



## Why use the AIU Centre archive?

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## Research Skills Series

### Why use the AIU Centre archive?

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### **Research Skills Series**

Anyone putting together a research project or hammering out a dissertation topic has a lot to think about. What's the subject? How's it going to be investigated? What kind of information will be necessary? And where's that information going to come from?

Here are two reasons why I believe the AIU Centre archive is a resource worth considering for studies covering a wide range of subject areas. It might not be immediately apparent that a Centre making available materials facilitating the study of race relations would be relevant to you, but hopefully by the end of this post its potential significance may have become clearer.

#### **1. Qualitative data brings quantitative data to life**

Some areas of study rely heavily on numbers. Collecting and manipulating statistical data are at the core of some approaches to subjects as varied as economics, political science, legal studies, history, sociology, psychology, education, human geography, and public health.

We number-crunch and analyse to gain reliable information, spot and interpret trends, reveal the effect of one variable on another, and (where possible) show how these trends change over time. Theoretical models may dominate debate, with quantitative data being used to support one or other theoretical perspective, discussed in quite abstract terms.

Quantitative data and approaches are valuable. They can tell us a lot. Some AIU Centre holdings give you access to rich historical statistical data in a number of areas which can bring additional depth to quantitative studies.\* But the Centre's significance doesn't end there.

Quantitative approaches take us only so far, and may in fact mask important insights. What about lived reality? Human experience? The effect of policy or trend on real people in real contexts? No amount of statistics can illuminate these.



Archive poster for an anti-racism rally of 1986

Quantitative data relies on qualitative data to infuse it with meaning.

Where can this all-important qualitative data be found? You guessed it – in an archive. I'd contend that the AIU Centre archive has a great deal to contribute to all the subjects noted above and more, primarily because the study of race relations cuts across all those disciplines.

Centre holdings illuminate the real experiences of real people in a whole variety of real communities with different backgrounds, forced to live out the consequences of the trends the quantitative data has revealed.

## 2. Theoretical frameworks can be tested against lived reality

Social science and humanities subjects seek to shape studies by deriving and applying critical theoretical frameworks. It's a necessary way to make sense of, order and discuss material, but we need to understand that theoretical frameworks are just that – theoretical. They are hypotheses, and hypotheses have no independent 'truth' in any particular circumstance beyond what actual 'evidence' supports.

We all need hypotheses and theoretical frameworks. They provide a convenient beginning for our research journey, helping to bring a semblance of order to what might at first be 'messy' data. Once the research is over,

theoretical frameworks inform judgement and sometimes (further down the line) policy. It's here that we can run into problems if we fall into believing that the frameworks themselves reflect objective reality.

Why does this matter? Because policy ultimately derived from theoretical frameworks affects real people living real lives in real communities. Lived realities may severely challenge and test the premises on which theoretical frameworks are based – if we can access those realities. This is where the voices of 'ordinary people' in 'ordinary communities' are crucial. Beneath the statistics and theoretical frameworks are real lived experiences.

## Project-based Collecting at the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre and Education Trust



The AIU Centre has particularly rich holdings that can illuminate, probe and test out theoretical frameworks. Factoring into our studies knowledge of real lives can undermine stereotypes to reveal that historical reality is not as clear cut as we think.

By taking a look at the [oral histories](#) collection we have access to over 300 individual interviews, mostly with members of the local Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community. We hear the voices of individuals from a variety of origins reflecting on their own experience in their own words, touching on subjects as varied as life in multicultural Manchester, the immigration experience, discrimination, education, health and illness, employment, and struggles for changes in policy and law...

Checking out the [archive](#) collections means we can factor in sources donated by local individuals and community organisations, as well as significant national collections such as the papers of the Commission for Racial Equality and Institute of Race Relations. As with the oral histories, much of the archive material helps us calibrate conclusions we may have made using theoretical frameworks. Evidence is provided of how real social and political trends affected the lives of a whole variety of real individuals and communities over the decades, as reflected and recorded in a variety of written and image-based artefact sources.

***These are only two reasons why we should consider using the AIU Centre archive. It's always worth discussing your project with Centre staff. You may be surprised by the variety and quality of resources you will have at your disposal.***

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\* For more information on these, consult Ruth Tait (the Centre's Senior Library Assistant), who can guide you.