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A Sociological Technique in Clinical Criminology

Saul D. Alinsky

For the past year the writer has held the position of staff sociologist and member of the classification board at the Illinois State Penitentiary — Joliet. Prior research work had resulted in a fund of detailed and intimate knowledge of the background of individual delinquents and social factors in crime. This fund of first-hand research data was utilized for classification purposes. The material would roughly fall into five divisions:

- A. The general neighborhood situation.
 - 1. This would embody a detailed picture of the community both physically and socially.
- B. Criminal techniques.
 - 1. An intimate knowledge of the techniques employed and the degree of criminality indicated by the latter.
- C. The typical sequence of delinquent experiences in the criminal career.
- D. Acquaintance with many delinquents.
- E. A first-hand knowledge of the group nature of delinquency, development of criminal attitudes, and social factors operating in delinquency and crime.

It should be clearly understood at this point that the writer is only speaking of the delinquent or criminal coming from the very deteriorated areas of Chicago and regarded as the gang boy. It is these areas that research has demonstrated have consistently high rates of delinquencies.

All of the writer's past research experience has been based upon the premise that in order to gain insight, one should be on the inside of the prob-

lem as much as possible. Prior to the writer's affiliation with the classification board he had been engaged in a two year research study of a delinquent gang.¹ This delinquent group resided on the near west side of Chicago in a deteriorated immigrant area which is well known for its consistently high rate of delinquency. This gang ranged in number from fifteen to, at intervals, as many as forty.

During this period the research relationship of the writer to this gang might aptly be described as that of a non-participating member. A degree of informality and confidence existed which was uncommon. At no time was any attempt ever made to change behavior, as research was regarded as the only function of this project. Continual daily association, observation and study followed for a period of more than two years. During this time fifteen members of the gang wrote their life histories in detail. It is apparent that under such constant and prolonged study these gang boys were observed in the most varied situations.

Material was secured pertaining to the group nature of delinquency and the development of delinquent attitudes and objectives. The delinquent vocabulary was learned and studied. This was done because language, while serving its immediate end of communication, is very revealing as to the attitudes, values, and cultural configurations of the group. Studies of criminal traditions and behavior patterns were made of the area. A detailed picture was secured of the local rendezvous, receivers of stolen property, the local political organization, community personalities, garages, theatres, restaurants and similar physical and social aspects of the community. First-hand knowledge was obtained regarding the well-known criminal personalities of the area. Family situations were studied as related to the delinquent activities of this gang. Various criminalistic techniques were analyzed as indices in the development of delinquent careers.

During this research period the writer had contact with many of the social agencies and most of the organizations dealing with delinquency and was in a position to observe the delinquents' attitudes toward these institutions. The writer was able, through this delinquent gang, to meet many other delinquents from other areas, and to be accepted on the basis of what is described, in their parlance, as "An O.K. guy." In brief, this research program resulted in familiarity with the neighborhood situation, its relationship to the delinquent activities, attitudes, knowledge of criminal techniques, and philosophies of life of the delinquent boy.

Gradually the writer familiarized himself in a somewhat similar manner with other areas, as had been done on the near west side, and material of a comparable nature was secured.

When the writer became a member of the classification board he was keenly aware of the formal relationship which usually existed between the in-

mates and the professional examiner. He remembered how, when employed in a research capacity, he had observed delinquents lying and blocking the diagnosticians. He was aware of the attitudes of the delinquent gang boy toward the professional staff. In cases from the west side gang, formal diagnosis had been compared with confidential knowledge of attitudes and past behavior. The discrepancies in most of these cases were amazing.

The research material was molded into a sociological interviewing technique. This technique functioned rather effectively in breaking the barrier of passive resistance and lying which is typical of the gang boy. This approach served to produce a more responsive, complete, and valid picture of the basic attitudes and the social factors operating in personality formation. The inmate's conception of himself, his values, objectives, philosophy, and general behavior patterns were more readily apparent than in the usual formal interview.

First, no difficulty was experienced in the cases of delinquents whom the sociologist knew personally. It is interesting to note the formal record in this case as compared to the diagnosis. This inmate upon admission to the penitentiary denied his guilt. The formal criminal record showed only one item. The inmate is here under an alias; therefore, no more of his formal criminal record was known, since the juvenile corrective institutions do not fingerprint their inmates.

CASE 1

Criminal Record:

St. Charles State School, Burglary, 1930-31.

St. Charles State School, Burglary, 1931-32.

Chicago—Cook Co. School, Burglary, 1929, escaped.

House of Correction, 1933, Attempted Larceny of Auto.

