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RESEARCH INTERVIEWING IN PRISON

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THE NECESSITY OF IN-PRISON RESEARCH

The necessity for intensive and productive research in the fields of criminal behavior, juvenile delinquency and correctional administration is self evident. Progress in any field, whether physical or social, ceases when research is meagre or when it is conducted in a superficial manner. Who could imagine the present status of medical science without the intensive physiological and biochemical research on which this profession rests?

For a number of reasons, some custodial, others bureaucratic, criminological research involving in-prison populations is neither as frequent nor as intense as is desirable to provide needed data on the complex problem of criminal behavior. Criminological research involves many approaches and many techniques; a good deal of data can be gathered in the community and from the courts. Records, police as well as correctional and psychological tests, can be examined and analyzed. Nevertheless, a necessary adjunct to other research approaches involves interviews with known criminals held in custody in our prisons. Many factors of sociological significance, such as self conception, levels of aspiration, attitudes and motives of offenders, can be measured only by carefully structured in-prison interviewing. While it is true that prison populations are not representative samples of the universe of crime, research among inmates is, at the very least, one primary source of basic criminological data.

THE NECESSITY OF PERSONNEL COOPERATION

The success of any research conducted within walls depends very basically upon the mutual cooperation of the researcher and each of the correctional personnel, from commissioner to guard, with whom the researcher is working. First of all, permission to conduct the research must come from the Board or Commissioner of Corrections and must be supported by the wardens and their

assistants. At the same time, it must be made clear to everyone involved that the Division of Corrections or the Department of Social Welfare is not sponsoring the research. Prison research sponsored by correctional authorities or conducted by correctional personnel suffers at the outset from a bias which is difficult to overcome. The orientation and the possible results are too intimately related to the employment of such individuals to be completely free from scientific criticism. This does not mean that correctional personnel are incapable of research or that they might deliberately bias their results. Rather, the responses of inmates to interviewers who stand in an authoritarian position to them are open to serious questions of reliability and validity.

The most valid research can be conducted by a trained outsider who has no axe to grind on any aspect of correctional structure. This in itself, however, raises a number of problems in gaining entrance to work behind the walls. There has been some reluctance on the part of wardens and other personnel to allow outsiders to enter the prison to meet in relative isolation with inmate respondents. Reasons given for this reluctance generally fall into three general categories: first, it is argued that the chief function of a prison is custody and that the entry of an outsider is a potential threat to the prison's safety. Perhaps the research might "disturb" the inmates or perhaps calculating prisoners might use the researcher or the research situation as a method of escape.

This argument, of course, has some validity. However, it must be pointed out that no known instances of prison riots or prison breaks can be found which can be attributed to research situations and yet in-prison research by outsiders has been going on since the time of Lombroso. It is important, nevertheless, for the warden and others to make certain that the researcher is well qualified and understands fully the custodial situation

and his position in it. Certainly no director of a hospital would allow an unqualified person to conduct medical research but at the same time, few hospital directors who are dedicated to the alleviation of disease would refuse to cooperate with qualified research personnel.

A second argument relating to this reluctance to allow outside researchers to enter the gates has to do with disturbing prison routine. Under present conditions, all prison personnel certainly have their hands full pursuing daily duties and cannot be expected to halt work while research is conducted. The researcher should keep this in mind in designing his study so that a minimum of disturbance results. Surely a well designed project will take this into account. A great deal of preliminary research can be done outside the walls and from prison records. The interviewing itself requires no more than small office space and possibly the assistance of one guard. Inmates are interviewed individually, under ordinary circumstances and, with careful planning, no more than one man per shop should be absent from his work at any one time. The inmate merely reports for the interview and following it he returns to his job. The whole interviewing process should cause less disturbance in prison routine than a daily sick call.

A third argument against such research which is sometimes given is that the research does not benefit the prison in any way. The study may have no conceivable relevance to improving operational procedure or to any other immediate need the warden may have. Much prison research is, or can be, basic and theoretical. The goal of criminological research is not only to discover immediate or "practical" information but to build a solid foundation of data about criminal behavior on which the whole science of criminology, and ultimately the profession of penology, rests. Again the analogy between criminological research and medical research can be drawn. Many, if not most, important medical discoveries originated from what was, at the time, impractical and even far-fetched research.

