

Gang Leader For a Day Study Guide

Gang Leader For a Day by Sudhir Venkatesh

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Summary

Sudhir Venkatesh was of East Indian heritage and lived and was educated in an upper-middle class neighborhood in southern California. After finishing college, he landed at the University of Chicago in 1989 where he had been accepted as a graduate student in sociology. He worked under William Julian Wilson who was one of the top sociology professors and the foremost African American in the field. There were long-accepted standards and methodology that was utilized in researching sociological issues for graduate dissertations. Sudhir was an idealist and a bit naïve compelling him to discard the conventional ways in which scholarly research was conducted. Sudhir chose race and poverty as the main topics of his dissertation. And he had a great idea how to find out what really goes on in the impoverished neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side. Sudhir decided to infiltrate himself into the projects so that he could study first-hand the operation and anatomy of drug-dealing gangs.

Needless to say, Sudhir did not share fully his plans with Professor Wilson and the other professors and researchers in the Sociology Department because he knew they would not endorse this unconventional approach. Sudhir was a very bright young man and was savvy enough to know that what he was about to embark upon would be wrought with danger and that he literally might not escape with his life. On his very first day in a project, he was mistaken as a spy for a rival Hispanic gang because he was thought to be Mexican.

Sudhir didn't hightail it out of the projects. For one thing, they wouldn't let him go and for another, he didn't want to go. Even though he'd been beaten and threatened with worse, he was determined to learn from the viewpoint of the poor black gang member what life was like. When J.T. the gang leader of the project that Sudhir had chosen for his venture met him there was an immediate familiarity between the two men from very different worlds. Sudhir explained his purpose for coming to the project. He was gathering data for his university project and that he someday wanted his work to make life better for the poor black in Chicago. J.T. ordered his men that it was hands off with Sudhir and that he'd be back the next night.

Sudhir spent a total of six years in his close relationship with J.T. and the people of the Robert Taylor Housing project. Although Sudhir was exposed to a wealth of inside information, there were secret parts of the gang's activity that J.T. would not let him in on. His professors ultimately learned the risk that Sudhir had been taken and advised him to stop visiting the project – it was dangerous and he could be complicit in crimes that he witnessed but failed to report. But Sudhir was hooked. He cared about the men and women of the projects. He developed deep feelings for them and his hope that his work would one day help them never dissipated.



ONE – How Does It Feel to Be Black and Poor?

Summary

During Sudhir Venkatesh's first week as a grad student at the University of Chicago in 1989, the students were advised of the safe areas around the school and in Hyde Park. He lived on the edge of the park in student housing. He often took long walks to get to know the city. As a student of sociology there was much to take in on his walks including the ethnic divisions. He was drawn to the Rogers Park area where there was a congregation of Indians and Pakistanis. He was most interested in the poor black areas.

Sudhir spent time in the black areas but never felt threatened or noticed any crime. The people in the area were curious about him. Life on these streets did not match the remote, clinical discussions about them led by his professors. It seemed that researchers preferred not to interact with these people in the development of their answers. Sudhir preferred the approach that required inactivity with ethnic groups or cultures being studied as opposed to the hands-off, distant statistical approach.

Sudhir contacted Professor William Julius Wilson, the nation's foremost scholar on race and poverty. Wilson was working to gain a better understanding the impacted on those who were born and raised in impoverished conditions. He provided Sudhir with some historic data and questionnaires that had been used in the past. Sudhir recognized that he would have to learn how to interview people.

In the day time, Sudhir saw nothing wrong with the Washington Park area although it was considered an unsafe area by the university. Sudhir had read about the poor black in Chicago and the Black Panther Party's activity there when he attended UC San Diego. But most of what he knew about Chicago was from news articles and the movies. Older activists like Leonard Combs, also known as "Old Time," believed that whites and blacks could never live in harmony. Sudhir contacted some of these activists to learn why they believed as they did. He gathered that because of steadfast beliefs on both sides that there was little hope for social progress of any significance. He saw the stark difference between how the reality of these activists and how sociologists perceived it to be. The older timers suggested that Sudhir interview young black men.

Sudhir found a tract of poor black families and set out to meet some of the young men who lived there. He entered a many-storied housing project to the shrieks and screams coming from upper floors. He was told by a young black man that no one lived there and that there was no one to interview. He learned later that he had encountered a gang member who generally rebuffed all visitors. They didn't want anyone of authority to interrupt their drug operations. As he walked away, he saw several young black men looking at him from upper floor windows. He had left the lobby but decided to walk up the stairs. He was met by angry black men who demanded to know what he was doing



there. They didn't believe he was there just to ask survey questions. One young man had a gun that he frequently pointed at Sudhir; another had a large knife. They thought he was Mexican and accused him of being from a rival gang. He was patted down and told to ask his questions. The guys didn't like the first question: "How does it feel to be black and poor?" They blatantly discussed killing Sudhir right in front of him.

A stocky man named J.T. was obviously the leader of the gang. He would become an important part of Sudhir's work for a long time to come. Sudhir explained to J.T. that he was trying to complete a survey that would make life better for young black men. J.T. took the questionnaire and scanned over it. He told Sudhir that he wouldn't learn much with the survey. Sudhir sat around with the young men but he couldn't talk. He sensed that he should not try to leave. From the conversation between the gang members, he learned that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) was building down the Lake Park projects to build condos and townhouses. Some residents of the projects were staying as squatters with the help of the gang that was pirating electricity for them. It wasn't all out of the goodness of their heart; tearing down the project would take away one of their drug-trafficking drops. He also learned that they were members of a large gang called the Black Kings. The men bragged about sexual conquests, power and money.

J.T. told him that he shouldn't be in the projects. It wasn't safe and he could get hurt. J.T. had taken some sociology classes in college. The revelation surprised Sudhir but he decided not to pursue the topic for the time being. The men started talking about a planned fight with a Mexican gang. Sudhir stayed the night with the men in the housing project stairwell. They drank beer, which they shared with him, and were visited by new people several times. Finally at sunrise, J.T. told Sudhir to go back where he came from. He told Sudhir if he wanted to find out about them he should just hang with them – not ask the silly survey questions. Walking back to his apartment, Sudhir had more questions than answers.

Sudhir returned to the project the next day. He brought six-pack and threw one to J.T. reminding him that he said he should hang out with them. That afternoon the guys talked a lot about mag wheels. They handed out crack to a couple of customers. J.T. was curious about Sudhir's work wondering why he didn't study his own people. Sudhir played a few games of handball with them. He steered away from asking many meaningful questions. Other than J.T., the guys were still suspicious of him. J.T. announced the guys had to leave but invited Sudhir back the next week to talk.

Analysis

In this first chapter, the reader is introduced to Sudhir Venkatesh who was a grad student at Chicago University who was working on his dissertation in sociology. He had decided to take a unique pathway in conducting research for his work. Although he did not share his unique approach with his professors because they would disapprove, he believed that his method would produce the best results.



Sudhir was focusing his dissertation on race and poverty. He felt that there was no better place to find out about both than in the notorious housing projects of the South Side of Chicago. The first time he stopped by a housing project, gang members thought he was a spy from a rival Mexican gang and beat him up.

Surprisingly, Sudhir was able to make a connection with J.T. the leader of the Black Kings gang at the housing project. There was something that the two men felt about one another almost immediately. Sudhir believed that J.T. would tell him everything he could tell him about his gang's activity and J.T. believed that Sudhir would write his biography and make him famous. J.T. called off his men and invited Sudhir back the next day.

Vocabulary

palpable, enclave, animosity, coalesced, sabbatical, intricacies, fatalism, reconnaissance, entourage, glean



TWO – First Days on Federal Street

Summary

Sudhir began hanging out with J.T. on a regular basis. They'd often cruise around the South Side as they talked. J.T. filled Sudhir in on his life growing up on the South Side and his admiration for black Chicago gangs. They ate at soul food restaurants which J.T. always paid for. Sudhir explained to J.T. that some sociologists believed in a culture of poverty in which poor blacks didn't work because they didn't value employment and that this attitude was passed down to subsequent generations. J.T. blamed low minimum wage for the reluctance that black men had in taking jobs. J.T.'s gang numbered in the 200s; he knew what each man made in the jobs they held. J.T. explained how he figured what good deals were in their drug operation. Sudhir would write notes after he got home; he didn't want to make J.T. nervous by writing them while they met. J.T. would contact Sudhir when he wanted to meet with him.