50 Arrests and 2 Violated

Paroles.

Many Cases were Fixed.

Community: This inmate was raised on the near west side of Chicago in a very deteriorated area, which is well known for its consistently high rate of delinquency. The sociologist has made an intensive study of this community. Criminal traditions and well integrated delinquent patterns of behavior are characteristic of this area. Delinquent gangs are very prevalent. Delinquency and crime exist to the extent that the probabilities are quite high that most of the boys coming from that area are either delinquents or have participated in delinquency at some time.

Personality: The sociologist knows this inmate intimately. His true criminal record is in this report. This inmate admits his guilt on the present charge and on a number of other serious crimes.

When this inmate was quite young he became a member of a delinquent group. Initiation into delinquency then began as a form of group behavior. He soon came to the attention of the Juvenile Court authorities and was supervised. Then followed a series of commitments. The commitments had the following outstanding results.

1. Increased stimulation, development and reinforcement of delinquent attitudes.
2. Contacts were made with delinquents from other parts of the city. These contacts were renewed upon release with consequent increase of the geographic range of this inmate's delinquent acts.
3. No change of behavior, such as from delinquent to social behavior, is noted.

It is interesting to note that when committed, this inmate adjusted perfectly to the institutional routine. He was awarded a trophy one year as being the best behaved inmate in a correctional institution.

The inmate has pursued a delinquent career which is typical of his community. Petty theft, truancy, burglary, helping to loot accessories from autos stolen by older members of the area, larceny of auto, armed robbery, and bank robbery. Well steeped in criminal traditions and fixed criminal attitudes. He will adjust within the institution because, quoting the inmate, "The smart hood goes along so he can get out, only the dummies make trouble."

Inmate frankly states he is continuing his criminal career after release. This inmate is unquestionably a recidivist despite his apparently youthful age.²

If the inmates were not known personally to the sociologist, usually friends of the inmates, or friends of friends of the inmates, were known. This is the result of a very wide acquaintanceship with many delinquents, as was noted previously. To illustrate, consider case II. This inmate had a former criminal record consisting of one commitment to a juvenile institution. He denied previous criminal activities and was very resistive during the initial stages of the interview. Partial rapport was obtained when the examiner mentioned names of friends of the inmate. After the sociologist injected unofficial

data known only to the delinquents of a certain area, the response finally was, "Well, if Charley told you all that, you're O.K. with me too."

CASE II

Family: The inmate is the youngest of five siblings. The parents were born in Italy, while the children were all born in Chicago. Upon their arrival in the United States, the parents came to Chicago and settled on the near-west side of the city. Due to culture conflict, primary group disorganization resulted. In a relatively short period of time we note a complete collapse of parental ties and control, which is quite characteristic of the family situation in this community. The younger generation spends most of its time on the street in this area. Participation in activities outside of the home soon reaches an extreme where the home in many cases becomes just a place to eat and sleep. The home cannot compete with attractions offered by what is termed here the "Street Life." The desire for new experiences can be more adequately satisfied by the delinquent gang than the home. A broken home situation resulted due to the mother's death in 1920. We find that an older brother of the inmate is at the present time incarcerated in the institution. The economic situation was such that relief was requested from public agencies.

Education: This inmate attended elementary schools to the third grade, leaving school at the age of 12.

Work Record: This inmate has no work record.

Criminal Record:

- 1924—Parental School, truancy.
- 1925—Chicago—Cook Co. School for Boys, Burglary (escaped).
- 1925—Chicago—Cook Co. School for Boys, Burglary (escaped).
- 1926—Chicago—Cook Co. School for Boys, L. of Auto (escaped).
- 1926—Chicago—Cook Co. School for Boys, L. of Auto (escaped).
- 1926—Chicago—Cook Co. School for Boys, Burglary (escaped).
- 1927—House of Correction, L. of Auto.
- 1929—Pontiac, Attempted Burglary; Discharged in 1933.

Approximately 100 Arrests

Community: This inmate resided on the near-west side of Chicago in an area which is well known for its criminal traditions and delinquent patterns of behavior. The prevalence of delinquent gangs and criminal cliques has made this community notorious. This area has shown a consistently high rate of delinquency. Research in this community has indicated rather regular successive graduations in the delinquent careers typical of this community.