Underlying the objections of correctional personnel to outside research there sometimes appears a fear, even if never expressed, that the research or possible publicity following it might hurt the prison or jeopardize the jobs of various prison employees. It should be remembered by both correctional employees and by the investigators themselves that criminological research is not concerned with exposing inadequacies in the

administration of the prison. This does not mean that the scientific researcher should, if it is in the nature of his project, disregard or suppress any data which might be negative to prison practices. The researcher is dedicated to objectivity and to maintaining confidences of respondents and cooperating authorities. He must report his data as accurately and as objectively as possible, at the same time maintaining his confidences and refusing to single out personnel for censure or criticism. However, the great bulk of criminological research is totally unconcerned with the administration of any single prison. The prison and its personnel enter the research picture only insofar as they are keepers of the inmates whom the researcher desires to study and that their cooperation is necessary for successful and accurate research.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL RESEARCH INTERVIEWING IN PRISON

The ultimate success of any research project depends upon the accuracy with which data are gathered. Elaborate analyses or well-written reports are irrelevant unless they are based upon reliable and valid information gathered from the research source. Any competent researcher is very careful that the instruments he uses, such as his questionnaires, scales, or schedules, are as precise as possible. He thinks through his objectives carefully; with equal care he builds his hypotheses and constructs his interviewing forms. He pretests and possibly pre-codes. However, all of his work is in vain unless he is equally careful in conducting the interviews he needs or in administering his tests.

THE SETTING OF THE INTERVIEW

In-prison interviewing presents a number of problems not encountered in other types of research interviewing. In all sociological, psychological, and case-work interviewing the actual setting of the interview is considered of primary importance in building rapport and in obtaining reliable responses. Attention to the selection of the setting is particularly important within a prison. In order to clearly emphasize the distinct nature of the research project from all things custodial, the location of the interview should be in a "neutral" or favorable part of the prison.¹ Preferably the interviewing should take place in an empty

¹ See LEWIS ANTHONY DEXTER, *Role Relationships and Conceptions of Neutrality in Interviewing*. AMER. JOUR. OF SOCIOLOGY, Vol. LXII, No. 2, Sep., 1956, pp 153-157 and ELEANOR AND NATHAN MACCOBY, *The Interview: A Tool of Social Science* in GARDNER LINDZEY (ed.), HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1954)

office in the prison school, library, doctor's office or guidance center. Certainly the use of any custodial employee's office should be avoided. Likewise, where possible, the interview should not be conducted in the psychiatrist's or psychologist's offices in order to clearly distinguish the research situation from the more familiar psychiatric interviews.

The interview setting should be as comfortable as possible and preferably in a quiet and relatively isolated office. The interview should be business-like, and free from any interruptions. The respondent and interviewer should be the only persons in the room during the interview although it may be necessary to have a guard stationed outside the door and out of earshot. The guard serves not only as a security measure but may appreciably aid the interviewing situation by sending for respondents when they are needed and maintaining order should an inmate have to wait for a few minutes until the interviewer can see him.

BUILDING RAPPORT IN PRISON INTERVIEWS

The question of rapport development in research interviews is ordinarily somewhat different than in case-work or psychiatric interviewing which may involve a long series of interviews with the same respondent. In sociological research, one or two interviews with a respondent is sometimes sufficient, although the actual number of interviews and lengths of each depend upon the nature of the project. This means that to obtain reliable responses, rapport of adequate intensity must be developed rapidly. Obviously, mutual trust and confidence is somewhat more difficult to come by when the respondent is incarcerated and when he is seemingly arbitrarily summoned for an interview that he knows little or nothing about. Consequently, the researcher must be prepared to succinctly familiarize the inmate with the purposes of the research in terms that he can comprehend and to seek his voluntary assistance. It is not necessary, of course, to explain fully the hypotheses underlying the research and it is both unscientific and unwise to tell the inmate precisely the data sought.² Yet enough information about the project must be explained in order to prevent misconceptions and damaging yard rumors.

² CRESSEY, for example, successfully concealed the theory underlying his research with embezzlers. DONALD R. CRESSEY, *OTHER PEOPLES MONEY: A STUDY ON THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF EMBEZZLEMENT*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953, p. 25. See also ALFRED LINDESMITH, *OPIATE ADDICTION*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Principia Press, 1947) p 6.