J.T. took Sudhir to the Robert Taylor Homes project after they had hung out for together for eight months. It was the biggest housing project in the U.S. J.T. told Sudhir to keep his mouth shut there. On the way there, J.T. kept asking if the cops were following them. Sudhir had been reluctant to admit to himself that he was hanging around with a drug-dealer, a criminal. Sudhir followed J.T. into the project. Young men immediately came to meet him. Sudhir followed J.T. and a man named Curly to an upper apartment. As they talked in cryptic exchanges negotiating something, another gang member kept them posted on what cops were in the area.

J.T. had grown up in Robert Taylor and would be returning there with the demolition of Lake Park. He would become the new leader of three buildings known collectively as Taylor "A" since Curly wasn't effective. He was looking forward to increasing his earnings at Taylor – he could make as much as \$100,000 a year. A good portion of their business was drug business with white people. He explained the Black King's hierarchy. Those above him were called lieutenants and captains with the board of directors above them. Sudhir feared that J.T. may want to end their relationship when he took on his new position. But J.T. had no intention of ending their meetings. He craved the attention that Sudhir gave him and Sudhir was someone who took J.T. seriously. But they would be on hiatus while J.T. was making the transition.

Sudhir learned that Robert Taylor was the most dangerous and crime-ridden project and that even law-enforcement felt it was too dangerous to patrol. Sudhir hoped that he could change the public image of the people of the projects. He wanted to introduce J.T. to Wilson one day but didn't know how to approach it. He shared only minor details of his relationship with Wilson and his group of sociologists and researchers.

J.T. contacted Sudhir after he moved in with his mother at Robert Taylor. His mother, Ms. Mae, greeted Sudhir warmly; they formed a bond immediately. J.T. explained that there was a feeling of community among the different groups that the project had been



separated into usually by gang affiliation. They had basketball tournaments and other organized recreational events. The majority of gangs interacted peacefully with each other. Miss Mae always stressed that they lived in a community not the projects. Miss Mae took in a lot of “strays” and allowed them to stay until they got on their feet. Sudhir began to have strong emotional ties with J.T. and Miss Mae. In short order, J.T had gotten control over three large buildings which he patrolled to make sure no one was stirring up trouble that would bring the police and interrupt his drug trade.

As Sudhir became more confident of his relationship with J.T., he began writing his notes at Miss Mae’s. Miss Mae and her guests expressed their feelings about Chicago politics, the housing authority and life in the projects. Sudhir steered away from questions of a personal nature. The people were nothing like the poor people he read about in sociological studies which usually portrayed them as dupes with no awareness of their status. He was grateful to them for the help they gave him.

Clarisse worked as a prostitute in one of the buildings. She had a ready smile and looked much older than her age which was mid-thirties. She was J.T.’s cousin and admitted to being the black sheep in the family. She pointed out other women who were also prostitutes who worked the building. When she came to a family gathering she was not to hustled anyone per J.T. Although J.T. didn’t control the prostitutes, they were each obligated to pay him a flat fee. Sudhir realized that J.T. made money on every element of the project. J.T. watched all people and movements so that nothing went awry and brought the cops. He kept everyone in line. The Black Kings patrolled Robert Taylor and its parking lots and lobbies more thoroughly than the cops did. J.T. and C-Note had a conflict one day when J.T. had planned a basketball game and party when C-Note had set up a car repair shop. J.T. told him to move his stuff but C-Note angrily refused. C-Note was dragged away and beaten and kicked by J.T. and his men. J.T. didn’t know that Sudhir was looking on and appeared to be miffed or perhaps even embarrassed.

Sudhir began to feel uncomfortable and ashamed that he might witness more beatings or worse. Did his research that he felt important justify his standing by and immobilized by violence? He began to tell his family, associates and friends less and less about the world he visited so frequently. He recognized that he learned a lot about the gang but that there was also a lot he did not have access to and did not witness. The C-Note beating made it clear that J.T. enforced his rules.

Analysis

This chapter describes the early days of the unusual relationship between college grad student Sudhir Venkatesh and Black Kings gang leader J.T. Sudhir was always open and honest with J.T. because he, of course, had nothing to hide. It wasn’t a balanced relationship that they shared; it was tilted on the side of J.T. who had much to hide from Sudhir. Although J.T. began to trust that Sudhir was just writing a paper – in fact, he assumed Sudhir was writing his biography – and that he would not use what he learned against J.T. or his gang by betraying them to the police.



J.T. shows his philosophical side on these pages. He opines about why young black men are attracted to gangs. His insight is duly noted by an eager Sudhir. Why should a young black boy stay in school when all he has to look forward to is a menial low-paying job, J.T. asked Sudhir rhetorically. A young black man can make unimagined sums of money dealing drugs. Of course, J.T. had gone through the same cycle himself. Sudhir was surprised yet pleased that J.T. had some college. He was a bright man who Sudhir felt was wasting his life but Sudhir was careful to keep such thoughts to himself; J.T.'s ego was easily bruised.

J.T. had children with several girlfriends, an area of his life that he did not let Sudhir into. Most of the time he lived with his mother, Miss Mae, at Robert Taylor. Miss Mae, sensing that Sudhir was a good influence on her son and the people of Robert Taylor, had lived in housing projects her entire life, a fact that deeply touched Sudhir. It made him realize the depth of poverty and hopelessness that these people who he had befriended and had come to know lived under.

Vocabulary

halcyon, dissertation, noxious, naiveté, denigrating, solace, euphemism, circumscribed

THREE – Someone to Watch Over Me

Summary

After the beating, C-Note's friends took him to the hospital. After he recuperated he eventually returned to Robert Taylor. Sudhir wondered how J.T. would react the next time he came to the project. He had stayed away for a week after the beating. Even though Sudhir was nervous about seeing him again, J.T. was nonchalant and behaved as he always did. They resumed their regular relationship but Sudhir could not get the image of old C-Note broken and beaten out of his mind. He felt ashamed that he hadn't followed his instincts and called the police.

Sudhir confronted J.T. about C-Note six months after the incident when another squatter named Brass was beaten by his men. Brass had a convulsion and passed out. J.T. could see that Sudhir was disturbed. He told him it was just the way it was around there. Sudhir was visibly shaken and felt like throwing up. Sudhir blurted out that Brass owed them money but C-Note had been beaten up for nothing. J.T. responded that he had challenged his authority. Sudhir had noticed many times that J.T. was paranoid about someone – even his own soldiers – dethroning him.

By 1990, Sudhir had been hanging out with J.T. about a year. It was the peak of the crack epidemic in Chicago. The gangs, including the Black Kings, were making tons of money. Policy makers, scholars and liberal activists had no solutions for the problems. No one could convince these men to give up the huge amounts of money they were making for a nowhere, minimum wage job. J.T. and other gang members required their young men to attend community meetings and help in voter-registration drives. Their motives weren't completely pure. By building up good relations with community leaders they were less likely to have the cops called in on them.

Sudhir observed the young men canvassing the building to sign people up to vote. He began attending rallies in high schools and community centers to educate the young on voting. J.T. was modeling his leadership on the gang leaders of the 1960s and 1970s who made great strides in furthering in the fight for civil rights. He believed that the gang would be strengthened if it emerged as a mainstream entity and less likely to be reported for their drug dealing. He contributed money to community causes and had his men attending political rallies.

Sudhir was able to explore the projects on his own but usually stayed in the safety net that the gang provided him which was in the vicinity of the three buildings that J.T. personally controlled. He got to know more about the gang and about J.T. by talking to people like Clarisse and C-Note and two brothers, Kris and Michael Johnson, who repaired cars for the community. The brothers had to pay T-Bone, an older gang member, fifteen percent of their earnings to settle disputes. Kris and Michael were gang members when they were younger making their relationship with the Black Kings complicated -- gang members were almost like their extended family.



J.T. was coming to prominence and gaining attention from the higher-ups. He was invited to a regional gang meeting downstate signaling his rise. Sudhir thought he'd have more opportunity to talk to the people without J.T. around but the people connected him with the gang and weren't interested in talking to him on an in-depth level. One exception was Ms. Bailey, the building president, who had an office in her apartment. She converted three rundown apartments in Taylor A, the section J.T. ruled over, to playrooms for the kids. She envied Taylor B, run by a man named Autry, that had a large Boys & Girls club with a library and recreational facilities. Taylor B was controlled by a rival gang called the Disciples.