Personality: When this inmate was quite young he was initiated into delinquency as a form of group behavior. Truancy resulted very shortly. The inmate continued to get into further difficulties with the result that he was constantly being supervised by the Juvenile Court. A glance at the criminal record will indicate the continual and consistent commitments that this inmate has undergone. Confinement in juvenile corrective institutions appears to have served only the purpose of increased development of delinquent attitudes. While committed to these institutions this inmate contacted delinquents from other parts of the city, with the result that he began to participate in delinquent activities in other parts of the city. He was very intimate with many well-known criminal personalities in his community and complete familiarity is displayed with the criminal tradition and techniques, which are characteristic of this area. Because of the sociologist's knowledge of many of the inmate's friends an unusual amount of rapport was secured, with the result that the inmate spoke very freely in a most vivacious manner and made no pretense of reformation. He admitted guilt on some rather major serious crimes. This inmate has pursued a regular developing criminal career. He has constantly engaged in criminal activities. A criminalistic philosophy in which anti-social objectives are characteristic plus fixed criminal attitudes would classify this inmate as a recidivist.

The utilization of intimate anecdotes and unofficial accounts of many activities, known only to delinquents of particular communities and the examiner, rapidly changes the interviewing relationship from one formal in nature to one that is informal and marked by an unusual degree of rapport. A potentially diagnosed first offender undergoing this approach received the following diagnosis:

CASE III

Criminal Record: The inmate's criminal record consists of two charges, both of carrying concealed weapons. He served a rather brief period of time in the Bidewell in Chicago in 1929 on the first charge and in 1930 on the second charge. These charges are rather serious in lieu of their indicating the behavior of the inmate during this period. He bragged to the sociologist regarding the manner in which he had put the "fix in."

Community: The inmate was born and raised in a community which is notorious both for its high rate of delinquency and the

criminal traditions which characterized the community. Traditions of delinquency and crime, and the various modus operandi of the latter, are transmitted from the older generation to the younger generation, such as social customs are in other forms of society. The idealization of the criminal, the fixing of the judge, the shyster lawyer, the intimidation of witnesses, the bribing of public officials, each form distinct configurations in the cultural pattern of this community. The sociologist is very intimate with this community and knows many of the friends of the inmate. He knows many of the criminal practices that are engaged in, and the activities of the members of the delinquent groups that exist in this community. The community factors may be regarded as being most unfavorable.

Discussion: This inmate has a casual work record and a poor educational background. He comes from a disorganized family and the community and marital factors in this case are unfavorable. His life pattern has consisted of successive delinquent experiences, accompanied by a gradual development of delinquent attitudes until at the present time the sociologist regards this inmate as having a well integrated anti-social personality. He possesses a completely anti-social philosophy of life and is well steeped in corruption and criminal objectives.

A display of complete familiarity with the physical features of the inmate's community, personalities in the area, and the rendezvous of the inmates has rapidly changed the interview from a formal one, characterized by cautious answers to the examiner's questions, to a vivacious, responsive, illuminating, and cooperative relationship. The approach in a sample case proceeded along the following channel. It opened with a statement from the examiner similar to this, "Aw, I've seen you before at Zimmermans and you had Stella there that night." The newly committed inmate, miles away from home in a strange penitentiary, who suddenly meets some person who knows such intimate details of his community usually responds with an excited flow of conversation. This initial establishment of a free informal relationship becomes less constrained as the sociologist injects more details and displays a comprehension of the inmate's discussion of his local community. Final barriers are usually broken when the inmate discovers that the sociologist was a pall-bearer for Lefty Petruccio, and knows the inside story of why and how Lefty was killed. Usually the response at that time is, "Well if yuh was O.K. wit Lefty you're O.K. wit me. What do yuh wanna know?"

Now what was the actual known basis for the opening statement, "Aw, I've seen you at Zimmermans and you had Stella there that night"? The prob-

abilities are that the writer has never seen the inmate there, or if he has, he has forgotten it. However, since we know that the inmate has resided in a particular community his entire life, the probabilities are overwhelming that, at some interval, the inmate has visited this particular restaurant. From our knowledge of this particular area we know that a girl by the name of Stella is notorious because of her sexual activities with most of the delinquents in the community. Therefore, we are on fairly safe grounds in using those data too. The diagnosis resulting from this approach, then, becomes radically different from what one would expect by judging from the formal criminal record.

CASE IV

Criminal Record: The inmate's criminal record is confined to two known commitments, one to the Chicago Parental School, and the other to the St. Charles School for Boys. However, a careful scrutiny of the police record is quite significant as regarding his criminal activities, as for example: 7-3-33, Robbery Charge—Nolle prossed because complainant was not in town; 10-5-33, Robbery—Nolle prossed because witness not sure, etc. This inmate has been arrested 25 times.

