

**Episode 138 - Dr. Robert Duran: "Smile Now, Cry Later": Gang Life - An Insider's Journey**

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.insocialwork.org](http://www.insocialwork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote users to practice and practice to research where is so short. Hi everyone. Happily Buffalo is a pretty diverse place. Like a lot of cities Buffalo has its own old world marketplace on Buffalo's East Side. You'll find the Broadway Market so if you need Lams made of butter chocolate sponge candy your watch repaired or you simply like to watch older perfectly coiffed ladies fight in line for Polish sausage. We've got you covered. I'm Peter Sobota. Like most difficult decisions gang membership is often fraught with him sibilance and for good reason. In this episode our guest Dr. Robert Duran describes what he has learned in 20 years of being involved in joining as an observer and researching gangs. He begins by describing his own youthful involvement as a gang member and why he remains committed to a critical re-evaluation of gang membership. Dr. Duran describes how conventional definitions of gangs are limited and fail to capture what gangs are and the opportunities and experiences of power they offer their members. He continues on to describe his findings including his focused on the contexts in which gangs form what holds them together and his recommendations based on his research. Robert Duran Ph.D. is associate professor at New Mexico State University's Department of Criminal Justice.

[00:02:01] His research concerns racism in the post civil rights era and community resistance from gang evolution and border surveillance to disproportionate minority contact and law enforcement shootings. He is the author of gang life in two cities an insider's journey with Columbia University Press. He was the recipient of the 2011 New Scholar Award from the American Society of Criminology division on people of color and crime. Dr. Duran was interviewed in January of 2014 by Steven Schwartz research associate at the School of Social Work. Buffalo's Center for Social Research Steve Schwartz with Professor Robert Duran who will be talking about his research on gangs which featured in his 2013 book gang life in two cities an insider's journey. Robert having read some of the this book I know your research really starts with your own story is it as an insider and you're correct Steve. So my book goes back into my own experiences into the early 1990s when I was jumped into a gang. I'm from Ogden Utah so it's not a place in the literature that's typically seen as where gangs are present. The gang that I joined they had a jump in process were five six individuals who were the original gangsters of the gang which are kind of the more senior members to this initiation process where you fight back and they kind of beach for a period of time until you demonstrate kind of this loyalty and the strength to be part of the gang. My own experience of getting jumped in and become part of this group. I never had seen or perceived that high school that that would become part of my life and who I was. You know I came from a good family good working class values.

[00:04:07] So the importance of family the importance of respect hard work and being there for each other in our family or religion as well. But not the main religion that's for the state of Utah. So not really expected to become part of the gang. And I think that gave me like a different viewpoint as well of people who join these groups and the variety that exists. But as I became more further involved I started getting more negative outcomes and with conflict and where at a period of time I thought I'd probably go to prison like many my friends and family members and really trying to see some things that were really shocking my life kind of in my late teenage years. Is this really what it was. Post to be this gang. And is that really helping me or hurting me. And that's just me. I think that thing that really came out is hurting those around me. So I think when I was seeing that this had the potential to hurt those around me that I started to become more. I got to try and do something

different. And so I started getting into school to work on the writers to work on cars. And then when I was in school I started realizing after high school that I liked going to school and I liked learning. And that I could do something about trying to explain why there are gangs and that fueled pretty much my whole journey of college education and research.

[00:05:41] And that's led to this book *Life in two cities* can you tell us about your current research that's featured in the book which really spans 20 years and what methodological and theoretical frameworks have shaped your inquiry. Yes mythologically I identify myself as an urban ethnography. So the training that I started sitting at University of Colorado when I went to graduate school was this whole idea of ethnography that your goal is to learn the perspective of others and the way you do that is by immersing yourself in the setting doing interviews. Field notes so anthropology has its early roots of going to other countries and exploring groups different from oneself. University of Chicago also studying like the city so I can account for this background of attempting to get the viewpoint of others and then the research tool for which I can gather data. So my own background influences who I have access to my networks. So I think one thing that makes it unique is I was able to talk to a variety of different individuals both who were in gangs current gang members ex gang members community members. But one thing Assal really made it important to do because as I was starting to go to college when I was younger I had access to improved jobs. I worked in youth corrections I worked in juvenile probation and that gave me access to law enforcement and kind of that language and way of thinking. So I made sure to do interviews with police officers prosecutors and try and look at things from a variety of different angles and the interviews by themselves. The ethnography the field notes immerse myself in the setting really helped to get like a current perspective of what was going on and this is in Ogden Utah. But then when I went to graduate school University of Colorado Denver Colorado became another site.