Miss Bailey asked Sudhir to visit Taylor B hoping he'd be inspired to help get a Boys & Girls Club established in Taylor A. Sudhir became a fixture at Taylor B's Boys & Girls Club. He read books to the children and then discussed them afterwards. In return, Autry filled Sudhir in on how residents viewed the gangs that controlled them.

Gang members, including J.T., also attended the meeting because Autry needed their buy-in figuratively and literally. J.T. was a little taken aback - even jealous - that Sudhir had a close relationship with Autry. As Autry encouraged Sudhir to join the meeting, J.T. warned him that their relationship was finished if he went in since he hadn't cleared it with him first. Sudhir was not about to jeopardize his long-standing relationship with J.T. and deferred to him. Later, Sudhir explained that it was Ms. Bailey who had asked him to meet Autry. Sudhir reiterated his purpose to J.T. - he wanted to understand how the organization works and how the residents work with him. To smooth things over, Sudhir stopped his visits to Taylor B.

A young boy and girl in Taylor were shot in a drive-by gang shooting. The girl died. J.T.'s gang had been the target and the Disciples the shooters. An all-out gang war was feared. Parents kept their kids inside; local churches delivered food to people too afraid to walk to the store. Ms. Bailey suggested Sudhir attend a meeting at the Boys & Girls Club where the police would be addressing parents and building leaders. The meeting was chaotic with residents shouting at the cops who were ineffective in calming them with their assurances that they were actively working to dismantle the gangs.

Autry held a meeting with two cops he was friendly with after the meeting which Sudhir attended. Also in the room was J.T. and some of his men and across from them were Disciple gang members. Ms. Bailey told J.T. and Mayne, the Disciple leader, to have their soldiers leave. Pastor Wilkins presided over the meeting and served as a mediator between the two warring gangs. J.T. wanted reparations because the shooting had scared off his customers. Sudhir couldn't believe that this conversation was being held in front of a pastor and the police. They compromised and it was agreed that J.T. would get to sell his ware in the park exclusively for a week. They agreed to a truce.

Analysis

The beating of one of the hustlers who made his money in the parking lot of Robert Taylor was badly beaten by the Black Kings. Sudhir was present and was traumatized



by the incident because he knew the man. C-Note was a regular at Robert Taylor, someone who was friendly and talked openly with Sudhir. It was the first time Sudhir had witnessed the violence that is wrought in the world of gangs and drugs. It was a reality check for Sudhir who stayed away for a while after the beating.

But Sudhir was on a mission to help these poor people who the world had forgotten. He returned, but it took six months and another violent incident before Sudhir worked up the nerve to confront J.T. about C-Note's beating. J.T.'s response was that it was just the way it was there. It was the law of the jungle. C-Note had gotten out of line which could not be excused, not even once. Sudhir confronted another person he was disappointed in – himself. He had observed the assault on C-Note and had done nothing. He had not tried to help him and he had not called the police. He didn't like being in that position but, as J.T. told him, that was just the way it was – for Sudhir, too. He was an auxiliary part of a violent crime. They expected him to be loyal to the gang and maintain his silence when he saw things he didn't like.

J.T. and other gang leaders truly believed that they were helping their community. The drugs were bringing revenue and jobs into the community's economy. And J.T. required his young soldiers to attend community meetings and participate in voter-registration drives. J.T. instinctively knew that there was a right way but it was complicated and he had taken a different path.

Vocabulary

benign, blatantly, paranoia, altruistic, nostalgic, consummate, odyssey, refuge, recalcitrant, platitudes



FOUR – Gang Leader for a Day

Summary

Sudhir told his professors about his dissertation topic. They were not as thrilled as he was about the topic – an in-depth study of the Black Kings crack gang and its leader, J.T. They believed he should focus on the tenants of Robert Taylor. Bill Wilson wanted to have a wider perspective of everyday life in the projects. He was also worried about Sudhir's safety. A few of the professors were ethnographers and feared that he was getting too emotionally involved with J.T.

J.T. remained Sudhir's best contact at the project. He had to be careful not to insult him by taking the focus off of him. J.T. viewed himself as a philanthropist as much as a gang leader. His job of keeping everything running smoothly in his buildings was a difficult one – a CEO with monumental responsibilities. He justified his drug operation by using some of the money to help others and to elevate the community. J.T. could be very convincing even though his argument was groundless. Sudhir was most curious about what J.T. did when Sudhir wasn't around. Sudhir tried to broach the subject by suggesting that J.T.'s job didn't look all that difficult. J.T. said he if he thought it was so easy, he should try it. Sudhir said he could do it other than lead a war or wield a shotgun. J.T. suggested he try it for a day.

They met the next morning. Sudhir stressed that he would not kill anyone or sell drugs. J.T. told him there were other things he would not be allowed to do. He warned Sudhir not to embarrass him. Only J.T.'s top officers, Price and T-Bone, would know that Sudhir was leader for a day. Sudhir didn't think about his leading a criminal gang and didn't know about the reporting requirements of researchers who learned about criminal activity. J.T. told Sudhir about that Ms. Bailey needed some clean-up work done in her building. They had to keep her happy because they sold crack in her lobby. J.T. asked Sudhir how he was going to handle it. There were two groups that hadn't done clean up for six months. He had to choose between the two. The guys gave Sudhir the pros and cons of each group and he made his choice.

The gang was looking for a large hall so all 250 members could attend some meetings. Pastor Wilkins said they could meet once a week in the church. The guys ribbed Sudhir intimating that the Pastor was gay and that he'd have to meet with him alone. Sudhir took care of that by delegating the meeting to T-Bone. He'd have to come up with a price to offer the Pastor for the use of the church. They met with Johnny next, a former gang member who owned a convenience store and overcharged BKs even though they were protecting his store. The problem was he was T-Bone's uncle and was dangerous. They worked out a deal that he'd have to pay only \$200 for the protection, Johnny wouldn't overcharge them and the BKs would stop stealing from him.

Sudhir then was schooled on settling a dispute between two gang members, Billy and Otis. J.T. reminded Sudhir that the men had to fear him and that he had to mete out the



appropriate punishment after he decided who was at fault. The dispute was over money from crack sales, both claiming that the other owed him money. After hearing both sides of the argument, Sudhir sided with Billy believing that Otis stole the money from him. But Billy may have forgotten to pay an old debt. Since they both probably screwed up, they were offsetting penalties and no one should be punished. J.T. didn't agree and decided that Otis deserved a beating. Sudhir waited in the car but heard J.T.'s punches and Otis's groans. J.T. reminded Sudhir that a leader can never let a gang member get away with stealing.

They cruised around the South Side. J.T. had been given the additional responsibility of monitoring the territories of other BK gang leaders. The benchmark these factions were measured against was how much money they were bringing in. Nothing else mattered as much. There were reshuffling and realignment of these factions. There were even mergers and transfers of distribution rights between the gangs. They visited the "sales teams" that were staked out on street corners.

Sudhir saw J.T.'s leadership skills up close in his dealings with these men and the stats about sales and money they were required to provide him with. On the streets, he kept himself safe from the cops because he never carried guns or drugs. J.T. had hinted on occasion about a relationship he had with the cops but never elaborated. The street corner guys were arrested frequently which was a drag on revenue flow. J.T. paid generous settlements to the families of druggies killed "in the line of duty." Any lies or even suspicion of lies or behavior that caught the attention of law enforcement garnered a beating or other punishment.

J.T. had a wide ranging roster of informants who he relied on. J.T.'s senior officers distributed the crack but sometimes the street crews cooked a supply up themselves. They could cheat J.T. by diluting the crack and pocketing the extra revenue. This practice was a threat to J.T.'s authority which those who wanted to take over could use against him. They could also lose customers for diluted product. J.T. took Sudhir with him when he confronted one of the crew leaders who was diluting the crack. His punishment would be to sell the diluted crack, make no money for a week and confess to his team what he did.

