publication. For example, further down in image 3, there is a report about the city of Cleveland, Ohio, passing an "ordinance to forbid discrimination in employment" which was backed by that city's Chamber of Commerce—which shows how such entities were capable of supporting fair employment. Image 5 features a discussion in the March 1950 issue of *Against Discrimination* about how "Republicans Disappoint on FEPC"—notably the role of nine of thirteen Illinois Republicans who continued to oppose the legislation. In image 7, the May–June 1950 issue of the newsletter tells us that FEPC legislation failed once again federally, not just because of Republican intransigence but also because of the impact of racism from mostly white western states that voted Democrat and did little to support civil rights activities. Based on the attention the newsletter gave to FEPC and federal legislation, it is possible to suggest the Council was ultimately more concerned with the partisan divide over issues of fair employment than the question of bipartisan agency and leadership within local movements for social change and civil rights.

Questions of Audience and Critical Limits to Sources

In terms of audience, you can ascertain a good deal of information from how articles are arranged and ordered in a publication like this in combination with the masthead and publication information provided. Image 1 advertises an upcoming event aimed at "professional and lay leaders" right on its first page, which suggests acknowledgment of a religious as well as the secular audience. Moreover, another column in image 4 reports an upcoming meeting of "Illinois Churchmen" was to feature "Protestant" church leaders from across the state. With Catholic Bishop Sheil involved in co-chairing the Council's activities as well as notices that feature collaborations with Jewish organizations like B'Nai B'rith—the council's activities clearly had an ecumenical dimension to them.

If you proceed to image 6, you can ascertain a good deal more information about the newsletters' intended audience. One feature piece notes how the "Vatican Issues a Call to Interracial Efforts" and highlights a report issued to "300 million Catholics throughout the world" that praised President Truman's

civil rights program because of its intent to “secure complete civil rights for all American citizens in practice…” as well as calls for policies against racial segregation. This coverage of changes on policies related to racism from the Vatican is significant for a city like Chicago that had a majority Eastern and Southern European-descended immigrant population—most of whom were Catholics and many of which were the primary instigators in racist violence in the city through the post-World War II period.[12] As such, the article on the Vatican’s interracial efforts notes the activities of liberal Catholic organizations that had been especially active in the city during this time, such as Friendship House and the Catholic Interracial Council. You can also see margin notes that highlight the announcement of radio programs hosted by the Chicago Urban League, notably “Destination Freedom” which had been a program started by local African American union member, writer, and civil rights advocate, Richard Durham.[13] It also repeats mention from earlier issues of Jack L. Cooper’s radio program, “Listen Chicago!”—thus, the newsletter clearly targeted an audience on the airwaves as well as through print.

Some of the newsletters recommend further reading, which demonstrates the educational *foci* of the Council. For example, image 4 reports on events and readings; from a Saturday afternoon presentation of the Fisk Jubilee singers at Chicago’s Civic Opera House to a comic book, “perfect for teenagers,” called “Negro Heroes” and published by the National Urban League. Image 5 shows that the March 1950 issue of the newsletter reported on a publication from the American Jewish Committee that presented a “record of progress in civil rights in 1948 and 1949” as well as a report on “Human Rights” from the Human Relations Commission of the Chicago Industrial Union Council. Other publications “worth reading” include an “Object Lesson in Race Relations” from *The New York Times Magazine* and a publication from the Bureau for Intercultural Education in New York. Researchers might consider what other perspectives were left out of these educational suggestions from the newsletter? What ideologies might have been excluded from consideration as appropriate views on civil rights reform regarding the rights of marginalized communities? These are just some ideas students might consider for future research and to better understand the changing terrain of American race relations in this period.

Over the course of the mid-twentiethcentury, movements for change and legal reform emerged in western countries—particularly in support of social groups that had been historically marginalized, such as African Americans

and Mexican Americans in the United States. Over this period, many US cities experienced an influx of migrants from rural areas in southern regions—a majority of whom were people of color seeking jobs and educational opportunities in the urban and industrial north and west. Significant coalitions of concerned citizens came to advocate for the rights of such marginalized groups and sought to influence public policies—notably in the educational, employment, and housing sectors. At the center of this advocacy were important questions about what a democratic and socially just society could and should look like and what engaged citizenry might do to foster progressive social change to achieve such ends. After World War II, many of these concerns emerged, largely in response to the resurgent racism and violence African Americans faced as they moved in greater numbers to urban areas from the rural south.

Conclusion

There exists a rich and varied range of primary sources and literatures concerning social movements that advocated for marginalized communities —whether they deployed an intersectional lens that accounted for a wider spectrum of human experiences or not. These sources reveal important details about key figures and organizations involved in movements that supported the rights of marginalized peoples. By exploring these sources, such as the ones explored in the above case study, you will learn to assess how and why the advocacy for marginalized peoples varied over time and place. You can consider the importance of precise contextual information as well as potential limitations, biases, and blind spots in the perspectives of those who advocated for the rights of marginalized groups from certain political, religious, and/or cultural positions. You will learn to recognize how to approach the study of marginalized communities as a lens into better understandings of key social and political issues of the time. And you will consider what role the wider public played in driving specific reforms and reactions in government policies, laws, and social customs.

Post-evaluation Questions

1. What major historical themes can a source like this help to address?

2. How can scholars best use this kind of source material in their work?

3. Consider the methods of intersectional analysis and approach to sources discussed at the outset of this case study. What perspectives might be missing from the source material?

4. Does the source have any inherent limitations in terms of how it's devised and written?

5. How could the meaning of this source change over time?

6. On balance, can any definitive historical conclusions be drawn from this source?

Further Research Considerations

If you were to research this area further, you might consider the following questions and discussion points:

1. What other primary sources might counter, challenge, or complicate some of the perspectives expressed in the documents discussed above?

2. Where could researchers look to gain a greater variation of perspectives that also treat similar historical themes?

3. What other disciplines of knowledge and secondary literatures might be further consulted to expand the purview of your research into the social movements that advocated for marginalized groups over time and place?

Further Resources

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Notes

1. Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1245.

2. See, for instance, Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; Frederickson, *Racism*; Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*; Forward by Gordon-Reed, *Racism in America*.

3. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 61.

4. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 139.

5. Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*; Grossman, *Land of Hope*; Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*.

6. Johnson, *One in Christ*; Germaine and Hoffman, *Joseph Germano*; Rice, *Healing the Racial Divide*.

7. Hirsch, *The Making of the Second Ghetto*; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*; Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*
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8. See, McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries*; Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*.

9. For a study that covers the history of the Chicago Urban League’s local activism in significant depth, see Helgeson, *Crucibles of Black Empowerment*.

10. Johnson, *One in Christ*; Neary, *Crossing Parish Boundaries*.

11. Kimble, *A New Deal for Bronzeville*; Schultz, “The FEPC and the Legacy of the Labor-based Civil Rights Movement of the 1940s.”

12. McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries*.

13. Williams, *Word Warrior*.

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