[00:07:49] So I had like this comparative ethnography do any interviews immerse myself setting. But another thing it was kind of limited to that point of time. So the interviews were very eye opening and really made even change the way I thought of gangs. When I talk to friends people I knew about their own experiences that if it wasn't in this framework of doing an interview I would have never known all that they had going on even in their own lives. But another thing I added was historical so I did my best to use primary documents newspapers to try and recreate how gangs first developed in the cities of Denver Colorado and Ogden Utah. What were the conditions that led to gangs being there in the first place. So theoretically I think more of the critical theory in sociology and legal studies influenced my explanation and as my adviser told me to don't read what's been written on book on anx you know immerse yourself and then later after you've collected all the data to see if it matches the current literature. And I think that really helped me to not go in with these assumptions. Even those from gangs. But the assumptions of the literature. Then later after I collected the data and compare it back to what has been said in the explanations for why gangs exist. That allowed me to even kind of create new explanations for gangs and kind of a new counter game paradigm that currently exists. Why is the definition of gangs so important to you.

[00:09:26] Yes ask that definition is pretty much caught in that current gang paradigm where gangs are defined as more kind of crime as a central part of the definition that their youth. So that definition of crime you really if you look at it like historically and even contemporary crime youth it doesn't really capture really what a gang is. So individuals can be young you know may 12 13 as young or even younger and more older as well so some 30s 40s 50s having ties to gangs. So I think the definition of just youth is kind of limited. And as for the focus on crime that it doesn't really capture the historical conditions that led to these gangs to be there in the first place the inequality that makes gangs emerge. So rather than looking at pathological individuals who would join again or become part of these groups I look at more of the problem conditions that are exists in the areas where gangs form and they don't just form in Los Angeles Chicago New York Boston. These

conditions exist in neighborhoods. Across the United States. So people being surprised. Yeah. Again Utah's gangs where I am now. Las Cruces New Mexico they have gangs. What presence do they have. Really also influenced by the response to these groups. The definition that I use for a gang is the one I borrow from brother to and anybody else. So their definition is a group formed largely by youth and adults of marginalized social class.

[00:11:14] And I add in our racial and ethnic groups and they continue which aims to provide its members with a resistant identity and opportunity to be individually and collectively empowered a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture a refuge from the stresses and strains of the barrio or get a life in a spiritual enclave within which it's own sacred rituals can be generated and practiced. So I think looking at new ways to define gangs and is it a social problem. And how do we respond to it. Do we attack the individuals or do we try and do something about the conditions that they form. I think that's really the key important piece of defining gangs. What is the root of the problem you've discussed your own history as an ethnographer. How did you maintain your objectivity. Yes my goal throughout this entire research project was to gather the best data as possible and I know an undergraduate school. The thing of research methods and interviews that really graduate school pushed me to really go to another level of documenting everything. So my objectivity I think was shaped by you know I would get answers to the questions that I have of why gangs were there and present from different people and from different angles and also historically and comparatively that kind of gave me more of a distance. Each piece was answering these questions. So law enforcement was I think about like a continuum of the way people think about gangs. Law enforcement has a viewpoint of gangs that is on one end of the continuum and that total opposite end of the continuum is the gang members themselves but the ones who are usually described as gang experts are oftentimes for presentations law enforcement but you're really getting a piece that is like I said one side of the continuum and not the other side. And so some TV shows and movies I think really push towards that perspective.