When Sudhir's day as a gang leader was coming to an end he was surprised that it was very different than he had imagined. He learned that a gang leader's day was full of surprises, disappointments, disputes, unhappy customers, complex problems, decisions to be made and punishments and rewards to be meted out. Sudhir was exhausted at day's end. J.T. was running an underground government and economy.

Analysis

Sudhir's professors and fellows at the University of Chicago learn the depth of personal involvement that he has devoted to the gang. Not only has Sudhir placed himself in personal risk, Professor Wilson suggested that he broaden his perspective of everyday



life in the projects. There was concern among Sudhir's professors that he ran the risk of becoming overly involved with the gang members on an emotional level.

J.T. remained Sudhir's strongest relationship in the project. He gained a richer understanding of how J.T. viewed himself which was part of Sudhir's fundamental thesis – how the poor blacks and gang members viewed themselves within their environment. J.T. looked at himself as a manager, even a CEO with great burdens of responsibility. He had to keep his drug operation running smoothly and making money because the higher ups – his board of directors – looked at the numbers. He viewed himself as magnanimous because he used some of the drug money to help the community. It would be a distorted way of thinking to most but being entrenched in that life, J.T. and others like him saw life through the filter of his own reality.

The payoffs that were necessary to keep the building and its tenants satisfied at least to some agree came to light for Sudhir. He had come to understand the fragile economy of the impoverished people that he was studying. Everyone wanted a cut to provide protection, do favors, remain silent, provide a service. They were all desperate for money to keep their children fed and safe and for the crack that enabled them to blur their reality.

Vocabulary

dissertation, prevalence, adamant, charismatic, philanthropist, rhetoric, vanguard, brazenly, acrimony, surreptitiously, banal, capricious



FIVE – Ms. Bailey’s Neighborhood

Summary

Ms. Bailey saw and knew a lot about what was going on at Robert Taylor. Sometimes she made the rounds with J.T. but also met with cops and housing authority officials. He sensed that the residents both respected and feared her. Sudhir’s professors were trying to steer him away from J.T. and toward people like Ms. Bailey in his research work. Even scholars on race and poverty knew little of the female’s role in the community.

Ms. Bailey was building president of the Local Advisory Council. She wanted Sudhir to include people outside Robert Taylor particularly white people and others who determined how they lived. But she did not want her people to be seen as victims. She stressed the choices that face the poor people in Robert Taylor. Ms. Bailey organized a winter wear and food pick-up in her office for the building’s tenants. She had a tight control over who got what. When a drunken Clarisse came by, Ms. Bailey took her aside and told her to clean up or she wouldn’t get anything.

Ms. Bailey invited Sudhir to attend the building’s monthly tenant meeting. The turnout was small enough that she was able to hold it in her office. One man complained about the noise BK gang members were making late at night. She announced that Pride would be there the next week for a voter registration drive. One woman complained that J.T. and his gang and Ms. Bailey were the only people who benefited from any changes. Ms. Bailey defended herself and the gang pointing out that there had been no killings for six months. She also reminded the tenants that they all got things they needed through the system. She turned to J.T. and the gang to protect them and to help get the things that the people needed. One man asked why they just didn’t go to the police when trouble broke out. Sudhir knew that the main reason was because the gang paid off tenants to keep their silence. Ms. Bailey insisted that the place was getting better, getting cleaned up.

Sudhir realized how desperate people like Ms. Bailey, a building leader, was to praise a crack gang and rely on it for protection and to get what was needed. She also needed to cooperate with J.T. to maintain her powerful position. In a discussion with Sudhir after the meeting, Ms. Bailey would not comment on the accusations made against her. She only would say that it was more important to fix a problem than how the problem got fixed. Ms. Bailey’s friend and assistant, Catrina, told Sudhir that Ms. Bailey was amazing – she got things fixed and took care of the people.

The tenants began to trust Sudhir more and more. Ms. Bailey enjoyed his presence; perhaps she thought he’d write a biography of her. One day, Taneesha, a tall beautiful girl who was pursuing a career as a model had been badly beaten. An ambulance was called but everyone knew it would never show up. Ms. Bailey asked Sudhir to have the BKs in the lobby take Taneesha. Ms. Bailey was worried that a man called Bee-Bee



would flee the building. Sudhir was told to call J.T. as gang members covered the building to stop Bee-Bee from escaping. Blue, one of the BKs caught up with Bee-Bee and slashed him across the face with a crowbar. The other BKs joined in the beating and kicking of Taneesha's abuser. Sudhir even got a kick in. Bee-Bee was eventually walked down to Ms. Bailey's office where she reamed him out and warned him to never touch Taneesha again. Ms. Bailey had no recourse but to have the gang form a militia to take care of Bee-Bee because she knew the cops wouldn't respond to a call for help. The women were afraid to call the police.

Sudhir became increasingly frustrated with the lives that the poor black were forced to lead in Robert Taylor. He also was disillusioned by the work of his professors and fellow researchers who, in their ivory towers, were too far removed from the reality of the violence, gangs and drug dealing that was an entrenched part of life in the South Side projects. Why should the kids stay in school with only low-paying jobs waiting for them when they could make money hand over fist in the drug industry? He rubbed his fellow researchers and his professors the wrong way when he would sarcastically tell them to meet the people instead of relying on census tables. They were living in a bubble. He did well in school but it became more and more difficult to reconcile his experience in the projects with what was taught and discussed at the University of Chicago. He kept a lot of his experiences to himself because it would be difficult to explain them and he'd be scolded for not calling the police in on the crimes that were committed right before his eyes.

Sudhir talked to J.T. about Ms. Bailey. J.T. told him that Ms. Bailey didn't trust him because Sudhir was "with" J.T. Sudhir went to speak to Ms. Bailey who was worried that he was getting in too deep with the gang. She was also afraid that he'd see things that he wasn't ready to see. Due to his middle-class upbringing he did not have the capacity to understand the tenants. Officer Reggie was a friend who could help counsel somebody like Bee-Bee. But generally the police stayed away. Ms. Bailey would stay in her position as long as she was needed to help the people. She'd been their thirty years already. Sudhir saw enough to know that Ms. Bailey got more out of her work than just the satisfaction of helping those in need; she pocketed money whenever the opportunity presented itself. She said she'd rather play by the rules but the rules rarely worked. The people in the building shouldn't have to go through a building president like Ms. Bailey to get the things that they needed and should have from the housing authority, police or emergency services.

Analysis

Ms. Bailey who was the president of the building she lived in at Robert Taylor is the focus of this section. Like the other residents and gang members of Robert Taylor, Ms. Bailey was at first skeptical of the nerdy grad student from the University of Chicago. She questioned his motivations and even his approach to his research. She told him to interview people, especially white people, outside the scope of Robert Taylor who had control over their lives. Ms. Bailey was usually indirect in her discussions with Sudhir.



Like J.T. she held back some information because she had her personal agenda which she did not want disrupted.

Initially, Ms. Bailey seemed to be dedicated to the tenants and only concerned with their wants and needs. She cooperated with the gang because what choice did she have? They were able to deliver for her and the tenants and they protected the people. During one discussion, she points out that there hadn't been a killing in six-months to illustrate the value of the gang.

As Sudhir learns more about the people and the lives they are forced to live in the impoverished and dangerous conditions of a housing project, he feels justified in the choice he made to become part of the community to more fully understand the people and what it was like to be black and poor which was the fundamental question he planned to answer in his dissertation. He felt that his professors and other scholars were way out of touch making judgments about these people in the safety and remoteness of their ivory towers.

Vocabulary

pedantic, aspirations, proximity, prefaced, prestigious, vigilante, makeshift, ingenious

SIX – The Hustler and the Hustled

Summary

Four years after he'd begun his research, Sudhir learned that he might be in trouble for the work he was doing. His work was not within the scope of normal academic research. Bill Wilson told him to stop visiting the projects until he spoke with an attorney. Sudhir followed his advice and saw an attorney who told him that he'd have to report crimes that he witnessed or that were being planned. He would have to testify against the gang if he were to be subpoenaed. There was no researcher-client confidentiality laws.

