Book Review

Gang Leader for a Day, Sudhir Venkatesh (Penguin Publishing Group, 12/30/08)

A. Overview

Author, Sudhir Venkatesh, is a Sociologist who attended graduate school at the University of Chicago. One of his assignments while attending the University of Chicago was to conduct a survey that was targeted towards young blacks in the neighborhoods of Chicago.

Venkatesh began by trying to find people to talk to. After awhile of walking around, he encountered a group of young black men. They started to interrogate him. Asking him who had sent him, or what gang he was in. Confused, Venkatesh began to explain why he was there. Then one of them took Venkatesh’s clipboard and began to read one of the questions that Venkatesh was supposed to ask them. One member read aloud, “How does it feel to be black and poor?” They all began to laugh and then quickly stopped. A middle aged man began to approach them. This man was known to the group as J.T. J.T. began to ask Venkatesh the same questions the others did. Venkatesh replied with the same answers and J.T. became intrigued.

J.T., who Venkatesh discovers runs a subgroup of a larger Chicago gang called the Black Kings, tells Venkatesh that he can only learn about their lives if he returns the next day. J.T. then let Venkatesh leave. On the walk home Venkatesh was trying to figure out what had just happened. After thinking about it for a while, fearless Venkatesh decides that he will go back
the next day. He returns the next day and J.T. can not believe it. They talk for a while and then
Venkatesh asks J.T. if he could follow him around. J.T. agrees and the observing begins.

Venkatesh follows J.T. throughout the whole book which consisted of multiple years. The main criminological aspect being analyzed in this book is the way sociological factors affect people to commit crime.

**B. Purpose**

The main purpose of Venkatesh writing this book is to help people get a better understanding of the life of crime. He wants to give the public a better perspective of what is really going on. How do criminals live? How do they act in their community? Why do they do certain things that may seem unethical to us, but is a way of survival to them? He answers all of these questions throughout the book and it truly made me look at things in a different way.

Venkatesh’s premises are very clear. What began as conducting interviews for survey questions, transformed into new relationships and understandings of why certain people might do something in a certain way. Constantly in the book, Venkatesh says that he would have not expected one thing to work like that or thought that things were way different than they actually were. For example, J.T.’s gang and the people that lived in the neighborhood were all a community. If someone needed something they would lend it to them. If they had people over they would feed them. Most of all they would have community gatherings a couple times a month. Whether it be a basketball tournament, barbeque, or a birthday party. Venkatesh felt as if he was part of the community. He wanted to show people that not all of the stereotypes are true and that sometimes the media might portray things that are not true.
Venkatesh supports this by giving multiple examples in the book of what he has experienced. Everytime that Venkatesh would hangout with J.T. he would write down whatever he saw.

C. Criminological relevance

This book contains many criminological ideas and theories that we have talked about in class. One theory that comes to mind right away after reading this book is Social Disorganization Theory. Which is very ironic considering that it started in Chicago. Throughout the whole book Venkatesh describes most things as “very run down” or “dull and dreary”. This shows that there is a lack of residential stability. Another sign was the socioeconomic status that the neighborhood consisted of.

I think the main theory depicted in this book is Subcultural Theory, considering the whole book is about the author hanging out with a gang. A great amount of the book is based off of one gang and how they are their own community or their own “subculture”.

D. Major conclusions

The conclusion in this book is a little different. Towards the end of the book, the Robert Taylor Homes, the neighborhood that Venkatesh spent most of his time and where J.T. lived, were planning on getting demolished by the City of Chicago. This meant that J.T. had to find somewhere else to live and find new work.

The book ends with Venkatesh and J.T. sitting on the hood of J.T.’s car looking at what used to be the Robert Taylor Homes. By this time J.T. and Venkatesh had a strong relationship. Within a few years of the homes getting destroyed J.T. grew tired of running a gang. He decided that he would manage his cousin’s dry-cleaning business, and start up a barbershop.
I know this is not what you were looking for in the conclusion, but Venkatesh does not really conclude about any of the sociological factors that he has observed. He kind of just explained what has happened to J.T. after the demolition. I liked how the book ended, but for this specific assignment the conclusion did not help me define what has happened.

E. Implications

The main problem throughout the book was gang involvement. There were many gang prevention programs discussed throughout the book. The problem with these programs was that it was run by the gangs. In these programs they would teach these kids how to behave. Meaning how to treat women with respect and do not do business while kids are around. “Doing business” was referred to as selling drugs. Venkatesh was quite confused by this prevention program. He wishes that they actually prevented kids from joining gangs. There were other gang prevention programs discussed in the book that actually prevented kids from joining gangs.

Venkatesh suggested that there should be more gang prevention programs in big urban cities such as Chicago. I agree with his implication here. If you can prevent it you will not have to worry about it developing into something bigger.

F. Evaluation

I believe that this book has some limitations. I think that it is a little biased. At the beginning of the book J.T. believes that Venkatesh is writing a biography about him so J.T. could be lying to make him and his gang look better. I also believe that J.T. influenced some of the community members to be nice to Venkatesh and to tell him mostly good things. This is a limitation, but it is not confirmed.
I really enjoyed reading this book. This book gave me a whole different perspective of what other people might be going through. I learned a lot about gangs and how they work. It is a lot more than a bunch of people killing each other and selling drugs. It is a community inside of a community. This book was very well written and is easy to understand. I think that by reading this book and completing this review I really got a better understanding of how theories play a role in today’s society.