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III. Research: References and Primary Data - Introduction

Teresa Cordova

University of New Mexico - Main Campus, tcordova@unm.edu

Norma Cantu

University of Missouri - Kansas City, cantun@umkc.edu

Christine Marie Sierra

University of New Mexico - Main Campus, csierra@unm.edu

Juan Garcia

Gilberto Cardenas

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Part III. Research: References and Primary Data

Introduction

Traditionally, historical studies have been male-oriented and male-dominated in their content. Because of an archaic emphasis on the accomplishments of Anglo-Saxon heroes, the lives and experiences of people of color have been largely ignored and excluded from the historical record. Efforts to study people of color from traditional social science paradigms have often resulted in distorted and inaccurate images which have served to reinforce existing stereotypes or misrepresentations of their experiences. Although such research was criticized and challenged by Mexican Americans, their demands for reform went largely unanswered.

With the social upheavals that accompanied the 1960s came renewed efforts to make the "system" more responsive to minority concerns and demands. Chicanos and Chicanas joined forces to bring about responsible change in research. In addition to challenging existing scholarship, they began to reevaluate much of what had been written about them and to rewrite it from a Chicano/a perspective. Afterward Chicanos/as stopped allowing the existing literature to dictate their research agenda and began to branch out into other areas which had been largely ignored by social science research. This led to the development of new paradigms and methodologies for studying the Chicano/a experience.

An important outcome of this was to generate discussion, controversy, and more research. Unfortunately, Chicano scholars fell prey to the very practice for which they had so vehemently criticized the Anglo research community. They now became guilty of perpetuating the same sins of omission which had characterized much of the mainstream literature. In essence, they overlooked the role and presence of the Chicana in their work. To date, much of the historical research among Chicanos has failed to include *la mujer*, has remained insensitive to the unique challenges which such research presents, or has continued to reinforce a number of the distortions and misconceptions commonly found in the mainstream

literature. It should be noted that women's programs have also neglected Chicanas in their research agendas, and that they are glaringly absent from much of the literature published by and about women.

However, Chicanas and their allies have not been silent on these points. They have developed plans of action which call for a research agenda that is responsive to their needs, and they have called upon their male colleagues to become more conscious of the role of women in the historical process. This was the challenge issued by Cynthia Orozco in her perceptive article "Chicana Labor History: A Critique of Male Consciousness in Historical Writing" (*La Red* [February, 1984]). According to Orozco, "The issue of women's history is not simply a matter of filling in the gaps." Instead it will require "a new conceptualization of history, new categories of analysis, and new periodization schemes . . ."—and of course more historical research.

Chicanas and Chicanos have begun responding to the new challenges in women's history in a variety of ways. Some have begun to seek and identify "new" sources of archival information, while others have assembled and analyzed existing bibliographies in order to assess their relative merits and usefulness. Currently there is a renaissance of Chicana scholarship that will radically alter the existing historical record on *mujeres* and greatly expand the horizons of research in this area. The selections which follow this introduction represent some of the work which is being done in the field.

In the first article Angelina Veyna has admirably combined her training in anthropology with history in order to study the experiences of women in colonial New Mexico. The study describes the power relationships extant in that society by focusing upon the legal battles which women fought in order to settle disputes or receive compensation for wrongs committed against them or their families. The cases discussed in the article involve *mujeres* from different classes and thus provide the reader with insights into colonial society, its structure, and how the legal and social system responded to their respective cases.

In reviewing the cases, Veyna makes it apparent that women were anything but passive in accepting the roles assigned them. Instead they filed their grievances and voiced their views in a public forum. That they were heard and that the courts at times ruled in their favor

begins to challenge existing views about colonial society and the place women occupied in it. While in many ways this study is exploratory, it nonetheless raises a number of intriguing questions and ideas that merit further investigation.

The local, state, and national archives of Mexico contain rich but largely untapped sources of information about Chicanas and Mexicanas. A large proportion of this archival material remains undindexed, uncatalogued, and unexplored by contemporary historians, especially as it pertains to research on women. The few existing guides on conducting research in Mexico's archives, including Richard Greenleaf and Michael Meyer's *Research in Mexican History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), are useful in that they provide researchers with general content overviews of the various collections housed in Mexico City's archives. However, they do not contain references to materials on women.

In her essay Dr. Barbara Driscoll begins to delineate resources and information on women housed in the Archivo General de la Nación and the Archivo de Relaciones Exteriores in Mexico City. While the materials she discusses are mainly about Mexican women, she argues that they represent an important source for scholars because the cultural and historical legacy of Chicanas transcends the geopolitical boundaries of Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, she points out that the bonds of culture and history between Chicanas and Mexicanas remain strong and that they are reinforced by the contiguity of the two countries and continuous migration.

In discussing the various and sundry resources, she cautions readers that they must go beyond the traditional historical methodologies in documenting the history of women. While some of the collections refer specifically to women, the great majority do not. Thus, much of the information must be extrapolated from historical and statistical records. For those willing to invest the time and effort, however, the fruits of such labor can be very rewarding.

Another source of information for researchers is the bibliography. Bibliographies can generally be classified in two categories: those which list primary and secondary source materials and those which contain a listing of other bibliographies. If properly researched, organized, and annotated, such guides can be an invaluable and time-saving tool for the researcher.

Richard Chabran has undertaken the task of analyzing the organization, contents, and relative merits of research and reference

works on Chicanas. In his analysis, he found that most of them were inadequate or too focused in their approach. He also found that a great number of the bibliographies he examined were marred by poor organization, numerous spelling errors, incomplete citations, and a lack of information regarding primary resources. While his own work in this area suffers at times from inconsistencies in format, structure, and analysis, his essay is timely in that it discusses the current status of bibliographies on Chicana research and points out the need for more work in this much neglected area.

Historical research on Chicanas is still in a fledgling state, and much remains to be done if it is to address the issues, directions, and challenges identified by Chicanas. Hopefully the three selections which follow will stimulate further interest in research that is responsive to the unique and important role of Chicanas in our history.