

A Case Study of Collaboration: The Chicano Pinto Research Project

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This paper describes a collaborative project involving academics and Chicano convicts and addicts which, despite the potential for serious strain between the groups involved, was in fact a success. The funded part of the project was designed to examine barriers to the utilization of formal resources by ex-convicts and addicts, and was staffed both with convict and nonconvict personnel, all but the director being Chicano. In later phases the project goal was directed more broadly to social change. Its history is analyzed in terms of the importance of different subgroup norms at different points in time, and some specific hypotheses about research in minority communities developed from this experience are presented.

Collaboration between minority communities and academic researchers is not only possible, but for most types of research it is necessary for fruitful work. This is the case history of a collaborative project involving academics and Chicano convicts and addicts (Moore, Note 1). The nature of the research meant that all of the ordinary difficulties inherent in research with sensitive minorities could have been manifest to an extreme degree. In fact they were not, and, though strenuous, the project could be called successful both in formal terms (completion within the funding period, with appropriate reports, and assurance as to the validity of the data) and also in broader terms.

The success of the project was not based on any particular formula except that of paying a great deal of attention to the relationship between the academic and minority convict frames of reference. This began with both a consciousness that there are, in fact, differences between the two and a commitment to

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mutual respect for the legitimate norms and values of both groups. This, in turn, acknowledges that both frames of reference include elements that are nonlegitimate to the other. In too many projects, resolution of conflict between the academic and the "subject" frames of reference is managed by the exercise of power and covert noncompliance on the part of subordinates.

Most social science models for research structures with minorities or sensitive populations focus either on techniques (indigenous interviews, as an example) or on interpretive resources, such as participant observation and the use of informants. These are assumed to be under the control of the research enterprise. The complex of academic norms and structures that exempt the academic researcher from any social controls except those of his own scientific community remain intact. Yet it is clear that response to extraneous pressures has been common among academic researchers. In the Chicano Pinto Research Project the purposes and goals of the project were assumed by both groups as legitimate. On the other hand, the specific means to attain these goals (whether by scientific instruments or interpersonal structures) were matters of continual negotiation and refinement.

THE NATURE OF DISTRUST

Taking each group as a general class and as stereotyped by the other, it is an understatement to say that the distrust between academics and Chicano ex-convicts and addicts is profound. The mutual stereotyping is based not only on class and ethnic differences but also on specialized world views based on some degree of mutual experience. The academic carries a heavy load of stereotype based largely on theory, since few academics have prolonged personal experience with members of the class. The convict, on the other hand, has endured much day-to-day experience with what is associated with academic work. This experience includes his initial classification in prison reception centers, the drug therapy groups in prison, and many other prison structures affected by academic research. But the mutual distrust extends much further.

The two groups distrust each other's goals. The addict-convicts tend to believe that academic research will further stereotype them and thus enhance existing discrimination. They believe it will reinforce already destructive institutional arrangements and serve to test new techniques for further manipulation without their awareness. Academic people tend to discount any but individual goals among addict-convicts. If other goals are taken

into consideration, they tend to include the notion of ethnic militancy—a vague and poorly understood concept that can include anything from ethnic exclusiveness to outright revolution.

The two groups distrust each other's ideologies. Addict-convicts tend to believe that academic ideology entails various forms of victim-blaming. Academics tend to believe that their minority research workers (in research employing addict-convicts) more or less coherently blame American institutions.

The two groups distrust each other's capacity for manipulation. Addict-convicts find it difficult to believe in the sincerity of the academic researcher. They believe, bluntly, that it is his object to manipulate them. Sincerity can appear of course, but it is usually a product of naivete, especially about prison and about the criminal justice system. Academic researchers tend to distrust especially the capacity of the addict to manipulate any situation to his own potentially illegal or illegitimate goals. This includes both lying and the distortion of data to protect the subgroup.

The two groups differ fundamentally with regard to the discreteness of a research project, and particularly the rarity with which academic researchers accomplish any kind of followup. Academic researchers tend to disappear from the field after short-term expressions of concern. They leave the dissemination of findings or implementation to other people with whom they have no relationships.