[00:13:23] This is the way we think about gangs like the History Channel show of gang land. I think that really gives a viewpoint of everyone wants that the gangs the baddest and the coolest. I talk about the reasons for like gangs are present. That's one of the gang ideals that I mentioned in one of my chapters. The Camelot style of creating this image of what they are but empirically the gang is a wide variety of different individuals and the conditions that they are created that I think those shows have a hard time of really being able to get at that point now that we understand your conceptual framework and a bit about your methodology. Can you tell us what your important findings were. Yes so important findings. Each chapter in the book goes from owning this kind of counter gang paradigm the other way of looking at games. So that first starts off about looking at the overall gang literature and over. Since 1927 however gangs been described what kind of access to these researchers have and being able to find out their information. So I start off an introduction kind of this overall information that has been put forth about who gangs are and what they do. And I moved towards my own research access my own insider perspective how that shaped the different forms of data that I collected and trying to look at things from a variety of different angles and then it moves into the war on gangs and the polls. There were riots era which focuses on law enforcement's efforts to suppress gangs and how that label could be used to come down against everybody in the community.

[00:15:13] So just because they said there was gangs allowed them to stop harass give people our time. Who met that image. So when we look at racial or ethnic inequality for Ogden Utah Denver Colorado and Utah's primarily Latino community that was receiving the brunt of aggressive law enforcement. Denver Colorado is black and Latino. We're experiencing these differential treatment. And then I move into another chapter the chapters where I look at historically the conditions that led to gangs in Denver Colorado and Utah break those up into two separate chapters and then I move into the pressures that people face in deciding whether to join a gang. This is primarily

focused on youth and high school middle school age. What are the pressures that young people feel and encounter whether to join a group that is known as a gang. Has these kind of connotations of fear. Nossel strengths but also you know people don't bother you. But most people don't join a gang. And after that chapter I go into what holds the gang together and I move into looking at solutions and solutions I think is the most important piece that I try and lead to and with this first book on gangs largely is capturing the research that I've collected primarily from 2000 to 2006 but it goes back into the early 1940s for Denver Colorado and early 1970s for Ogden Utah and the second book that I'm working on is the research that I've done on the U.S. Mexico border region.

[00:17:06] So PASO TEXAS FOR THE SAFEST second or third large cities in the United States low numbers of homicides adjacent to one of the most violent places in the world in 2008 2009. You know a high number of murders and killings that drug cartels and the feuds that have gone on. Definitely different than I ever research before in Utah or Colorado. So I think that captures the important findings. You called that gang paradox. When we spoke. Can you explain what you mean by that Ursule game paradox. I devoted so much time to researching gangs that during graduate school and I think when I was done and I moved to southern New Mexico last Crucis I think I kind of had this assumption that I know everything about gangs of study that some might have talked to so many people historically and everything I have a good sense of everything that it's about. And when I moved here to Las Cruces New Mexico the border region you know was seeing a fence dividing families people being deported. Border Patrol kind of this militarized zone that was kind of like this other level of enforcement and of the politics that separate countries. But the gang paradox idea pretty much came from this idea that there are all the conditions that poverty law enforcement identifies Latino African-American as higher gang involvement. So here are these conditions lack of resources that really lead to having a larger gang presence. And I think politically people turn the other way. But in this area gangs have actually their present but they're not at the level of violence amongst each other in terms of homicides or the way they're treated by the police can like this place that doesn't really fit the typical literature of even what I studied before or even these other places.

[00:19:17] So that's what I'm working to develop now is completing the writing and hopefully turn this into a second book shortly. I know you don't view gangs only through a criminal justice lens. You've spoken to us. Can you tell us about the core ideals you found within these Mexican American gangs. Well it's kind of a hard chapter and there was an article that was published in the Ostlund. One of the two Kunle studies most premier journals that this chapter was candlelight. I didn't want to sensationalize gangs and nothing about the data that I was collecting was focusing on doing what law enforcement was already creating an image of. But I wanted to figure out what is this glue what is what holds the gang together. So you're facing all this adversity in the community by police criminal justice system. How can this gain this group of people still exist despite all these obstacles of possibilities of death incarceration her victimization. How can such a group still exist despite all those problems. And so the core ideals of the gang were built from Channel look at all as far as the opposition and how they can still operate. So I look at the loyalty to be informed. You know even before but really demonstrated during the jump in process the loyalty of I Got Your Back. We're creating something we created something that is different that we have a source of empowerment. And no one is going to bother you no more. So like this protection that before as an individual you know maybe as your family or hopefully someone stick up for you.

