

Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets

by *Sudhir Venkatesh*

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Reviewed by:

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In an extreme ethnography, Sudhir Venkatesh follows his research of the culture in an inner-city housing project into an area he was warned to avoid in his graduate school orientation sessions. While assisting a professor with a research survey at the University of Chicago, Venkatesh was introduced to the Lake Park projects. Venkatesh quickly learned that the people living in the projects had no interest in responding to a survey. He also learned that he had “no idea how to interview anyone” (p. 5). However, an unplanned twist of events led to a connection with J. T., a leader in the Black Kings gang. That connection grew into a respect and friendship. Under the protection of J. T., Venkatesh spent nearly a decade living among the residents of the Robert Taylor Homes, one of the largest high-rise housing projects in the U.S. at the time. He witnessed life from inside the projects, and through observing the Black Kings, a prominent gang that sold crack cocaine, he discovered the complexities of the gang hierarchy. He began to see more in the projects than graffiti on the walls and stairwells that reeked of urine. His eyes were opened to the people in those buildings and the lives that they led.

J. T. had grown up in Robert Taylor and left to attend college on an athletic scholarship. He later began working a sales job in downtown Chicago. After two years in the “mainstream,” J. T. grew frustrated with White people who possessed lesser skills than him receiving promotions ahead of him, and he returned to the projects and the gang (p. 29). J. T. explained to Venkatesh that he hoped to rise in the leadership of the gang and described a structure not so distant from that of other businesses in corporate America. He was working to make enough money to afford a better life, to rent apartments for the mothers of his children, and to buy his own mother a house. Until he made enough to buy that house, Ms. Mae, J. T.’s mother, was living in an apartment in the Robert Taylor community. She willingly opened her home to Venkatesh, providing him with meals and space to write. Unless she was at church, Ms. Mae always wore an apron, and as she heaped food onto his plate, she freely shared her thoughts with Venkatesh. “We live in community, understand? Not the projects—I hate that word. We live in a community. We need a helping hand now and then, but who doesn’t?” (p. 43)

Venkatesh would regularly follow J. T. on his rounds through the buildings. High school-aged kids would walk behind them serving as foot soldiers to J. T. Starting in the poorly ventilated stairwells, they would make their way through the buildings. As they passed Ms. Easley wearing her blue Tenant Patrol jacket, J.T. got an update on the elderly residents and slipped her a few bills for the children of the building. He explained to Venkatesh that the Tenant Patrol ran after-school parties for the kids and purchased school supplies for them. They played a role in ensuring that the children, women, and elderly remained safe and were provided for. As they continued on their rounds, they encountered a man lying in a pool

of vomit, suffering from a bad drug trip. J. T. had a few of his men take him to the clinic to at least get him out of the building. They passed squatters, prostitutes, and crack addicts on their survey of the building. On these rounds, J. T. would:

... deal with the various people who hung out in the lobbies, stairwells, galleries, parking lots, and playgrounds. He warned a prostitute not to hustle out in the open. He told a man selling sneakers—they looked like counterfeit Nikes—to move away from the lobby where J. T.'s gang members were selling drugs. J. T. often forbade homeless men from hanging out in the playground, especially if they were drinking. (p. 58)

Venkatesh takes the reader on the journey with him. Each page reveals a new level of complexity and shows that things are not always what they appear to be. There are incredible alliances, support structures, and intricacies involved with life in the projects. Residents of these buildings develop methods for living in a void that the government could not or would not fill. What an outsider would deem as corruption spreads so widely through the community that it leaves nothing untouched. The author relays that the local businesses, government, churches, and police and other emergency services are all involved in these seemingly secret systems and illegal activities.

While many people understand, or at a minimum recognize, the destruction that gangs bring into a community, they rarely notice the support and structure that gangs provide. For example, monies earned from illegal activities are used to support programming for the local children. As Venkatesh established connections with people in the community, more doors were opened for him. He interviewed pimps, prostitutes, and hustlers.

Many women did find legal methods to supplement their little or no income and provide care for their families. Some sold meals out of their houses, told horoscopes and psychic readings, or styled hair to bring income to their families. Many women worked together to develop an exchange of services. If one had a car, she might exchange driving for meals. Some of these networks even developed and “maintained a fixed formula of exchange: If you cook my family five meals, I’ll take care of your kids for two days” (p. 197). Venkatesh opens up this world in the middle of Chicago that is often ignored. With this unique perspective, readers find themselves connected to the individuals (real people with changed names) and experience the frustration of learning that the Clinton administration moved to demolish the Robert Taylor Homes.

For professionals working with new student populations and first-year reading programs, choosing a book that will appeal to a broad population and generate meaningful conversations can be challenging. In *Gang Leader for a Day*, there will be no shortage of meaningful conversations. However, this book is not likely the best selection for a new student reading program or for a campus-wide book club. While it is an informative and engaging read, the sensitive issues that are presented in the book are not suited for the broad discussion that occurs among new students. Nor does it specifically target current issues surrounding transition.

While this book may not be ideal for a new student reading program, it has the potential to be very successful with more specific populations or groups. It could certainly be used in Freshman Interest Groups, in a partnership with faculty in fields such as sociology, American studies, humanities, anthropology, public policy, and women’s studies. In small groups, this book could cultivate a range of discussion. Those conversations need not be

limited to the actual issues of public policy and poverty that Venkatesh reveals in writing the book but can extend to exploring the hands-on nature of his research.

The book could also be used and highlighted in a diversity dialogue surrounding socio-economic status and cultural backgrounds. Discussion on ethics could emerge when looking at whether an illegal activity could be “right” if it benefits the community or whether the illegal activity really and truly benefits the community. Students could dissect the accuracy or inaccuracy of Venkatesh’s representation of the Robert Taylor Homes and of the Black Kings. Opinions could be formed and shared on whether the information that Venkatesh gathered and the conclusions that he drew are fair. Asking whether he sought to answer all questions or whether more research is to be done could be a motivating and inspiring factor for a budding sociologist.

Those who are intrigued enough to read this book are encouraged to consider that many of the young adults living in projects and similar environments do go on to attend college. Discussions with colleagues surrounding transition and retention would be enhanced when considering the perspectives revealed in *Gang Leader for a Day*. While there is some current debate to the accuracy of Venkatesh’s portrayal of life in the projects, it does provide an interesting and fresh perspective.