It was time for Sudhir to turn his notes and experiences into a dissertation. He had failed to include the role of the projects in the broader economy as his professors had expected him to. Surprisingly, J.T. and Ms. Bailey agreed to allow him to interview Robert Taylor tenants, hustlers, pimps and prostitutes to learn more about the economics of Robert Taylor. Ms. Bailey knew that he'd be in contempt if he didn't share what he learned with the police. But he'd face a beating if he did. That's why people trusted him because they knew he'd remain silent. Everyone knew he kept notebooks about his experiences in Ms. Mae's apartment. He wondered who he should be worried about – the tenants, Ms. Bailey or the police.

J.T. told Sudhir he has to make a choice to either be on the side of the black folks or the cops. The people in Robert Taylor felt that he'd been on their side. Just don't change, J.T. told him. Sudhir focused on the economy of the three buildings that J.T. was in charge of. J.T. seemed eager for him to talk to the pimps, the prostitutes, the car thieves and all the other criminals.

Ms. Bailey and J.T. summoned Sudhir to her office one day. They both greeted him warmly and wanted to know what he'd been finding out. Over three hours, Sudhir went over his notes with them and told them about all his encounters and the money they earned. He had met or learned of most of these people through Ms Bailey and J.T. Without them, he would have never made as much progress. He transformed the information in to data to create statistical tables and graphs depicting the earnings of the hustlers in Robert Taylor.

Sudhir stopped by the parking lot to say hello to C-Note and the other hustlers there. He got a cold reception. No one would talk to him. He got the same reaction from people in the lobby. He begged C-Note to tell him what he'd done. He told Sudhir that he had to learn to keep his mouth shut. He told J.T. what everybody made – now J.T. wanted a cut. He told C-Note that he had been duped by Ms. Bailey and J.T. He apologized to C-Note; he had screwed up. Sudhir figured Ms. Bailey was cashing in on the information he supplied them, too. He talked to Clarisse who confirmed that it was all over the building that he was spying for Ms. Bailey. She confronted everyone about their illicit, claiming they owed her money. Sudhir felt terrible. Clarisse warned him that the people were angry and wanted to take it out on his hide.



Sudhir began to question his work and whether he could really change the lives of the people in Robert Taylor. The only way he could make amends was to stay away but he was close to finishing his work. He did contact Autry and Clarisse a few times. They didn't give him much hope that the people would talk to him anymore. He tried to strike up conversations with some of the tenants but they weren't interested in talking to him.

Sudhir attended Catrina's funeral. She had been killed by a gunshot during a domestic altercation. Catrina had always liked to write. In her honor, Sudhir decided to start a writing workshop for young women in the building. By doing this he would also be offering an olive branch to those he had offended. The workshop started with five women and grew to about a dozen. The young women would write about their struggles and then discuss them. The women wrote of the men in their lives, their children, their hardships, their inability to earn money and most poignantly the abuse they suffered. The topic one week was, "How I Survive." The women debated the ways they had learned to survive. One woman said knowing someone at the housing authority was crucial for repairs or when the rent was going to be late. Another woman said there were ways to get clothes and food for their children even if they didn't have money.

The young women kowtowed to Ms. Bailey because they had no one else to help them. Sudhir was dismayed by the power of someone like Ms. Bailey. The women used tactics like keeping a supply of cigarettes on hand to bribe squatters and others with. They were paid to store drugs for the gang. They used sex to get money and things they needed for their children. They made sure to know someone at the hospital in case their children fell ill or needed food. Knowing how to use a knife came in handy at times. Keisha confessed that she stabbed her man after he passed out from too much alcohol. It was a way to stop the beating. He almost died but recovered from his wounds.

Sudhir's personal life was taking time away from the projects. He had moved in with his girlfriend and they were thinking about getting married. He began to have regular meetings with Bill Wilson and the other professors about his dissertation. Sudhir was invited to a tenant meeting by Ms. Bailey. One of the women accused him of sleeping with her daughter which was not true and which he denied. Several women began calling him names and hollering at him to get out. Sudhir tried to explain that his only interaction with the young women of the building was at the writing workshop. Ms. Bailey finally quieted them down. He left feeling that everyone in the J.T.'s territory was angry at him.

Analysis

Sudhir met some headwind in his field work when he was advised by his professors to seek legal counsel about his unique approach in conducting his research. A lawyer advised him that there was no client-researcher confidentiality law that would cover him for failing to report crime or failing to contact law enforcement when learning of plans to commit a crime. Sudhir certainly did not want to wind up behind bars; he was shaken by the lawyer's advice.



Sudhir realized it was time to start backing away from the people and putting his notes and experiences in writing. His goal was to write about what it was like being black and poor. He had gathered a wealth of information on the topic and knew that it was time to focus on finishing his work. He felt for the people but he was pragmatic enough to know that there was nothing much he could do to change their lives. However, he felt his dissertation and future writing he could base on his experiences were things that could possibly help poor blacks like those he came to know so well in Robert Taylor.

Sudhir realized that J.T. and Ms. Bailey had used him. They had urged him to speak with the tenants about illicit, under-the-table money they earned. He thought they wanted to learn the results of his interviews out of interest. In reality, he had been naïve; they wanted to learn about the money people earned so they could demand a cut. He was duped by people he trusted but had long before accepted the mantra of the projects – it was just the way it was.

Vocabulary

surreptitiously, caveat, brothel, ecosystem, exacerbated, ambivalent, fiasco, pragmatic



SEVEN – Black and Blue

Summary

Sudhir's strongest relationship at the projects was with J.T. One afternoon Darryl Young spotted a young white man cruising around the parking lot. Darryl became enraged and told the man to go and sleep with his own women. He called in Price, security head, to chase the boy out. Suddenly a car came squealing out of nowhere firing rapid shots like machine-gun fire. Price got hit and fell to the ground. Another car was approaching so Sudhir and another gang member dragged Price who was bleeding profusely, to safety. Sudhir finally found J.T. Sudhir encouraged him to call the police but J.T. insisted they wouldn't come. Sudhir loaned his car to Cherise who drove Price to the hospital. J.T. set up headquarters in a vacant apartment where he issued commends to gang members. J.T. expected another assault; the BKs were at war. J.T. filled Sudhir in that a dispute over drug territories was behind the attack. J.T. and his men discussed ways of retaliating. Price and J.T. were friends since high school. J.T. thanked Sudhir because he risked his own safety to help Price. J.T. and his soldiers tracked the shooters down and beat them unmercifully.

J.T. was in line for a big promotion. He and his gang would be taken over more territory and overseeing more BK factions. J.T. invited Sudhir to attend the next regional meeting with him. Sudhir had been hoping for this chance for years. When the Chicago public-school teachers went on strike, Sudhir helped Autry set up a study area for the kids to keep up on their school work. Sudhir would lead a class in J.T.'s building. Sudhir was having problems controlling the students who showed him no respect. Some kids sold marijuana in the class; others left and brought back beer; others gambled. Loud music played from a radio. One kid made up a rap song about Sudhir called "Injun Teacher." Sudhir was overjoyed when the strike was over.

Autry asked Sudhir to help write a grand proposal for a federal youth program. He met with Officer Reggie who had grown up in Robert Taylor and was Ms. Bailey's friend. Reggie felt that armed gang members kept the other tenants safer. Sudhir recalled when J.T. had rented out the Elks Lodge for a party for the tenants. It was raided by five armed men who J.T. said were cops. They stole everyone's money and jewelry. Reggie admitted that there were bad eggs who worked at the department. Sudhir had been with J.T. when he was stopped by the cops who demanded to see his paycheck. Reggie told him that cops can require a person to prove he can afford the car he's driving in. Many cops resent that the gang members who kill people with their drugs make more than they do. Sometimes the cops take cars and sell them for charity – a way of getting back at the dealers. Gang members rarely complained about being robbed by cops. It was part of the game.

Reggie took Sudhir to a bar frequented by black cops. The cops weren't eager to talk about their experiences. They viewed Sudhir as a Hyde-Park liberal out of touch with reality. Sudhir recognized one of the cops named Jerry. He was on the take at Robert



Taylor. He was aggressive and violent and was feared by the regular tenants. Sudhir felt uncomfortable under Jerry's stare because he'd seen him beat up a tenant one night. He wondered if Jerry remembered him. Jerry didn't want to talk and warned Sudhir not to write anything down. Reggie told Sudhir later that Jerry and the others wanted to meet Sudhir because they knew he'd seen them in the building and wanted to know what he was up to. Reggie eventually agreed for Sudhir to include what he told him in his dissertation as long as he changed his name. He warned him to be careful what he wrote about the others. Autry also advised him to not write about the cops because they are nothing more than a gang with authority.

