

Different / Parallel Histories / Stories

African American Migration and Latin American Immigration

Review the case study and reflect on the follow-up discussion questions

This case illustrates:

Nuanced social problems within and across groups of people. The power of deep listening, vulnerability and safe conversations. The benefits of seeing one another more deeply. The power and importance of story and facilitated conversation linked with political analysis of the bigger picture.

Key topics considerations:

Intergroup dynamics, expanding BIPOC conversations, bridging across race and nationality, widening political analysis, environmental racism, interrupting the dominant narratives.

Setting:

This case takes place in Newark, New Jersey, which has a 50% African American and 30% immigrant population. This city was home to the largest garbage incinerator and one of the country's most contaminated land sites, which disproportionately impacted the Black and Latin American communities. A group of African Americans and Latin American immigrants were brought together through the Environmental Justice Program in hopes of addressing the resulting environmental degradation. But before this larger environmental crisis could be addressed, there was a need to develop trust and community between the African Americans and Latin American immigrants in the group.



Residents of Newark's Ironbound neighborhood protest against the construction of a garbage incinerator, circa 1984. The multilingual messaging reflects the diversity of the activist community in the Ironbound. Photo from the Ironbound Community Corporation archive.

BREAKING

Breaking was occurring within the Environmental Justice Program because of underlying tensions between African Americans and immigrants. Some members of the African American community felt threatened by Latinx immigrants, believing they were taking the few available jobs and taking over historically Black neighborhoods. Some Latinx immigrants believed the dominant narrative that claims the reason many African Americans have not made it is because of their own lack of initiative, instead of the pervasive impact of structural racism. The tension between the two communities was exacerbated when an undocumented Latino immigrant was convicted of murdering an African American man. The tension rolled into the program.

BRIDGING

In order to address the breaking dynamic, an intentional bridging dialogue was organized for the African American members and Latin American immigrants. This case focuses on the work done with the African American community. The bridging dialogue was structured into three parts: 1) a 30 minute documentary that chronicled the struggle against Jim Crow segregation, racism and economic exploitation that led to the Great Migration from the South, 2) personal testimony about their families' migration stories from the facilitator and audience members, and 3) a comparison of the reasons why African Americans left the US South to why immigrants leave their home countries. This led African Americans to understand their shared identity with Latinx immigrants as exploited migrants. It also helped link the shared fate of African Americans and Latinx folks.

BELONGING

This event opened dialogue and conversation which allowed the African Americans in the group to truly see the Latinx members, leading to increased empathy and consideration of shared struggles and a shared identity. This change translated in the way that African Americans and Latinx immigrants in the Environmental Justice Program interacted with one another. There was also further solidarity displayed through African Americans joining in on protesting against immigrant detention.

Questions for Discussion:

We want you to keep your thoughts to the points or facts illustrated in this story. For the questions in your life or your examples, please speak from the “I” experience.

Question	Educational Goal
1. Where do you see breaking in the story?	Be able to identify a breaking dynamic.
2. How did the breaking dynamic manifest in the relationships of the folks involved?	Be able to identify the negative impacts of breaking, what happens when we don't bridge.
3. Why is it important for African Americans and Latinx immigrants to bridge or come together? In this case and in general.	Be able to identify how our experiences/struggles are interconnected within the same system, even if they manifest differently. Be able to understand the importance of a bigger 'we.'
4. What policies and institutional practices are at play?	Be able to identify policies and practices that manifest as intergroup othering.
5. In this particular case, what opportunities were opened by bridging? a. What were the reactions of the folks involved?	Be able to identify the impact that bridging can have.
6. What questions or critiques do you still have about breaking, bridging and belonging?	Be able to understand the frameworks enough to offer questions and critiques.
7. Where do you see or experience breaking in your own community, organization, school, or work setting? Can you describe the negative impact that these have?	Be able to apply the breaking framework in their own life experience.
8. Do you engage in bridging in your work? If so, how? 9. If you don't already bridge, how might you apply what you learned today?	Be able to apply the bridging framework.
10. What world do you see when we instead decide to bridge?	Be able to understand that smaller 'we' leads to harm. Be able to imagine a world where we focus on the bigger 'we.'