Even before, or certainly while explaining the research project, the researcher should clearly identify himself and emphasize the fact that he is totally unrelated to the prison administration and that any information divulged by the inmate will be held in strict confidence and will not be discussed with any of the prison staff nor for that matter with anyone else. It is perhaps a good idea for those researchers who have university affiliation to carry with them a staff directory or university bulletin so that any doubting inmates may look up their name and position. While this does not really prove identity, it has been found helpful by this writer and seems to be sufficient evidence for most inmates. As Dexter has said—"The role assigned to the interviewer by the informant will be in terms of the informant's conception of the interviewer's group affiliations."³

Vital to rapport development and the ultimate reliability of the data obtained is frankness concerning the relationship of the interview to the inmate's particular case. It must be strongly emphasized that the interview and the total results of the research project will have no effect in mitigating the inmate's sentence, in increasing his chance for parole, or in any other way acting as a direct benefit to him. Conversely, the interview or project will have no harmful effect on his record. If, under such conditions, he sees no incentive for cooperation, long-range effects of such research may be pointed out to him as well as illustrations of general progress in criminology and penology resulting from just such research as the present project.

The information sought in the interview should be elicited as naturally as possible to build and maintain rapport throughout the interviewing period. Any questions should be frankly answered and the respondent should be freely allowed to see what notes have been taken. Again, in recording notes during the interview, the confidential nature of the project should be stressed. The problems of recording in-prison interviews are approximately the same as in other types of research. Some inmates show reluctance to have their statements written, possibly because of negative police and court experience, but others are only too eager to speak "for the record." Cressey has used a variety of recording techniques with evident success.⁴ Notes, schedules, and other forms should be kept securely filed by the researcher at all times and

³ DEXTER, *op. cit.* p 153.

⁴ CRESSEY, *op. cit.* pp 24-26.

no final typing or coding should be done by prison personnel.

The entire deportment of the researcher should be above reproach during the extent of the total research project. He must bear in mind that he is seeking to obtain reliable information from a more or less initially hostile population. To gain and maintain inmates' confidence and to prevent harmful grapevine rumors that might destroy his work, he should remain as aloof as possible from prison personnel even during the off-hours of lunch and evenings.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF INTERVIEWING ORDER

The skilled researcher should give some thought to the order in which he interviews his sample. If possible, he should check with prison personnel concerning the reputation of the first few respondents. He should avoid beginning his project by summoning unpopular or sexually deviant inmates in order to prevent his study from being negatively defined in the yard before it has a chance to begin operating. He should try to start with "average" inmates in terms of type of offense for which sentenced, length of sentence and so on. This does not mean that all his respondents should be these "average" inmates; he is bound to interview his sample without such arbitrary substitution. However, he should keep in mind what is probably the most unique characteristic of prison research, namely the fact that most or all members of his sample know one another, share with one another certain sentiments, orientations and experiences of prison existence and will undoubtedly communicate with one another and quite probably will collectively evaluate the research project before it has really begun.⁵ It is, therefore, important that the first few respondents carry back to the yard a straight story of the research project and it is equally important that their in-prison reputations are such that the project can be evaluated accurately by other inmates.

If the research is concerned with gathering facts about the crimes for which the inmates have been sentenced, it would seem advisable to pay some attention to the interviewing order of men sentenced as partners in their crime. If, by careful scheduling, one partner is prevented from communicating with the other partner following the interview, a crude measure of reliability can be had.

⁵ For a similar situation see MAURICE LEZNOFF, *Interviewing Homosexuals* AMER. JOUR. OF SOCIOLOGY, Vol. LXII, No. 2, Sep., 1956, pp 202-204.

SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF ARGOT

Prison slang and other variations in criminal argot inevitably present a problem to the in-prison researcher. Obviously, the interviewer must clearly and accurately understand the responses of his sample in order to gather valid data and the peculiar language variations of many inmates presents a real challenge. In general, argot encountered in prison interviewing falls into five categories: first, slang concerning incarceration, prison routines and prison personnel and this may include terms common only to one specific prison; second, inmate terms for various legal processes and types of sentence; third, argot common to certain types of offenses and offenders varying from terms used by burglars to the language of confidence men; fourth, argot common to sex practices and sexual deviations; and last, argot common to various vices which sometime accompany crime like gambling and narcotic addiction. These variations, of course, are in addition to ordinary slang differences created by the usual amount of social distance which exists between the interviewer and his respondents. Many inmates are slum-produced and the ordinary "jive-talk" of the slum is often unfamiliar in the academic world of the researcher. The interviewer should familiarize himself as much as possible with these argots which he may do by asking correctional authorities, reading a number of unofficial glossaries of various slangs, and, of course, by asking the meaning of terms when he encounters them in the interview.

