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## Symposium

# Saul Alinsky: The Contributions of a Pioneer Clinical Sociologist<sup>1</sup>

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*Janet Mancini Billson*

Saul D. Alinsky, sociologist in the Chicago School tradition, self-styled radical, visionary of a better society. His work has remained on the periphery of sociology, attended to more often by social workers and political activists than by academic sociologists. Yet now that we look back on his work through the lens of the current reemergence of the clinical sociology movement, it is clear that Alinsky is an early example of an interventionist steeped in the sociological and anthropological traditions.

Two pieces reprinted here, a 1934 article on clinical criminology and one on community organizing dated 1941, reveal a sociological practitioner at work. In the first article, Alinsky describes through a series of case analyses his work with individual juvenile delinquents in the Chicago inner city. Although he claims that his intent was not to change their behavior, he elicited more realistic case histories of the boys through his methodology than did the "formal" case interviews typically conducted by juvenile workers of that time. This in turn should have facilitated more effective intervention on the part of the helping staff. Alinsky offers no solutions to the delinquent behaviors presented by the youths, nor prescriptive strategies for changing them. He engages, rather, in a fascinating interplay between participant observation methods that yield him intimate knowledge of a juvenile's community and interviewing techniques that bring that knowledge to bear on a boy's presentation of self.

It must be remembered that Alinsky studied under Clifford R. Shaw, the University of Chicago sociologist who wrote the classic case study of a delinquent, *The Jack Roller* (1966), and who conducted the famous "area projects" attempting to uncover the sources of delinquency in the social turmoil of

Chicago in the 1930s. The social context of individual behavior was paramount in the thinking of the time. Alinsky worked within the broad framework referred to as "the cultural approach to behavior problems." As Wirth (1931:49-66) stated in his article on clinical sociology, "The sociological approach to behavior rests upon the recognition that a person is an individual with status, and that personality is 'the sum and organization of those traits which determine the role of the individual in the group.'" Alinsky is a clinical sociologist in the sense that he utilized a diagnostic case approach in which he sought to fathom the problems of the individual's "reference" group.

Alinsky was a social diagnostician par excellence who paved the way for others to work for specific behavioral changes. It is critical that he was part of a clinical team, similar to the multidisciplinary teams working in child guidance clinics around the country in the era (Wirth 1931). As Wirth argued, the sociologist's role in such settings as clinics, detention centers, or settlement houses might be limited to background research on the community context; on the other hand, it might be extended to consultation with other staff members or to training them in the "cultural" approach. Finally — and we would see this now as a more complex role — Wirth felt that the clinical sociologist "might directly participate in the study of cases and in their treatment. This would involve interviewing and other contact with patients, study of their social world, the collection and analysis of life-histories, contacts with the community, the school and social agencies, participation in programs of adjustment."

Alinsky obviously involved himself in this fuller role, utilizing his own community-based adaptation of the "life history" method developed by Shaw. By engaging the juvenile in a relatively open and more complete accounting of his life history, it can be argued that Alinsky stepped out of the research role and into the realm of therapeutic interaction. Wirth wrote, "The telling of his life story or the writing of his autobiography on the part of the delinquent may be one of the most effective devices in a therapeutic program." A fundamental principle behind almost all therapies is that open communication, ventilation, and catharsis are essential for movement toward insight, then change.

Alinsky understood, without benefit of psychoanalytic training, the importance of establishing rapport with his young delinquents: "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" (Alinsky 1934). In part this rapport is established through the use of the boy's vernacular, which Alinsky would already have mastered by virtue of his participant observation research in the community. The model Alinsky chose to use for probing, elaborating, and expanding communication was sociological.