Addict-convicts and academic researchers view differently the related problems introduced by the normal research strategy which (in funded projects) entails relatively rigid and comparatively inviolable research design. This is abruptly introduced into a complex community setting and the subjects have little opportunity to modify it.

These abstract categories of distrust prompted the initial research strategy. The collaborative model taken by our project assumes that the distrust both within the project and within the broader academic and Chicano pinto communities could be overcome. In tracing this interaction, the project can be seen in three distinct phases of (a) prefunding (b) funded operation and (c) postfunding, with clearly discernible subphases in the funded project.

BEFORE THE FUNDING

Our collaboration cannot be understood outside the Chicano convict self-help movement. Essentially this movement is prison-

based. It places great emphasis on self-development and self-change, as well as social change, with a special priority on social justice for Chicanos inside the criminal justice system. The emphasis on personal change in the prison self-help groups has origins in *Movimiento* philosophy and discipline, especially in the conversion of Chicano convicts (pintos) who are addicted to heroin. (About two-thirds of the convicts we surveyed in 1975 had been heroin addicts.)

The first formally organized Chicano culture group in California was EMPLEO, formed in 1966 in San Quentin after several years of organizational effort focused around a bilingual basic education program for Chicanos in the prison. Many of the EMPLEO members were transferred to other California prisons and many wound up in federal prisons within a short period of release. By the end of 1968 every state prison in California had a Chicano organization modelled after EMPLEO. By 1975 at least 25 Chicano culture groups were operating in federal and state institutions in the United States.

Street versions of EMPLEO began almost at once. They were encouraged by the general vitality of the Chicano movement and by its emphatic interest in the definition and representation of Chicano problems by Chicanos themselves. A concern with research is a vital part of this. It is nowhere better shown than in *The People's Resolution*, a 245-page document issued in 1970 as part of a campaign to mount a state-wide proposition to change California laws about heroin sentences. The resolution was issued by LUCHA (League of United Citizens to Help Addicts), a pinto self-help organization which worked in Los Angeles a number of years as an integral part of the Chicano movement and almost entirely without funds.

The People's Resolution incorporated a number of elements, including formal survey research designed to show the effects of prison and the continued involvement of the criminal justice system with heroin addiction in Chicano communities. It was widely distributed and widely discussed among Chicanos. Endorsements of the projected campaign were obtained from an impressive cross-section of Chicano leaders (including César Chávez) and from diverse community interest groups such as the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Thus the prospect of legislative change by means of Chicano pinto research was firmly implanted. Research per se was legitimated, especially research into the correctional system that would document the differential treatment of minorities and the exploitative aspects of the correctional system.

The 1975 project uncovered, as an example, several self-surveys done by prisoners.

This experience lasted for more than 10 years and is the background for the funded research. If nothing else, it repeatedly reinforced the notion among Chicano convicts that research itself is neutral. Nonetheless research conducted in academic locales still was distrusted.

THE FUNDED PROJECT

The research was designed during the summer of 1973 when the author was director of a funded descendant of LUCHA. The projects were funded simultaneously by the National Science Foundation and the National Institute on Drug Abuse¹ to analyze the barriers to utilization of formal resources by Chicano ex-convicts and addicts. Virtually no prior research had been done and the project monitors from both agencies were open to the collaborative methodology proposed in order to gain a trustworthy insight into what was then being defined as a national problem.

Research Design and Staff

A straightforward exploratory approach was used to define the primary research tasks. We knew at the beginning that a high proportion of Chicano convicts reach prison through one of two interconnected routes—gang-related activities and narcotics. The gangs in Los Angeles are neighborhood (or *barrio*) based. Thus we concentrated on three barrios that were also target areas for agencies serving convicts and addicts. We intended to utilize a variety of techniques to place these three neighborhoods in a “barrio typology” which had several dimensions. And we intended to survey the residents of these neighborhoods for their perception of local problems related to gangs and to drugs.

The other principal data-gathering task was the interviewing of newly released convicts from these three barrios. It would be preceded by an ethnographic effort to derive systematic measures probing the extent to which Chicano convicts and addicts differed from the prisoners of other ethnic groups in their modes

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of prison and post-prison adaptation.

The design called for a combination of structured instruments (to draw the barrio typology and to interview neighborhood residents and ex-prisoners) and less-structured, quasi-ethnographic data. The design was deliberately broad to allow room for modification in research that was conceived as essentially a pilot project.