A few weeks later, Sudhir's car was broken into. His backpack had been rummaged through. He called Reggie who told him that the feds were working Chicago with a goal of indicting drug gang members under the RICO Act (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act). The gangs feared the involvement of the feds. The cops didn't like the involvement either because they were often forced to reveal police corruption. He warned Sudhir to lay off his questions about the cops some of whom thought he was working with the feds. Reggie put the fear of the cops into Sudhir. They had the power to how open the gang could operate. Had he gotten his story about the projects strictly from the cops, it would have been a different story and the tenants would have turned their backs on him.

Reggie would share intelligence with the gangs if it would avoid a war. He and other cops used "scared straight" tactics to get young gangsters to stop dealing drugs rather than arrest them. Reggie also mediated disputes between gang members and hustlers. They also scared criminals from the outside away from the projects. Reggie confirmed to Sudhir that his car had been broken into by cops looking for what he was writing about them.

In 1995, Congress and the Clinton administration were in a dialog with big city mayors across the country about tearing housing projects down. They had concluded that the high rises increased crime and poverty rather than having positive impacts. Robert Taylor was at the top of the list and was to be replaced with a town-house development called Legends South. The tenants didn't believe it would ever happen.

J.T. was promoted and reminded Sudhir about attending the regional meeting. Sudhir was busy finishing his dissertation. He'd been advised by his professors to stay away from the projects and the tenants felt he'd betrayed them. J.T. was undeterred. He told Sudhir they'd been together too long for him to give up now. Sudhir was conflicted. He had not been proud of his behavior at the projects although his intentions were always positive. He had duped J.T. that he was writing his biography. Most of all his original hope that he could help them elevate themselves to a better life seemed out of reach.

Analysis

Sudhir's wish to see gang life up close and personal was granted in this chapter that starts off with a gangland drive-by shooting. Although he was naturally frightened, he



helped drag one of J.T.'s officers, Price who was in charge of gang security, to safety. The action brings the gratitude and admiration of J.T. and solidifies the bond between he and Sudhir.

J.T. was at the peak of his career and was line for a big promotion within the gang. It is obvious that J.T. had more and more trust in Sudhir which allowed him to get more deeply into the machinations of the gang. J.T. invited him to attend a regional meeting where he would be able to meet the higher echelon of the Black Kings.

Police corruption is an issue that is covered quite extensively in this chapter. Although the tenants and gang members had been sensitive about what Sudhir might include in his dissertation from interviews with them, the police were also onto the fact that Sudhir was gathering information about activities at Robert Taylor.

At their request, he met with some black police officers who were not so subtle in their warning for him to watch his step. Sudhir learned that it was police officers who had broken into his car looking for notes about them that he may have included in his notes. They were, of course, worried about whether any of them would be mentioned in Sudhir's research. From this experience Sudhir understood on a personal level the reluctance of the residents of Robert Taylor to call the police for help.

Vocabulary

sauntered, entourage, commandeered, exponentially, nondescript, belligerent

EIGHT – The Stay-Together Gang

Summary

Sudhir attended several of regional meetings with J.T. and learned a lot about the leaders and their activities. They often discussed management problems just like a corporation executive would. Even though he feared further involvement with them, he continued to attend the gatherings. By then Sudhir had been hanging out with J.T. for six years. Sudhir felt a measure of pride that J.T. had risen in the organization but had to remind himself that J.T. was a drug dealer and a gangster. With his higher profile, J.T. like all the higher ups was more worried about being arrested, federal indictments and imprisonment. He saved as much money as he could for his mother and children. He was earning \$200K a year because he was now getting a cut of all BK revenues.

J.T.'s success was threatened by the impending demolition of Robert Taylor. He had made his reputation and a lot of money in those buildings. Once it was razed, he would lose his customer base and a large number of his gang membership. J.T.'s officers like T-Bone and Price were also lamenting the end of Robert Taylor. They had hoped to advance like J.T. did but that opportunity was slipping away. They couldn't just up and leave; the others would suspect they were collaborating with the feds.

Sudhir realized that J.T.'s job in convincing young men to join the gang was difficult because of the low wages they'd earn. He saw the process up close one night when he accompanied J.T. to West Pullman where he wanted to expand and where there was little gang activity but many young men who were drop-outs or unemployed. J.T. met with a group of them and told them they needed to become black businessmen. He tried to convince some of them to give up the minimum wage jobs they had. J.T. left the group telling them that if anyone else came by trying to recruit them that they should tell them they there were Black Kings. J.T. told Sudhir that he had no choice but to try to recruit these boys because of the demolition of Robert Taylor.

The politicians promised that the tenants in Robert Taylor would be relocated to middleclass neighborhoods. Everyone in the project was worried about who'd go first and where they'd wind up. The CHA held meetings to answer the concerns of the tenants. The CHA was corrupt and inept but was expected to successfully locate 150,000 people and Robert Taylor represented the largest portion of that population.

The city began to build condos and townhouses to replace the projects. Robert Taylor tenants had been promised the right to return to the area once the new construction was completed. However, only a small percentage was able to do so because, it was believed, Mayor Daley's administration and powerful interest groups destroyed Robert Taylor in a blatant land grab. In the end, the new apartments were designed for middle and upper class families.



At the back-to-school party, Sudhir said hello to a number of people he hadn't seen for a while. Suddenly there were gunshots and everyone took cover. J.T. ordered everyone to get down. A thin woman who appeared high or drunk was staggering down the street and gibbering to herself. Everyone yelled at her to take cover. One of the men ran out and grabbed the woman and pulled her to safety. After a while when no more gunfire was forthcoming, the party resumed.

Sudhir was ecstatic to learn that he'd won a junior fellowship at Harvard's Society of Fellows, a three-year salaried position. When Sudhir told J.T. about the fellowship, J.T. didn't seem to want to accept that Sudhir would be leaving. He thought of all kinds of things they could do together like travel the nation to study gang activity in other cities. J.T. was still counting on Sudhir's book being his biography.

Sudhir thought he'd stay in touch with J.T. after he left. But his new position was demanding and more and more time passed between visits. When Sudhir did visit he found J.T. to be eager for the good old days that they had shared. J.T. had enjoyed the attention that Sudhir gave him and missed it. Sudhir came to notice in his new world for his knowledge of gang activity. J.T.'s world fell apart with the destruction of Robert Taylor and so did their relationship. After completing his fellowship, J.T. urged him to take a teaching position in Chicago but Sudhir had secured a position at Columbia University.

Ms. Bailey also felt the impact of the impending end of Robert Taylor and the deterioration of the BKs. She depended on them for the money and resources she needed to help people relocate. When she was unable to help the people, many of them turned on her accusing her of pocketing money instead of helping them. Ms. Bailey was hurt by the accusations and was worried that many of the people who had been sheltered by the likes of her and the gang wouldn't make it "out there."

In November 1998, Sudhir was waiting outside Robert Taylor for J.T. for what would be the last time. J.T. had called and asked Sudhir to meet with him. J.T. gave him a sheet of paper with names and phone numbers of contacts in New York that he wanted Sudhir to contact. It was obvious by then that Sudhir would not be writing J.T.'s biography but he did not seem to be upset about it. During their drive to a restaurant, J.T. began filling Sudhir in on the latest gang-related problems. Sudhir zoned out; that part of his life was over.

A few years later, J.T. left the gang world and managed his cousin's dry-cleaning business. He did some consulting work with the BKs a few times but wanted no long-lasting relationship with them. When in Chicago, Sudhir always met up with J.T. who seemed relieved that he no longer had to worry about being arrested and serving time. Sudhir's research into Chicago gangs had been unconventional but he had learned more than he would have by running stats. His experience with J.T. and the Black Kings have stayed with him; J.T.'s words often echo in his ears no matter where he is.



Analysis

Sudhir got more ingrained into the gang by attending regional meetings where J.T.'s big bosses were in attendance. He had to remind himself that he wasn't among corporate executives with their talk of personnel and management problems. Just like his professors were far removed from the street, these men who had rose in the ranks were now at a distance from the action on the street. Their talk of running the business from 10,000 feet blurred the reality of the violence, death and tragedy that their product was responsible for.