Community: This inmate was raised in a very deteriorated area which is predominantly Italian in racial composition. This area has a very high rate of delinquency and is well known for its criminal tradition and the criminal patterns of behavior that have permeated the culture of this community. Delinquent gangs and criminal patterns of behavior are outstanding characteristics of the culture of this community.

Personality: A very unusual degree of rapport was established between the sociologist and the inmate. The sociologist is very familiar with the community, friends, and ideology of this inmate and his associates. During the interview the inmate admitted his guilt of many well-known robberies in the city of Chicago including crimes of major seriousness. He named several associates that accompanied him on these criminal activities. A check was made with these associates that confirmed the inmate's accounts of his criminal activities. We have here a case of the typical very sophisticated delinquent gang boy, the product of a disorganized area of a very high rate of delinquency. Very well developed criminal attitudes and criminalistic objectives and philosophy of life. In brief, the anti-social trends of this inmate's personality are so marked that he may be termed anti-social.

Many potential first offenders (with no previous formal criminal records) have rather quickly become admitted experienced criminals by analysis of criminal techniques. The particular case cited here is of an inmate committed on a charge of larceny of an automobile. During the formal interview the inmate, with a display of emotion, denies having committed crimes previously and states that this is the first auto he has ever stolen. He is quizzed as to the technique employed in unlocking the auto. He replies, "With a master key." From our research background of delinquent activities and patterns of typical sequence of techniques in that community, we know that most of the delinquents become proficient in the use of a master key only after stealing a number of cars. This is usually preceded by episodes of burglary. The sociologist, acting on this clue, probes and frankly tells the inmate why he is skeptical of his denial of all previous delinquent activities, and that he is aware that the inmate has passed the novice stage. With very few exceptions the inmate then unfolds a lengthy previous history of delinquencies. The following diagnosis results.

CASE V

Criminal Record: Chicago-Cook Co. School, 1927; St. Charles, 1929, Larceny of auto.

Community: Deteriorated, low rental area in which delinquency is very prevalent. Delinquent traditions and gangs are outstanding characteristics of this community.

Personality: This inmate has consistently followed a criminal career which is typical of the delinquent pattern of behavior of his community. He has become so proficient in stealing autos that he became affiliated with the automobile syndicate in Chicago located at C — — and D — — Streets. He has stolen more than 200 cars in the past two years. When arrested on this charge he was promised protection by the syndicate. He states he failed to be acquitted because of the crime drive that was in full force at that time. Unusual rapport was attained when this inmate discovered that the sociologist knew a number of the inmate's friends and also knew the true unofficial versions of certain things known only to the delinquents of that community. At that time the inmate stated, "Y'know I'm through fooling with shorts (cars), from now on I'll get other punks to get the shorts and I'm going into business." Well-grounded criminal attitudes and anti-social philosophy. Recidivistic material.

Knowledge of the typical sequence of delinquent activities in the history of the delinquent career is a valuable phase of this approach. It is known (from

research) that most criminals, from certain communities, have pursued a regular developing delinquent pattern before reaching the stage of robbery or even larceny of an automobile. Data pertaining to these delinquent careers permit a pointed positive interview approach that is rather successful in procuring a valid picture of the inmate's behavior. A case is given where this approach was used.

This inmate, during the initial stages of the interview, denied his guilt. Great resistance was encountered in attempting to secure any material relating to previous delinquencies. A partial rapport was secured when the writer discovered that he had known some of the inmate's friends when they had been incarcerated in a juvenile corrective institution. On the basis of partial rapport the inmate admitted his guilt on one previously known official commitment. However, considerable blocking was still evident. The approach just described, which is based on the typical sequence of delinquent activities of certain communities, was then projected. The inmate's probable past delinquent career was reconstructed including probable commitments. Attention was most scrupulously centered on detail. For example, research shows that the burglary stage of the delinquent career of that community is generally the same. By that we mean the young delinquent burglarizes a particular type of store. Details of this nature resulted in astonishment, then indignant denial which was shortly followed by a series of admissions including a number of juvenile commitments and gang associations. The personality diagnosis resulting from this approach follows:

CASE VI

Criminal Record: An extensive Juvenile Court record is present in this case. Commencing with truancy, the inmate was in rapid succession committed to the Parental School twice and later twice to the Chicago-Cook County School for Boys—both times on charges of burglary. In 1929 he was committed to the St. Charles State School for Boys on a charge of burglary. In 1932 he was committed to the House of Correction in Chicago on a charge of larceny of an automobile. His criminal record is also characterized by two probations, one of which definitely was violated, and two escapes.