The initial staff was about half-convict and half nonconvict. The student research assistants were drawn from several disciplines. All except the director were Chicano. The convict staff was chosen by the convict-serving agencies and included men from the three barrios with a mixture of addicts and never-addicted men who had served time in California and in federal prisons. Few of them had formal college-level education and none had formal research training or background.

Phases within the Project

The collaborative effort showed positive and negative trends which followed quite clear phases. All of the staff, both convict and nonconvict, were hired simultaneously and set to work on the clarification of some research tasks and the development and testing of instruments. This process was intended both to socialize the convict-addict staff to the use of research instruments—and to socialize the student staff to the convict frame of reference. In actual practice, this period became a time of mutual information exchange and testing. The testing went on within the convict staff while they were testing the academic staff. The academic staff did very little testing; to the contrary there was substantial but uninformed trust of the convicts. The convict staff acted predominantly as interpreters, discussing in large and small staff seminars the structures and significance of the barrio gangs and the prison. Nonstaff convicts were also involved in this discussion process, which included incarcerated convicts who were allowed to leave prison and to visit the project on “community betterment trips.”

The second phase (when actual work was performed and questionnaires taken into the field) was a test of performance, with mutual assistance and the mutual evaluation of all staff. It was a period of shakedown; there were resignations and terminations as the question of work performance became more of an issue. The mutual testing of convicts became visible to the project director. *Movimiento* concepts of discipline began to supplement the more informal social controls of the convict

subculture. Essentially, when the informal controls did not work—that is, when convict staff members either failed to perform or to stop “messing up”—the project director was pressured to fire the deviants.

Meanwhile the strains of the project were appearing among the student staff, one of whom was terminated because of nonperformance. It was easier for the director to do this than with the pintos because the norm was that of staff development for all pintos and failures to perform were interpreted as failures in development. This clashed with the convict definition of the situation. The delay in terminating convict staff caused a deterioration in morale.

After a period of comparative calm, with harmonious and apparently fruitful collaboration with all elements of the staff (including some new convict additions), the fourth phase entailed a crisis of major proportion. The trouble began with a conference (jointly with the American Friends Service Committee) planned at the beginning of the ninth month. An advance report containing some of the qualitative discussions (history of one neighborhood and its gang, a history of the heroin and barbiturate market in East Los Angeles, a history and present status of the self-help groups in prison, and a counterpresentation to a recently published book on Chicanos in San Quentin [Davidson, 1974]) was to be prepared in time for the conference. Its production required extreme pressure to produce written material. Even the strongest of the student staff tended to collapse under the pressure, and almost all of the lengthy advance report was written by the convict staff and the director. This was a period of major confrontations and enormous tension. It left a deep residue of alienation among the students who were required to produce a document for a broad professional community and pinto audiences that reflected a partially digested and tentative conceptualization of a new and traumatic world view. On the other hand the convict staff tended to write off the students. Additional research staff was hired to supervise data reduction and some preliminary data runs.

As it happened the conference attracted a wide variety of community people and professionals involved in prison problems. This result and the final three months of the project led to a sudden spurt of self-confidence among the pinto staff members. Contacts from the conference led to a series of television and personal experiences and, even more gratifying, to requests for Chicano membership on a variety of committees concerned with change in the penal system. Queries came to the project for

new ventures. The pinto staff participated even more generally in the development of the final report, and the advance report began to appear in classroom instruction in local colleges.

INCORPORATION AFTER THE PROJECT: THE FINAL PHASE

When funding ended, the research group incorporated itself as the Chicano Pinto Research Project, Inc., to undertake a wide range of research, demonstration, and educational activities relating to Chicano convicts and addicts. Resources were extremely limited. The ex-convicts served as the core staff and worked on a volunteer self-help basis, along with some volunteer professional help. Nine months after funding ended, three major proposals had been submitted, along with a proposal for CETA trainees. Plans were made for the publication of an edited version of the final report, for continued development of the research skills of the convict staff, and for local efforts at dissemination.