The end was near for the Robert Taylor housing project. All 28 buildings would soon come down. It was the end of a troubling era and part of urban renewal plans that were underway in Chicago and across the nation. But the people of Robert Taylor who were being relocated looked at it as a land grab. They were later proven to be right. The townhouses and condos being built that were originally targeted for the residents of Robert Taylor wound up housing middle and upper class families. Sudhir had his last experience with danger and violence when a drive-by shooting by a rival gang interrupted a back-to-school celebration.

It was time for Sudhir to leave and return to life as he knew it all his life. He had to leave J.T. and the gang and the people of Robert Taylor who he'd know for six years behind him. J.T. was sad to see Sudhir go. They had become friends and Sudhir was a well-educated classy guy who had seen something special in him.

Vocabulary

consigliere, exalted, surreal, mettle, rarefied, paranoia, sanguine, braggadocio, gentrified, fatalistic, chicanery, incessant



Important People

Sudhir Venkatesh

Sudhir Venkatesh lived and went to school in California. After finishing college, he was accepted into the graduate program in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. He decided that he would focus on race and poverty for his dissertation. He was fortunate to be working under the stewardship of one of the foremost scholars in the field of sociology in the nation. Although he completely respected the work and wisdom of Professor William Julius Wilson, Sudhir had a mind of his own and a strong sense of how to proceed with his work.

Unknown to Professor Wilson and the other professors and associates in the Department of Sociology Sudhir decided to learn about race and poverty and the black gangs in the crime-ridden South Side of Chicago by “walking with them.” His purpose was two-fold: he wanted to develop an important dissertation and wanted his work to be meaningful and perhaps help the poor black of Chicago.

In his first attempt to reach out to them, he was mistaken for a member of a rival Mexican gang and badly beaten. He convinced J.T. their leader that his purpose was pure. J.T. liked the idea of being the center of this “nerd’s” research and the two formed an unexpected and strong bond. For the next six years, Sudhir became a fixture at the Robert Taylor housing project. He hoped that his work would one day benefit them. Most of the people he met thought he was a nerdy student. The kids would call him Gandhi or Julio or even “Ay-rab” and pull on his pony tail. Sudhir risked his own safety and the possibility of arrest and incarceration for not reporting the crimes he witnessed.

The day that J.T. allowed Sudhir to be the gang leader for a day was a pivotal moment in their relationship. The two men trusted each other and each had an impact on the other that would be a lasting one.

J.T.

J.T. was a lower-level gang leader when Sudhir met him in 1989. He was a stocky man who had an authoritative presence. He had been the leader of the drug operation at a public housing project called Lake Park on Chicago’s South Side. He was a member of the Black Kings gang. Shortly after Sudhir infiltrated himself with the gang and became friendly with J.T., he was “promoted” and transferred to the Robert Taylor Homes also on the South Side. Robert Taylor was the largest public housing project in the nation and it was one of the most dangerous. J.T. was placed in charge of three buildings of the 28-building complex. The drug traffic was more robust at Robert Taylor than it had been at Lake Park. J.T. eventually was promoted to the higher echelon of the BKs and took over another territory in addition to Robert Taylor. J.T. was making good money with a salary reaching as much as \$200K a year.



When Sudhir had the audacity to stop by the projects to begin his research, he didn't understand about things like gang territory and protocol. He was badly beaten by J.T.'s soldiers who thought he was from a rival Hispanic gang but rescued when J.T. came on the scene. Although at first skeptical, J.T. came to believe that Sudhir was just an egghead who was doing research and wasn't a threat. He allowed Sudhir to have inside information about the operations of the gang – to a degree. He always held back on matters that were too dangerous to share with an outsider. When the heat from the feds increased with the arrest of more gang members and drug dealers, J.T. became paranoid that he would wind up behind bars.

After it was announced that Robert Taylor and all high-rising housing projects across the nation were being torn down in favor of townhouses and condos, J.T. knew that his world was coming down, too. Many of the tenants who were his customers moved on. He lost gang members who had to relocate as well. J.T.'s income and authority were on the decline. After Sudhir left the area, the glory days of J.T.'s domain soon ended. The two men kept in touch over the years. The last Sudhir heard of J.T., he was managing his cousin's dry cleaning business. He was happy and relieved that he didn't have to worry about being arrested any longer.

Ms. Bailey

Ms. Bailey was the president of the building she lived in at Robert Taylor. It was one of the J.T.'s buildings. She was paid a few hundred dollars a month for a job that was, in her case, all-consuming. She met with Sudhir a great deal. She wanted him to understand her people. She tried to explain to Sudhir why so many young black men quit school and turned to the gangs.

Ms. Bailey knew that staying in school was the only way out of poverty but these men when given the chance to make more money than they ever imagined they ever would could not reject it. When meeting with Sudhir, she would ask him to leave if a tenant came by; the tenants were her priority.

Ms. Bailey got a cut from the earnings of many of the female tenants but would not take a cut from the prostitutes. Sudhir was disillusioned when he learned that Ms. Bailey for all her claims of only wanting to help the people in the building, pocketed a lot of money and put the squeeze on tenants to give her money and other things she wanted in exchange for helping them. Her gravy train ended when the building was scheduled for demolition.

William Julius Wilson

While Sudhir was a grad student at the University of Chicago and working on his dissertation in sociology, Professor William Julius Wilson was one of his professors and advisors. Wilson was the most eminent scholars and the most well-known African American in the field of sociology. When Sudhir first met him, Wilson had been teaching at the University of Chicago for twenty years and was the author of two books that had a



huge impact on how experts viewed urban poverty. When Wilson discovered years after Sudhir first began research for his dissertation that Sudhir was spending most of his waking hours at the projects, he advised him to stop that work at once. Spending so much time with gang members placed him in grave danger and in criminal jeopardy.

Leonard “Old Time” Combs

At the start of his research, Sudhir spoke with a group of old men who hung out in Washington Park. He wanted to get their view on race and poverty. Leonard “Old Time” Combs told Sudhir to never trust a white and that blacks aren’t any better. Old Time fished in the park every day. He believed that there would never be true equality for blacks because they lived in a city within a white city. It had been that way since he came to the city and was sure it would never change.

President Bill Clinton

Ms. Bailey invited Sudhir for a back-to-school party for the building’s kids. He hadn’t been at Robert Taylor for a while and nostalgia came over him as he drove up to see the cars parked all around and the rap music blaring. He spotted flowers that he’d never noticed before. The last time he remembered seeing flowers was during President Clinton’s visit who advocated an a law enforcement practice known as “police sweeps” which were unpopular among Robert Taylor residents. But Clinton was popular among African-Americans and there had been excitement in the air in anticipation of his arrival. It was also under the Clinton Administration that the decision was made to tear down many of the nation’s high-rise housing projects because they had become a den for drug dealers and because poverty had been more entrenched since their inception.

Miss Mae

Miss Mae was J.T.’s mother. She was a warm woman who warmly embraced Sudhir and treated him like her son. She instinctively knew that he would have a positive impact on her son and the young people in the building. She had lived in public housing her entire life.

Clarisse

Clarisse was a prostitute who lived in Robert Taylor. She was in her mid-thirties but because of her lifestyle and drug addiction she looked much older. She was called Clarisse the Mankiller because, according to her, her love knocked them dead. One afternoon Clarisse was in Ms. Bailey’s office and was drunk or high or both. She was told to get out but stumbled and threw up as she tried to leave. Sudhir was told to get her out of there and get her home. Clarisse had a powdered substance in her purse that was either cocaine or heroin.



Ms. Bailey warned Clarisse that if she learned that her kids were starving she'd have them taken away from her. Sudhir got Clarisse home. He was afraid to leave her alone because of her wretched condition. He wanted to call an ambulance for her but she refused. He took her kids to a local sandwich shop and got them something to eat. Ms. Bailey warned him not to be taken in by the women in the building; they'd take advantage of his good nature. It was wonderful that he fed Clarisse's kids but Ms. Bailey always saw to it that the kids in the building were fed.

C-Note

C-Note was a squatter who fixed cars in the parking lot of the buildings that J.T. controlled at Robert Taylor. Although he wasn't a resident of the building, he had been in the community for over two decades. He stayed in a "squat" apartment that was set aside for squatters like J.T. who was their leader. He paid a fee to J.T. for the use of the squat apartment. He got into an altercation with J.T. and some of his men and was severely beaten. Sudhir had witnessed the assault and had to deal with lingering guilt because he didn't help C-Note or call the authorities to report the crime.