Community: Community factors may be termed as being distinctly unfavorable. This inmate was raised in a deteriorated area, which is characterized by rooming houses, vice, general disorganization and one in which delinquent gangs are prevalent.

Personality: This inmate was initiated into delinquent activities at a very early age. He first participated in delinquencies as

a form of group behavior. This resulted in truancy and general behavior problems. Repeated commitments have failed to alter this inmate's behavior in any marked manner excepting insofar as it has resulted in reinforcement and continuing development of delinquency attitudes. He has constantly followed a consistent developing criminal career. Truancy, petty thievery, burglarizing of stores and larceny of automobiles followed in regular chronological order. The inmate and his group first became involved in stealing automobiles when they reached the decision that they could utilize an automobile in their various burglaries so as to increase their profits. This inmate frankly admits that the odds are 9 to 1 that he will continue to engage in criminal activities. Fixed criminal attitudes and anti-social objectives are apparent in this boy. Since previous institutionalization has not affected this inmate's delinquent behavior, it is quite dubious as to whether the present incarceration will result in any change; however, a superior intelligence as attested to by formal psychometric data (B-113) and a somewhat promising degree of insight appears to indicate therapeutic possibilities.

The usage of delinquent vocabularies characteristic of the inmate's community is of great value in the establishing of closer rapport. To illustrate, if the question, "Have you ever been chased by the police while you were in a stolen car and have the police shot at you" is phrased "Have you ever been in a hot short and got lammed by the heat and had them toss slugs at you," a warmer and more responsive answer usually results. Furthermore, the usage of delinquent terminology may serve as a criterion in analyses of degree of development of delinquent attitudes.

The main trends of the approach utilized in this interviewing technique have been described in the preceding material. As the reader may deduce, there are innumerable detailed points of information which may be used in attempting to probe through a resistant hostile barrier. For example, an inmate is committed on a charge of armed robbery. He denies previous criminal activities and parries all queries. He states he was unemployed, penniless and therefore victimized by the police. A slight detail, such as the name of his attorney, may result in the securing of a good deal of material pertaining to his past life. The writer knows that the inmate's attorney's minimum retainer fee is \$250. Under cross examination the inmate admits he has money and has engaged in armed robbery for a period of two years.

It has been suggested that the necessity for first hand research in order to utilize the above technique might be obviated by the acquisition of various key stories, names, or factual fragmentary information. The examiner, however,

would encounter a great deal of difficulty in attempting to secure this form of unofficial information because of the formal professional relationships existing in the penitentiary. The general suspicion and resentful awareness of inmates is not conducive to obtaining data of this nature.

Assuming, however, that such data could be secured, the examiner will face another difficulty. After opening the interview on the basis of such data, and along the general trends described in this paper, he will probably secure an initial responsive cooperation. In a relatively brief period, however, he realizes that more and more material must be injected, not only to reinforce the secured rapport, but to retain it. The inmate, becoming aware of fewer responses and total ignorance displayed by the examiner on many points, begins to suspect he is being tricked. He commences to wonder why, if the examiner knows the inside story of the X robbery, he doesn't know J., who participated in that crime. Many inconsistencies soon appear and the inmate becomes panicky. Complete blocking usually results.

The statement may be made that most of the material produced by utilizing this approach is factual in nature and is not very penetrating as regarding personality analysis. An intelligent scrutiny will rapidly disclose the weakness of a criticism of that nature.

First, in the major part of the interviews in which a highly unusual degree of rapport is secured, a more accurate and valid portrayal of the attitudes, objectives, conceptions of the self and causative factors in delinquency is obtained than in the formal interview.

Secondly, we have the group where the technique is used to probe through a resistant barrier. In this group a comprehensive, valid knowledge of behavior is highly illuminating as to an understanding of the development of attitudes and general personality configurations. The close inter-relationship between attitudes and activities is not to be denied.

The sociologist, by the development and utilization of this technique, does not see the inmate as an isolated unit nor does he possess a cold, formal knowledge of the inmate's social milieu. He knows from first hand contact and study the social phenomena of the inmate, including those subtle phases of the total picture which are so highly significant and yet which must be learned through first hand contact. When studying the gang boy it can be generally stated that: To know your community is to know your delinquent.

With this background and technique a truly gestalt picture is secured. The sociologist is in a position to portray and interpret the interplay of attitudes, group customs as related to habits, social distances, conception of the self, and an insight into the motivations and dynamics of behavior that will be a contribution to criminological units.

NOTES

1. This study was made under the supervision of C. R. Shaw—Institute for Juvenile Research, Chicago, Ill.
2. All care has been exercised to remove any identifying data from the case illustrations in this paper.