But the lack of stable funding and an institutional base made the status of the project as a "minority within a minority" very evident. There were institutional obstacles to reform of the prison system or any change in the community relationships with addict and gang programs. Meanwhile the larger community in East Los Angeles began to suffer from a general deterioration of their sense of community input into policy, largely as a result of federal policies in a period of recession. This deterioration became an obstacle in generating enthusiasm for change among any groups except Chicano convicts. There was also an exact counterpart in the deterioration of the prison environment. The self-help movement in California prisons was struggling for survival against both repression from the correctional system and against changes in the orientation of the convicts within the prisons. The conventional approaches of most academic researchers (and the relatively slow process of the communication of innovations) meant that the expertise of the core group among academic researchers was slow in being recognized.

GOALS AND IDEOLOGIES OF RESEARCH

It became clear during the post-funding phase that any research directed at social change for minorities meets all of the obstacles, old and new, that depress poor minority communities. Research findings are a poor instrument for social change unless they are institutionally backed to an extraordinary degree—even if the findings are supported by the subjects themselves. This

is a cynical truism but it is worth repeating. It is a fundamental fact of all research on minorities. Most mature minority persons are very well aware of the realities and their helplessness underlies much minority suspicion of the rationale of academic research. The inevitable result is a very realistic distrust of goals, noted earlier in this paper as the first dimension of difficulty.

Both academics and minority people adapt in many ways to the larger problems of minorities in American society. For the Chicano Pinto Research Project the question of goals became a question of multiplicity. Concretely, this meant that the scope of the project broadened to include a history of Chicano settlement in Los Angeles insofar as that history bore on the emergence of gangs and the development of stable narcotics markets in that community. Such a context was felt to be important—not only as a scientific context for understanding particular community or ex-convict attitudes but also as an ideological stance in terms of establishing the ultimate referent for change and the long-range goals of the project as an instrument for change.

A multiplicity of goals meant that subgoals were given priorities within the limited time of the project so that immediate threats within this larger context could be met. Thus efforts at developing a brief ethnography of the role of the Pentecostal movement among Chicano addicts were largely abandoned for a more immediate priority when a new book on Chicanos in San Quentin (Davidson, 1974) appeared. The book, which portrayed Chicano convicts as “the key” to San Quentin, as controlling the prison subeconomy and as enjoying their power, seemed plausible to the academic staff, but the convict staff found it invalid and damaging. A major effort was diverted to a critique of the book, with several seminars that included men incarcerated in the prison at the time of the book’s research and circulation of particular chapters among prison self-help groups for a critique by correspondence. This also entailed a revision of a portion of the research design, initially to derive a typology of Chicano adaptations to prison that would parallel the Irwin (1970) typology for Anglo prisoners. A broader and more ethnographic approach was taken to what had been seen as the structured and rather simple task of measuring status and adaptation in the prison.

In general, throughout the project research questions and findings were tested against the larger goal of change. We found that there was no interest in suppressing negative findings; the effort was rather to present a complex view. It is also worth noting that the convict researchers tended in most cases to change

their own interpretive frameworks as they penetrated any given issue in depth. This was most apparent in gathering the oral histories of the barrios and their own gangs. Normally the identities of Los Angeles Chicano addict-convicts are deeply bound up with the experiences and perspectives of a particular gang "clique" (cohort). Uncovering the larger context of the neighborhood itself was an important piece of experiential learning for many of them. Repeatedly the project director was pressed by the convict staff to go into greater depth even in highly sensitive areas such as sexual exploitation, in the service of more complex understanding and the destruction of stereotypes. Ultimately and always the goal was social change.

The ideological issue became thoroughly subsumed under the issue of project goals and during the process of mutual discovery and interpretation. No set of prior interpretative categories (formal theoretical, political, or any other) effectively survived the complexity of the interaction in the project during the research. To a lesser extent, the "reaching out" of the project to both incarcerated and "street" convicts for help in interpretation extended this experience well beyond the formal boundaries of the project. It also extended some of the experience to "squares" who were beyond the boundaries of the project, even though the task of communication to academic researchers remains entangled in the ponderous machinery of professional communication.