It is ordinarily not necessary nor desirable for a researcher to be able to talk like a confidence man, yet as anthropological research must take place in the language of the culture being studied, so the prison researcher should make an effort to learn at least some of the basic "criminalese" encountered in his work.⁶ Frequent interruptions to clarify terms damage rapport and the strained, often erroneous use of argot by the interviewer may destroy rapport completely. As Kinsey has pointed out, there is considerable variation in the use of vernacular terms by locale, by racial groups, and between generations,⁷ and the interviewing structure must be flexible enough to bridge misunderstanding. The rigid techniques of question-

⁶ See, for example, the excellent description of the role necessarily assumed by the interviewer in DONALD RASMUSSEN *Prisoner Opinions About Parole* AMER. SOCIOLOGY, Vol. 5, No. 4, Aug., 1940, pp 589-590.

⁷ ALFRED KINSEY and others, *SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE HUMAN MALE*, New York: Saunders, 1948, p 52.

naires and directed interviews leave something to be desired in research with prison populations; accurate understanding can be developed best in an interview situation. As Caplow has said: "The expert interviewer is much more than a recording device. No matter what the form of the interview, he should pursue his questioning to the point where no significant ambiguities exist for him."⁸

PROBLEMS OF RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY IN PRISON RESEARCH

Fortunately, information from in-prison interviews is, in some ways, easier to check for reliability than interviews taken "in the open." Each inmate has an extensive dossier containing a good deal of pertinent information about his background, criminal record and so on. Many times modern prison records contain statements in the inmate's own words regarding his past life, the conditions surrounding his criminal career, his relationship with authorities, his parents and others who know him. In short, a brief but verbatim autobiography exists. This is, of course, in addition to test results, investigator's reports, court records, psychologists' summaries and the other components of penal records. Certainly these are indispensable as a reliability check on interviewing data.

Truthfulness of responses is not a problem peculiar to prison research, but is an issue in all projects involving interviewing. Probably because "imprisonment" and "dishonesty" are popularly related conceptions, doubts concerning data from inmates are more often expressed than doubts of data from, say, public opinion polling. There is, of course, no absolute way of measuring the degree of honesty in expressed attitudes, or sincerity, or the accuracy of recalled emotions. Nevertheless, all possible methods of validation should be used, and, of course, care should be taken in the design of the study and the interviewing techniques to assure in advance research situations in which honesty and accuracy can be engendered. Merton, for example, has claimed that the focused interview is the best technique for validly measuring subjective experiences such as attitudes and emotional responses⁹ and Young reports the successful use of an oral interviewing guide.¹⁰

⁸ THEODORE CAPLOW, *The Dynamics of Information Interviewing* AMER. JOUR. OF SOCIOLOGY, Vol. LXII, No. 2, Sep., 1956, p. 167.

⁹ ROBERT MERTON, MARJORIE FISKE and PATRICIA L. KENDALL, *THE FOCUSED INTERVIEW* Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956

¹⁰ PAULINE V. YOUNG, *Scientific Study of Young, Occasional, Urban Male Offenders* AMER. SOCIOLOGY REV., Vol. 5, No. 4, Aug., 1940, p. 596-600.

In addition to study design and interviewing technique, many other methods have been developed to check validation, such as comparing results of data with subsequent events, comparison of results with other, similar research, comparing pre-testing results with final results, validating data against judgement of experts, repeated check interviewing and so on.¹¹ As far as research with inmates is concerned, if Caplow's hypothesis that "... being interviewed is an inherently satisfying experience and ordinarily constitutes its own goal"¹² is correct, the components of this hypothesis, escape from boredom, attention, a chance to express one's views and the other satisfactions received by the interviewee will be even stronger motives for free and frank conversation in inmate interviewing. Coupled with the opportunities for the researcher to use already compiled records of many facets of his respondents' lives, the entire in-prison situation seems to lend itself to a degree of accuracy and methods of reliability check not afforded in many other types of research.