[00:21:09] But the gang is really this creation of these are the people that are now going to look out for you wherever you are and then also looking at another core idea of this pressure to respond courageously to external threats. So in this hostile kind of more neglectful environment there are people who push boundaries and threaten people's safety that the gang itself kind of demonstrated their strength by making sure that in demonstrating that they would not allow threats to the individuals who are a part of that gang. And that's where it leads to problems of conflicts between gangs that that putting in work responding courageously to external threats was a key piece. This

third poor ideal that I found was promoting and defending the gang status. So being able to constantly represent and the representation of the gang really varied by age. So if your teenage years were that man if you are an adult what it meant seem to transition with time for the most active I think are still the juveniles and trying to create a name for themselves that they fit within this larger group. But this constant kind of pressure if you're not defending the gang you're not sticking up for who we are. There can be consequences. You know with the rules of the gangs kind of informal rules that they have. And then this last piece that I added of ideas of the gang was maintaining a stoic attitude toward gang life to kind of smile now cry later that with all the problems that are going on in the neighborhood and you know facing negative consequences of possibly death and incarceration are those going to be bad times.

[00:23:07] The maintaining the gang and who it is that is also going to be the positive things and the positive things are supposed to be outweigh the negative. And with these ideals most people have difficulty living up to them. So individual personalities and a wide variety of things that go on in people's lives that these ideals have been definitely hard for a lot of people to maintain. And that's why I think people will stay in the game forever too that they transition out of this life. So you've identified core ideals loyalty courage against threat defending the gang and stoicism toward the negative consequences. And that kind of contrasts with the way you see the criminal justice system has responded to gang behavior. Could you explain. I think it really started you know there's been some great work done by John Moore and Diego Vehle who were looking at gangs in Los Angeles California seeing this shift over time of using drugs and when this attention started to be coming towards criminal justice involvement in communities. I think in the past a lot of the literature seems to highlight they were kind of points before the 1940s kind of neglect of this population. But as long as they're segregated we don't really have too much involvement or attention on these individuals. But I think after the Zuni riots which occurred in Los Angeles and then that fear spread to other places around the country that started going more towards this is a population that were identifying as a problem and we're going to now increase our different wars against this population.

[00:25:05] So the war on gangs that have been large from that time so curfew loitering vagrancy all the different things they started adding to really come against gangs. But I think the major shift happened that in the civil rights movement there's a lot of good information of how gangs were actually no longer being seen as the way to address the needs of the community that these civil rights groups were tackling these root problems that it started becoming a point where gangs weren't popular. That is can like this lifestyle that you know you aren't cool with if you are in the gang stuff you're kind of backward and civil rights movement examples such as like Denver a crusade for justice really started showing that OK what do we have. We've got problems with the schools and the police. Are we going to really address those points with counterintelligence programs that by the FBI police department aggressive enforcement start really seeing that. OK here's a population I think that can be seen as a challenge to the mainstream way how things are run. So we don't want groups like this developing and so we see that point of the counter against the civil rights organization. So what this aspiration of Dr. Martin Luther King Malcolm X how these groups were countered to FBI police practices that it really started getting to this mid 1970s work criminal justice system started really incarcerating more people than they ever have had before using the law enforcement to be more aggressive and less guidelines of the reasons why someone could be stopped how they could be treated. So the chapter where I have on the war on gangs in the post civil rights era is really documenting from the 1980s on this whole push to criminalize and incarcerate marginalized populations. How would you describe the importance of the research.