MANAGING STATUS NORMS: MANIPULATION VERSUS SOCIAL CONTROLS

The phase history of the project can be analyzed in terms of the importance of different subgroup norms at different points. In operation at one time or another were the following: (a) academic quality norms, (b) convict subculture norms, (c) Chicano solidarity norms, (d) pinto movement norms, (e) Chicano student subculture norms, (f) norms having to do with the desirability of personal development, (g) productivity norms. The first four led at various points to both cooperation and conflict. The latter two are general norms of the larger culture and both applied within and transcended subgroup norms.

Clearly the issue of mutual distrust of mutual manipulation is based on the question of potential conflict between subgroup norms. It is a sociological truism that the social change that works best is that which is the most capable of drawing on existing

repertoires of social control mechanisms. In a real sense, any research project is a project in social change—of its own members' abilities, if nothing else. It would seem absurd, then, to train a minority social researcher within the context of academic norms with a limited set of technical skills and expect him or her to act with a professional conscience. Yet precisely this is done in many projects, especially in research involving "deviants." The use of ex-addicts as interviewers in narcotics research rarely entails either a concern with or a familiarity with the interviewers' motivational structure or normal controls over their behavior. Likewise, limited socialization to norms of academic quality (technical socialization) means that from the perspective of the employee, the concerns of the academic may be equally mysterious and therefore equally dubious. Hence actual manipulation may easily take place and an atmosphere of near-paranoia can ensue.

This became very clear with the student staff. In the initial phase the academic quality norms and the norms of Chicano solidarity combined to create good and fruitful work. During the second phase, the students tended to withdraw somewhat as the operation of convict subgroup norms became more evident. The harshness and complexity of the ex-convict world became more salient within the project itself. The young students, all trying to manage their personal and academic life, tended to withdraw to the support of their peers. The difficulty of the students in functioning in their allotted roles as standard research assistants seemed largely related to their shock at meeting the world of the pintos. Their increasing tendency to reassure each other that they were "OK" meant a curious kind of withdrawal from the reality of the project. In the final phases the original student staff performed increasingly ritualistic tasks. The new Chicano students did the bulk of the research tasks along with the convict staff.

During the first phase the convict staff also acted primarily according to Chicano solidarity norms, pinto movement norms, and academic quality norms. The extent to which convict subculture norms were in operation was concealed from the nonconvict staff during the first phase. When it came to the surface (that is, when some convict staff members failed to respond to the informal controls and the project director was pressured to terminate some members), in effect convict norms were submerged under norms of the pinto movement and productivity. For the convict staff, these two norms were dominant for the remaining time of the project, with increasing concern for norms of academic

quality. These became salient as the student staff began to demonstrate their own problems and as the "audience" (the conference) became more urgent. Chicano solidarity norms also became less salient as the convict staff became increasingly concerned with what can only be called psychological exploitation of incarcerated convicts by some of the secretarial staff in a series of romances conducted by correspondence. This problem was neutralized by the addition to the secretarial staff late in the project of two male ex-convicts, one Anglo and one Chicano.

Norms of personal development were omnipresent. Earlier we mentioned the convict definition of "deviance" which was defined by the project director as difficulty in development. Of more general importance is the fact there was always a certain ambiguity about the nature of expertise. Clearly, substantive knowledge was the monopoly of the convict-addict staff; however, the convict staff members constantly challenged their own information and interpretations. This process was evident from the first and greatly enhanced the sense of external validity—even if the validity appeared after several yelling matches. More subtle was a continuous and real challenge to the claim of the academic staff to a monopoly on technical expertise. This was interesting and unexpected. Once, for example, a simplified version of a semantic differential in game form was developed in order to measure the prestige of different gangs at various epochs on several dimensions. Despite pretesting with older ex-convicts, the instrument failed to work in the field. It was too much of a game; the respondents felt insulted because their world was being taken lightly. The staff were embarrassed to admit that the instrument had failed. It was abandoned only because it was decided the the failure lay in the instrument itself rather than with the administration. Then again, we believed the conventional wisdom that women are better interviewers than men—until it became obvious that the middle-aged men on the staff were getting more and better interviews, even with women. The explanation lay in the role of the traditional poverty-level Mexican family, in which women are quite subordinate. Men interviewers of middle age carry prestige. They are the peers of male respondents and in male-dominated households, were allowed to interview women respondents more readily than women interviewers. Again, the barrio symbols of what is serious and what is trivial are important in any research project and they proved to be important in the technical aspects of our project.