THE ETHICAL POSITION OF THE PRISON RESEARCHER

Successful interviewing necessitates a confidential relationship between interviewer and respondent of the same intensity as doctor-patient or lawyer-client relationships. However, the social researcher-respondent situation is not privileged in the law to the same extent as are these other relationships. Nevertheless, to be assured of reliable data, research interviewers inevitably inform their respondents that all information will be held in confidence but often qualify this assurance by explaining that data will be used "only in a statistical way" or that all identifying information will be concealed. Presumably, this assurance of confidence extends to any information gathered in the interviewing situation even if it is not actively sought and is irrelevant to the particular research problem.

In dealing with inmates, the researcher is in a position where, inadvertently perhaps, he might be informed of unsolved crimes, of plans to disturb prison routine or to break jail, of corruption among guards, or of vice within the walls. The issue he then faces is whether to ignore the information, inform prison or police authorities, or to personally discourage any inmate who reveals such informa-

¹¹ For a discussion of validation techniques see MILDRED PARTEN, *SURVEYS, POLLS AND SAMPLES*, New York: Harper, 1950, pp. 486-498.

¹² CAPLOW, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

tion from actively participating in the illegal or disruptive activity. The answer, should such a dilemma occur, cannot be arbitrarily formulated. Each situation must be judged as it occurs and the researcher must weigh the factor of his position as a law-abiding citizen against his scientist's role of keeping confidences. An understanding warden once told me, at the start of a research project, that if I should learn of any dangerous or disruptive plans among the inmates (this was at the height of the recent prison riot fad), I should keep this information to myself. He explained that his job was custody, mine was not, and that he felt perfectly competent to maintain custody with his own staff.

Should an issue arise which involves the possible loss of human life or the commission of another felony, the researcher must decide as his own conscience and the law to direct. However, any prison community abounds in unfounded rumors and it is not too unlikely that some inmates might create a fictional story of an impending break or other violation to test the promised confidence of the researcher. The skilled prison interviewer should act very cautiously on such information. If men are really planning a break or a riot it seems unlikely that an interviewer would be told, certainly not at the beginning of the study before any rapport has a chance to develop. Reporting such fictional information to prison authorities would undoubtedly seriously damage the research project. Ultimately, however, the researcher must make each decision as the case arises and while he does not have the immunity of the confessional, at the same time he has certain obligations to his own scientific study, and one of these is keeping information confidential within all reason.

CRIMINOLOGY AND IN-PRISON INTERVIEWING

Criminology, as a special field within the general area of social science, is concerned with many

types of behavior and variations in law-breaking in addition to those represented in prison samples. Techniques in criminological research include devices other than the interview. Nevertheless, face-to-face sources of data are vital to progress in any science of human behavior. Donald Taft has said that "The hope of ultimate control and prevention of crime depends upon the future of criminological research"¹³ and research with prison inmates can provide, much more than it has, valuable additions to knowledge about law violations. Not all answers can be obtained by interviewing inmates; the study of conduct norms, or white-collar crimes, statistical analyses of crime rates, those rare studies of the ordinary criminal "in the open," and other such research contributes to the central body of knowledge. However, in-prison interviewing has been chiefly information oriented, demographic in content. As Sykes has so aptly stated:

"In the past criminology has been often a borrower but seldom a lender, as far as a theory of human behavior is concerned. It has drawn heavily on the disciplines of psychology, sociology, jurisprudence, and so on, in order to solve its questions. It has rarely contributed original propositions or substantiating empirical studies to the social sciences. As a result the criminologist has become somewhat isolated from the main body of social theory and research; and the study of crime, in spite of the inherent interest of the subject matter, is in danger of becoming a dull parade of unattached facts."¹⁴

Carefully constructed research projects and skillfully conducted in-prison interviewing can do much to lessen this danger.

¹³ DONALD R. TAFT, *CRIMINOLOGY*, New York, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956, p 20.

¹⁴ GRESHAM M. SYKES, *CRIME AND SOCIETY*, New York, New York: Random House, 1956, pp 115-116.