[00:27:19] I think the importance of my research as I look at the early creation of when the game first began and also the early study of gangs from 1927 Frederick trasher so eighty seven years since that time frame that the systematic study of gangs that there has been a lot of interest in the topic. So I counted more than a thousand different individuals who have written on this topic in the

past seven years. Different techniques methods that they've use different areas that they've studied. But I think one thing that I found interesting. All these individuals who researched gangs is less than 40 and devoted at least a year or more of having direct interaction with individuals who are involved in this lifestyle and less than a dozen who are substantially out of their lives of trying to reduce violence and to change the outcomes of the people involved. So in academia and I think research there is kind of this difficulty of the expert on the topic often has studied it from a distance and I think that's what really makes my research unique. And from these background and I've done it the research comparatively looking at different areas. So really trying to give voice to this population that there are so many different stereotypes and assumptions about who these people are that join gangs in or around and in these settings that I think my overall goal of encouraging empowerment giving voice looking at things historically and comparatively to this counter gang paradigm that I'm encouraging definitely stands out in the current literature that exists and I don't see anyone else currently doing it.

[00:29:19] Hopefully this can bring up good discussion and get people thinking in other ways about this topic. Now after your 20 years what advice do you have for listeners who are social workers or practitioners teachers or researchers in this area. You know my advice is as I look over time there's been a lot of good work and their efforts so I think even social work efforts of the past where they would put like a community outreach worker. So when they're in the community you try and reach out to the people in the neighborhood and provide alternatives. I think this idea that punishment has to be the solution creates more difficulties and more problems in the long run. And I think more research is starting to document those difficult outcomes. So you know seeing the importance of cultural competence and the ability to care about humanity and the dignity of people of different backgrounds. So by race by class by gender by religion being kind of open and encouraging that people who are on the margins in these neighborhoods and around the country that they can do other things and with support and encouragement. You don't have to stay in a gang or go that lifestyle that there are alternatives. And I think with that encouragement from others I think early on even my own background I grew up using people with negativity and hate as energy. But I think I definitely appreciated the ones who were more supportive and encouraging. And yes sometimes I fall and don't carry on just like you know other people that I've known through that. If you're living in these conditions it's not always going to be like a real beautiful kind of happy time that there are going to be difficulties.

[00:31:18] But I think I see as I've worked with this group in Denver Colorado I give it the pseudonym of ASAP in the book Area Support for all people. But this group in Denver really impressed me because it involved x gang members working with current gang members and the overall vibe was to reduce the violent and the ex gang members had a way of building rapport and reaching out and encouraging the youth who are current gang members in a way that no one else could really reach these youth and make them pay attention and think about their options in life. So I think incorporating individuals who have the kind of backgrounds of be in gangs may be in prison or are having difficulties that instead of pushing them off to the side that they are of no value. I think these are some of the individuals that can play the greatest role in channeling the energies of individuals involved in gangs to give like Luis Rodriguez. You know he's written books about gangs and creating alternative encouraging poetry and writing to give the efforts of Father Greg Boyle Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. You know how he's been able to use religion and work that is creating a way out in the last chapter before the conclusion in my book I outline these three kind of strategies that I've developed over 20 years of background with gangs that make creates a. So I focus on a strategy one of cultural empowerment and promoting gender equality. So learning from how the Civil Rights Movement gender equality was one area that created a lot of problems. And I think these groups back to their full potential.

[00:33:12] So moving past those divisions so making sure leadership positions male female. And

this idea of cultural empowerment that you learn your history and your background you can have pride in where you come from and that cannot allow you to be a better person in society giving you an education. I look at challenging the police and mainstream view of gangs. So there's a wide variety of individuals who are in gangs are not fun to be around with and there's no great no better people and of it either. Even other organizations and groups that have done interviews with players personalities that in all fields I think that I don't like to come across so recognizing you are taking just one individual to represent everybody. I think it's the wrong way to go about it and really seeing the last point I had of designing a program that responds to gangs is involving people from the community who have these backgrounds and also what the support and guidance and social workers who bring this cultural competence understanding of what's going on is carrying this support to create alternative wealth empower equality in educated you've done a great optimistic ways to end our conversation today. Well thank you for taking your time to talk to us about your research and your experience and we hope to hear more from you in the future. Yeah I really appreciate it Steve. Thank you for your time and thank you for having this opportunity. You have been listening to Dr. Robert Duran discuss his research on gang membership and in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

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