Development was clearest in the case of writing skills. Few

of the ex-convict staff possessed writing skill and yet they generally responded to the demands of the project. The most subtle aspect of personal development involved the expansion of the ex-convict's universe of discourse in the course of gathering data. A larger framework for the interpretation of their own experience, their barrio experience, and the Mexican American experience developed its own momentum and this became a significant factor in the decision to persist in the project even after funding ended. In this respect, personal development became subsumed under the norms of the pinto and of the Chicano movement as a continuation of the capacities that, for example, are extolled in prison self-help groups. They converged very strongly with the norms of academic quality.

RESEARCH STRATEGY: DESIGNING FLEXIBILITY

It should be clear by now that the project demonstrates a very great need for flexibility in the collaboration between minorities and academic researchers. This is most important when, as in some cases, there is a fairly inflexible and highly detailed research design involved. This project was characterized by a willingness to substitute one technique or approach for another in order to meet broad goals. We were willing to rank subgoals in terms of both short-term and long-term project goals.

It is also true that the project probably exaggerated the strains inherent in such collaborations because it concentrated on the most serious problems in the Chicano community. Neither the immediate crises nor the general integrity of the project could have been managed without flexibility.

From its inception the project made its presence known and invited cooperation from outside groups. This was particularly important in the presentations to prison self-help groups and in seminars held on specific topics that involved particularly knowledgeable ex-convicts from the community. In this respect, by following *Movimiento* norms, the project not only debarred accusations of secrecy but also could draw on resources that would normally not have been accessible. The research proposal was made available to interested individuals, and preliminary reports (e.g., the history of the heroin market) were circulated for critical comment within prison groups and community agencies. Such openness also strengthened the convict staff in resisting an effort by a group that had taken no previous interest to censor the

final report. The "open project" strategy thus served ultimately as our greatest protection.

FINAL COMMENTS

The Chicano Pinto Research Project exemplified and exaggerated many of the difficulties in academic research with minority populations. Like all others, it had many unique aspects, but certain hypotheses may be drawn from its methodology.

The most important hypothesis is that every minority subcommunity has a more or less organized history and the potential for utilizing both research findings and research-trained personnel. The more deprived and problematic the community, the more the history will involve stereotyping. The more serious the stereotyping, the more important the need to overcome the stereotypes in the course of the research. In turn, this will tend to emphasize the constraints on producing valid research, interpreted in a broad context of minority status.

Another obvious hypothesis is that research projects in minority communities can be analyzed in terms of a Balesian sequence of phases, with two important modifiers. The initial cognitive phase will be more or less successful as a function of the social distance between project members (minority subcultures represented in the project) the extent to which the meanings of research within the subject subculture are seriously addressed.

A third overriding hypothesis is that regardless of the actual nature of the exchanges taking place in a project at any phase (information exchange, decision-making, or whatever) the socioemotional context is omnipresent. Ultimately this context refers to the status of minorities in American society.

Another set of hypotheses concerns inter- and intrapersonal tension. We hypothesize that the resources for the management of tensions within a project include subculturally differentiated status systems that extend well beyond the formal boundaries of the project. The dimensions of differentiation include social class and occupationally specialized networks, often mobilized through kinship, especially in the management of intrapersonal tensions. They also include interest groups that may have a direct or indirect stake in the research project and its findings. The more direct the stake, the more visible and helpful the support in later phases of the project. We discovered that individual stresses were manifest to the friends and relatives of the staff who were more or less drawn into the activities of the project. An outside

support group that is directly affected by the research (convict as compared with student) will expect its expressions of concern to be taken as legitimate. Less directly affected groups will be more hesitant, but they also will affect the processes within the project. It is assumed that a degree of politicization characterizes all of the related subsystems.

The dynamics of research in minority communities in the mid 1970s seem inevitably to draw in larger reference groups and broader issues than most academic researchers or funding sources are willing to acknowledge. Whether this means that research in minority communities is different in kind from that of other research is an interesting question. At the very least it means that research training in academic professions remains—after more than a decade of minority challenge—seriously deficient in preparing researchers for what has been and will continue to be a significant feature of the research enterprise.

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