

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SUDHIR VENKATESH, *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008, xiv + 290 p., index.

In this book, Sudhir Venkatesh documents his experiences collecting qualitative data for his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago in the 1990s. His work may sound familiar to those who have read the chapter “Why Do Drug Dealers Still Live with their Moms?” in Levitt and Dubner’s book *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, which features detailed notes about the economic transactions of the drug-dealing gang that Venkatesh studied. Venkatesh has collected very detailed, rich data of one high-rise, part of the Robert Taylor Homes, home to tens of thousands of poor, mostly unemployed African Americans. The Chicago housing projects were demolished in 2007.

A self-described “rogue” sociologist, Venkatesh discusses his six years of Ph.D. data collection as a student under William Julius Wilson at the University of Chicago in the early 1990s. *Gang Leader for a Day* includes eight detailed, gritty chapters of his experiences and encounters with a vivid assortment of characters, including “Black Knights” gang members, hustlers, prostitutes, police, key informants and a multitude of kind souls who consistently provide him with information, advice, protection, hot meals and a place to store his field notes.

Venkatesh chronicles his risky, naive entry into the field where he walks into a housing project and is scrutinized (is he Mexican or Indian?) by the gang members he sets out to study. Venkatesh’s initial and primary informant is a prominent college-educated gang leader, J.T., who befriends Venkatesh. Calling Venkatesh “Mr. Professor,” J.T. believes that he will write his biography. To that end, he offers Venkatesh virtually unlimited access to his world as gang leader. Venkatesh soon realizes the limitations of being closely allied, or perceived as closely allied with the gang leader, and sets out to broaden his contacts in the housing project. What follows is a nuanced examination of the social organization and underground economy of life among the urban poor, touching on local Chicago politics, relations with police, the Chicago Housing Authority, social workers and other bodies. True to the book’s title, he does run the gang for one day, making routine, mundane decisions on behalf of J.T., and learning much about the delicacies of wielding power as a drug lord. Venkatesh broadens his research focus beyond J.T. to include powerful female members of the community, in an attempt to learn about the role of female household

leaders, and tenant leaders. Venkatesh presents a very readable ethnography of his adventures, offering a richly detailed exploration of life in a Chicago housing project in the 1990s.

This book is a somewhat pedestrian, popular account of academic research, rather than an academic discussion of the subject matter. *Gang Leader for a Day* is reconstructed based mainly on Venkatesh's field notes, but also from memory. It is aimed at a general, popular audience. Jargon-free, it reads like a novel or autobiography; I was able to read much of the book's 290 pages in one sitting. References to sociological or academic terms (i.e., the Likert scale) are minimal. While Venkatesh has unabashedly identified himself as a sociologist in the book's title, and sociology is woven throughout, this book is clearly aimed at a general reading audience, not academics. It is "sociology-lite." Nevertheless, it should not be relegated to the category of suitable only for Oprah's Book Club. It would be a helpful resource for several academic audiences. Peppered with profanity, Venkatesh recreates the raw language of the crack dealers he studied, providing an easy read for undergraduates.

*Gang Leader for a Day* would fit in nicely as a text in a number of undergraduate courses. The book's main focus is on race, as it examines the day-to-day struggles of the virtually all African-American residents in a poor housing project. However, there is much in the book that could be mined for courses in deviance, race/ethnicity, inequality, research methods, sociology of organizations, and to a lesser extent, gender. Issues of class, race and identity also surface, as Venkatesh (the child of middle-class South Asian immigrants) discusses his role as a "brown man" Southern Californian, and how his experiences shape his academic vantage point.

For those who are searching for an interesting, detailed ethnography to analyze in an undergraduate research methods class, *Gang Leader for a Day* is an excellent choice. Venkatesh sets up a clearly delineated debate on the qualitative-quantitative divide, coming down squarely on the qualitative side, learning early that the question "How does it feel to be Black and poor?" is not easily answered using a Likert scale. He deftly highlights issues of ethics, identity, race/class/gender dynamics in data collection, the realities of ethnographic work, and the value and use of qualitative versus quantitative methods of collecting data. *Gang Leader for a Day* throws into sharp relief the thorny issues of conducting ethical research. For instance, Venkatesh struggles with maintaining allegiances with powerful community members, while trying to forge close ties with less powerful residents. Venkatesh gives refreshingly honest, clear examples of his missteps. For instance, he focuses the target of his research on the underground economy of three high-rise buildings within the gang's territory, and collects detailed information from residents about how much money they make, expenses they incur and so forth. Venkatesh talks with pimps and prostitutes, as well as those who sold food or offered child care in their apartments, styled hair, prepared taxes, offered psychic fortune telling, performed carpentry, fixed cars, collected scrap metal, as well as a host of other off-the-books businesses. He unwittingly betrays the

confidences of dozens of interviewees and alienates himself from the general community when he discusses the details of their underground earnings with the gang leader and a tenant leader who both increase their “taxing” of these underground businesses, based on Venkatesh’s data. *Gang Leader for a Day* richly details many ethical grey areas, as Venkatesh navigates his way through the vagaries of data collection over the course of six years. Perhaps the most compelling ethical question is how Venkatesh works with his primary source of data, gang leader J.T. The nuanced relationship between the two men evolves over the course of the research, with Venkatesh variously realizing his dependence on J.T., and with J.T. more or less overtly seeking to gain advantage through Venkatesh, such as increasing his legitimacy in the eyes of others by having an observer from the university document his decision-making. Venkatesh struggles with his role as a researcher, never certain how much to reveal to J.T., striving to balance a desire to gain access to more data through J.T., and feeling an obligation to be as honest as possible with him, and accepting that honest revelations may compromise his ability to collect data.

This book does hold value in its ability to draw undergraduates in; its rich, detailed example of ethnographic work may be a springboard for instructors to discuss the thorny realities of data collection or substantive issues having to do with race and social class. However, the reader is left with the sense that much of what Venkatesh has left on the cutting room floor may be of use and interest to sociologists themselves. For example, Venkatesh mentions in passing his professors’ attempts to redirect his research focus from an in-depth study of J.T., the charismatic leader of the crack gang, to a focus on broader sociological issues such as entrenched poverty, domestic violence, and relations between residents and government bodies. If you are interested in the student-supervisor-academic community dynamic, and the tension between how academics approach and negotiate research questions, and more to the point, how the focus of field studies may shift over time, there is little here for you. However, what Venkatesh has included, namely his ethical struggles about how many details of his work to reveal to his supervisor and classmates, is compelling, and would be a starting point for debates in graduate classes. Perhaps due to space restrictions, or predictions of the general reading public’s interest in learning about the most academic side of his research, Venkatesh has included little of it. Yet, Venkatesh’s more academic publications and journal articles are easily available for those who wish to delve more deeply into the issues he introduces in *Gang Leader for a Day*.

Despite its relative lack of deep sociological analysis, this book is squarely located as a sociological work. From his academic roots at the University of Chicago, Venkatesh provides a vivid, gritty account of life in a notorious Chicago housing project. His book interweaves issues of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, crime, deviance, and the study of organizations. Moreover, his perspective on the discipline is a compelling one; a self-described “rogue” sociologist, Venkatesh struggles with his role and rightful place as a sociologist throughout the book. The book as it stands serves as a rich, appealing introduction to sociological issues of race, social

class, crime, organizations and research methods, rather than an in-depth analysis or a final word on these subjects.

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