Similarly, in the piece on community organizing we find Alinsky's grip on the cultural context of community in explaining (and changing) individual

behavior. His analysis of the interplay between Catholicism and labor union activities in the Back of the Yards neighborhood of Chicago is prototypical. He emphasizes once more the proper conception of the *individual problem* as merely an example of a larger social problem experienced by others in the same social stratum. C. Wright Mills's later distinction between "personal troubles" and "social issues" (1959:8,9) is similar to Alinsky's perspective. Alinsky harkens back to his Chicago School training as he attempts to define the problems faced by individuals in a poor inner-city area as reflections of social structure defects that go beyond the person and even beyond that specific community: "Their problems are the same, the causes of their problems are the same, and the organic character of these industrial communities is very similar" (1941).

The writing is Marxist in orientation, with a strong emphasis on the centrality of economics and the "major destructive forces which pervade our entire social order" (1941). Alinsky is referring to socioeconomic inequalities and assuming that various racial, ethnic, and religious groups hurt themselves by nursing prejudices and perpetuating isolation and competition. He was convinced that only when people realize that their differences are outweighed by their commonly shared problems will they achieve true community (and the solution to those problems). On a larger scale, this is Marx's distinction between a "class for itself" and a "class in itself." The latter does not become the former until "false consciousness" is eliminated.

Although Alinsky does not elucidate these theoretical linkages or specify the roots of his conceptualizations, sociological threads are woven throughout the fabric of his approach to social change. To Alinsky, power, community, and organization are inextricably connected in theory and inseparable in practice. He apparently was influenced by Wirth's analysis of the negative impacts of urbanism as a way of life (1938) and saw the formation of umbrella community organizations as an antidote to the alienation, apathy, and isolation predicted by many urban theorists, including Tönnies, Maine, Durkheim, and Redfield.

In viewing Alinsky's work retrospectively, we must acknowledge several ethical and methodological problems that are of concern to contemporary clinical sociologists. For example, if the study discussed in "A Sociological Technique in Clinical Criminology" were conducted today, guarantees of confidentiality would be made to the participants. The use of research data gathered from specific individuals to determine their fate in a classification system might be considered unethical. It appears that, since Alinsky knew the general life style of the "delinquent," he did not mind lying to obtain additional information to confirm suspected "anti social" behaviors that a prisoner would not otherwise confess. It is ironic that in "Clinical Criminology" Alinsky — who later became so concerned with the influence of society on the individual —

might be viewed as using his knowledge of society to reinforce the power of the state over the individual.

From "Community Analysis and Organization" it is not clear whether Alinsky's success stemmed from his theoretical approach, his charisma, or the development of techniques that worked at a specific point in history (i.e., were appropriate for Chicago in the late 1940s and 1950s). Freedman's experience suggests that Alinsky's success may have been charismatic or a function of the times. In 1941 the country was emerging from the Great Depression as it prepared for entry into the Second World War; as the economy expanded, so did opportunities for social accomplishments. Alinsky reports what was accomplished, but tells us little about how it was brought about. While the lives of many residents of the area were probably improved by the creation and existence of the Back of the Yards Community Organization, it is not clear what made the organization effective.

Dark edges that seem apparent now may be evident because in the four decades since the articles were written, our ideas about ethics, procedures, and the relationship between the individual and society have changed. It is thus unfair to view Alinsky's work solely from the modern perspective; for his time and place, he was a radical change agent, dedicated to righting the then-perceived wrongs of society. The times were less sensitive to the issues of ethics and protection of individual liberty from the conformity demands of institutions. That does not mean, however, that we should be insensitive to those issues today in reflecting on Alinsky's work, or on our own.

Retrospectives by John Glass and Jonathan Freedman, two clinical sociologists who had personal contact with Alinsky, follow the selections from Alinsky's writing. As Freedman and Glass suggest, Alinsky was both dynamic and fallible. The lessons he taught were not always well received; his values were not always those that we of a more sophisticated era might applaud. Still, Saul Alinsky emerges from the Chicago School tradition as a humanistic change agent whose ideas deserve our careful attention.

## NOTES

1. I am indebted to David J. Kallen of Michigan State University for pointing out these questions regarding Alinsky's approaches to social change.

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