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Defining, Understanding, and Seeking the Negatives

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Several genealogy terms include the word *negative*, which might be confusing, for which phrase means what. Genealogists might hesitate to seek and use negative evidence because it seems less tangible. In order to understand where negative searches, negative findings, and negative evidence fit into research, a model is needed. By understanding these concepts, we convert the negative . . . into a positive!

Definitions

Negative Search—A failure to find sources or information relevant to our person or subject (does not exist, never existed, or was just not found by the researcher).¹ Example: No published obituaries were found in the geographic area and time period when Abraham died.

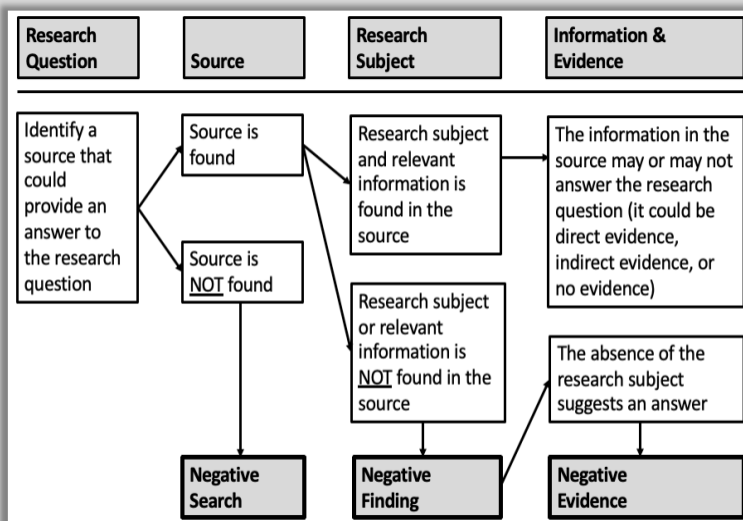
Negative Finding—An outcome occurring when we find sources relevant in some way to our subject, but those sources provide no evidence relevant to our specific research question.² Example: No death record was found for Abraham in the place where he was known to live and die. Death records are extant for this time and place.

Negative Evidence—A research subject's absence from an extant source suggests an answer (to our research question) that must further be explored or supported. Example: For seventeen years, Abraham appeared in the same city directory through 1888. His absence from this source might indicate he died in or after 1888. However, alone this is not proof and would need additional evidence before making a conclusion about his death date.

Negative evidence “acts” like indirect evidence, which can

- Support or weaken a hypothesis
- Suggest a new hypothesis
- Add or eliminate possibilities.

Figure 1—Model for Identifying the Negatives during the Research Process



Model for Identifying the Negatives

Consider the model shown in Figure 1, which begins with a research question in the left panel.

Research might result in a source being found or not. If the source is not found, that is a negative

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search. If a source is found yet the research subject or the information sought is not in the source, that is a negative finding. That negative finding might become evidence if its absence suggests an answer to the research question.

Can Negative Evidence Be Sought?

Generally speaking, negative evidence is not usually sought. It is more often identified after seeking—and not finding—our research subject or relevant information within an identified source. When combined with other evidence, negative evidence might become proof.

I don't seek a kind of evidence. I seek sources, and then the information is what it is. Evidence is mental. You can change it in terms of how you think about it. So, I can think about the negative possibilities as well as the direct and indirect possibilities when I find it. . . . Negative evidence can be sought to confirm other evidence or when you are trying to eliminate possibilities. (Interview with Tom Jones)⁴

However, sometimes negative evidence can be proactively sought. Thinking about it, and how a proof might be supported with it, can help researchers look for it.

How Prevalent Is Negative Evidence?

Answering this question might not be possible. But let's try! If negative evidence seems to be present in many case studies, then perhaps we need to look for it, find it, identify it, categorize it, and use it to its fullest advantage.

The *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* is a journal focused on publishing case studies often related to resolving relationship or identity questions using indirect, negative, and/or conflicting evidence. Authors of case studies with recent articles reported that about 52% of their case studies included negative evidence.⁵

Number of Occurrences and Significance

Of those case studies that incorporated negative evidence, the occurrences of negative evidence ranged from one to more than twenty, with a mode of one occurrence per case. When negative evidence was used, the authors reported that about 65% of the time it was highly significant in answering the research question.

Possibility of Underreporting

Negative evidence was likely underreported in these cases for multiple reasons, including the author's recall of its use (especially if it was less than highly influential in answering the research question) and the time lapse between the publication date and the survey. Thus, if at least half of complex cases utilize negative evidence, and its use tends to be highly significant, we now can conclude negative evidence is crucial in successfully solving complex genealogy cases much of the time.

Record Group Dominance

In the same survey, these case studies showed that some record groups tend to play a role in negative evidence more than others. Nearly all record groups were mentioned at least once. However, some record groups were reported as more frequently providing negative evidence:

- Probate, wills, and orphans court records
- Tax and freeholders' lists
- Censuses
- Deed or land records

Recognizing Negative Evidence in Written Research

Opportunities to recognize and work with negative evidence are present not only in our own works, but also in works of others. Negative evidence does not typically stand up and shout, "Hey, look at me. . . Here I am!" However, it does signal us, albeit quietly, with the use of certain words or phrases that we can "listen to" when reading case studies.

These include the following keywords or phrases: *although, at least one, but, can be eliminated, do not, however, neither, never, no, none, nor, not, nothing, no one, no source, only one, unknown*.

Recognizing negative evidence in one's own work is more difficult. It can be as elusive as the word *negative* sounds—with implications such as "negative space" meaning something that is not obviously there. Given that complex cases often involve negative evidence that is highly significant, you might be wondering:

- How can I find more negative evidence?
- Am I missing negative evidence that could lead to answers?
- Did I misunderstand any search results or findings?

Ask these questions of your own research and review the Model for Identifying the Negatives during the Research Process. Researchers identify negative evidence at different stages of the research process, though usually toward the end when evidence is being assembled. Some might identify it during the data gathering process:

Negative evidence is not a conclusion based on various pieces of evidence. It's a silence in a specific record, record set, or situation. We should hear that silence amid the process of data gathering, individual record analysis, and correlation of details. We recognize that silence as we evaluate the context of the record in which we did or did not find something. That, then, creates a hypothesis that we must investigate long before we get to the assemblage stage. (Email from Elizabeth Shown Mills)⁶

However, it can become more evidence during the assemblage stage when a timeline or a table with their associated narratives are crafted.

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