Lenny Duster

One evening, Sudhir attended a Baptist church with J.T. where an ex-gangster named Lenny Duster was talking to a group of young gangsters about their rights, responsibilities and their voting power. He reminded them that they were not only foot soldiers for their gangs, they were foot soldiers in the community. Lenny kept things calm between the young men of rival gangs which the gang leaders appreciated because it was more difficult to conduct their drug trade in the midst of warring combatants. Lenny had been in the gang business so long that his thinking had been distorted. He believed that the takeover of the heroin business was a boon for the community because it created jobs for the young. His presentation was schizophrenic in that he preached to the kids about voting and community responsibility while he taught them effective techniques in dealing drugs.

Price

One afternoon a woman called Boo-Boo was hysterical because she thought the owner of a corner store had slept with her teenage daughter and infected her with a sexually transmitted disease. Price, a gang member who was in charge of security, accompanied her to the store. A crowd, including Sudhir, followed them. Boo-Boo began throwing groceries at the man. A man ran out and got inside a nearby car. Boo-Boo followed and threw liquor bottles at the car accusing him of raping her daughter.

An older man came out with Price, pleading his case. He had six-packs of soda and beer placed on the sidewalk for the crowd to freely partake in. Price learned that the 16-year-old girl slept with the man who had fled but that she slept around and already had the STD. The man had been giving her diapers in exchange for the sex. It was common



for girls and women in the project to sleep with men for free food and other things they needed. J.T. didn't intervene; he had no way to stop the behavior. Price had been the peace-maker.

T-Bone

Of all the gang members that Sudhir met, he related most to T-Bone. He saw a young man with a lot of promise who wanted to return to college but had been caught up in the gang. He was good with numbers and did the accounting for the gang. When the time for Robert Taylor to be demolished, T-Bone met Sudhir one night away from Robert Taylor. He gave him all the gang's books he had on the gang's finances. It was as if he thought the end was near. Giving Sudhir this information was a huge violation of gang codes.

Sudhir did not turn the books over to the police. Years later he wrote several articles that were based on the information which brought Sudhir and co-author Steven Levitt critical acclaim. Sudhir felt that T-Bone wanted to do something positive because he feared a bad ending. He wanted the world to understand his gang. Sudhir was surprised by the low salaries paid to young gang members who did all the dirty work. Even officers like T-Bone and Price only made \$30K a year. T-Bone was ultimately arrested by the feds.

Catrina

Catrina was a young woman who lived in the projects. She worked as an assistant to Ms. Bailey and was her staunchest defender. Katrina had great hope for the future but was killed in a domestic altercation involving her father. Katrina liked to write, so in her honor Sudhir established a writing group for young women in the building. The women were able to express their feelings in writing and then discuss them with the group. It was an outlet for the young women who had to suppress so much in their lives.

Dorothy Battie

Dorothy Battie was a resident of Robert Taylor. She had a positive demeanor even though her father and several nieces and nephews had been killed in gangland shootings. She had cleaned herself of a drug addiction and had helped out everyone in the community both tenants and squatters. She was the leader of a group called "the Stay-Together Gang." They were convinced that the only way to survive was to stay together. After the announcement was made that Robert Taylor was being demolished, she vowed to help families transition to new places that would hold promise for a better life. Unlike other building leaders including Ms. Bailey, she refused to take any money for helping families relocate.

Another building leader, Ms. Reemes, was furious that she wouldn't get a cut from the relocations that Dorothy was helping with because she wasn't taking any money. Ms. Reemes retaliated by getting her grown daughters evicted and having the electricity

turned off in Dorothy's apartment. She tried to get the gangs to harass Dorothy but they refused. Dorothy Battie worked tirelessly in getting a large number of families relocated to their new homes.



Objects/Places

University of Chicago

Sudhir Venkatesh was a grad student at the University of Chicago in sociology. He planned to make his dissertation on race and poverty. He wanted to have authentic stats rather than incorporate census numbers into his work that were not reliable. He worked under one of the foremost professors of sociology, William Julius Wilson, who warned him to stay out of the dangerous projects of Chicago. However, Sudhir wanted to learn about poverty, race and drug gangs from the people themselves.

Washington Park

Sudhir visited Washington Park where some old-timers hung out every day. These African-American men had seen a lot in their times that were relevant to Sudhir's studies. They had seen racism, poverty, the onset of the drug culture and the emergence of the notorious South Side gangs. One man told Sudhir that blacks and whites would never live in equality. The blacks lived in a world that was within the white world.

Ethnographers

Ethnography is a specialized field within the field of sociology. More specifically it is the study of people and their cultures from the perspective of the people. It was the approach that Sudhir took in conducting research for his dissertation on poverty and race.

Chicago Midnight Basketball League

The children at Robert Taylor had no safe place to play. Their parents who were mainly single women feared that their kids would be abducted or be the innocent bystanders in a drive-by shooting fueled by drug wars and perhaps worse become involved with a gang. As a result, the project formed a midnight basketball league in an effort to give the kids something to do and to keep the boys who were vulnerable to the lure of gangs off the streets. The Clinton Administration modeled a national midnight basketball league after the Robert Taylor concept.

Urban Renewal

Urban renewal as a popular phase in the 80s and 90s and referred to the efforts of city planners to provide a way to elevate the living conditions of the inner-city poor and help them climb out of the abject poverty that many of them faced. Urban renewal included



improved housing, incentives for business to relocate to the city and points of interests that would draw tourists and thus revenue into the city. Many black residents called “urban renewal” “Negro renewal” because from their perspective it moved hundreds of thousands of blacks from the city so that highways, stadiums and other attractions could be built that did absolutely nothing for the poor black.

Gang Leaders

There were two types of leaders in the Chicago gangs: the “jailhouse” leaders who learned in the big house that it was important to build up solidarity and loyalty. Then there were “operators” like J.T. and other younger leaders who were more entrepreneurial and practical than ideological.

The Disciples

The Disciples was a rival gang of the Black Kings. During a dispute over drug territory, two young kids at Robert Taylor were shot by members of the Disciples in a retaliatory drive-by. The little boy survived but the little girl died. Parents with little kids at Robert Taylor were terrified and kept their kids inside. A meeting was arranged between the warring gangs and a truce was agreed to. A little girl had died but that was just the way things were.

Harvard

After Sudhir finished his dissertation, he was offered a three-year fellowship at Harvard’s Society of Fellows in a paid position as a researcher. He was excited about the prospect. J.T. tried to change the subject when Sudhir told him the good news. It was around the time when J.T.’s buildings were being readied for demolition. J.T.’s life was being turned upside down. Now he was losing his friend, Sudhir, who had focused on him for six years.

The Boys & Girls Club

One of the Robert Taylor buildings not under J.T.’s control had established a Boys & Girls Club that was run by a former gang member named Autry. Ms. Bailey insisted that Sudhir visit the club hoping that he could establish a club like that for the kids in her building. Sudhir began visiting the club on a regular basis. He would read to the children and then discuss the book afterwards. A similar club was never established in any of J.T.’s buildings.

Writing Group

After Catrina, a young woman who helped Ms. Bailey, was murdered in a domestic altercation. Sudhir attended Catrina's funeral and had been so moved by the young woman's senseless death that he established a writing club for young women in the building in her honor because Catrina had always loved to write.

Themes

The Economics of Public Housing

Professor Wilson who was overseeing Sudhir's dissertation work and advised him to stop spending so much time with J.T., the leader of the Black Kings a street gang, and his men. Sudhir decided to take his advice and began to focus on the economics of life in the projects. He began interviewing the women of the Robert Taylor housing project. He learned that more than 90% of the households in Robert Taylor were headed by women. Many of these women had protested for civil rights in the 60s and 70s. During the 80s and 90s, their quality of life deteriorated due to the increase in the use and availability of drugs, the gangs that ran drug operations and violence that was a natural by-product of the drugs and gangs.

These societal changes within the housing projects in Chicago and in other large cities across the nation deepened the poverty and poor living conditions that public housing residents suffered from. While stats indicated that there was 96% unemployment among Robert Taylor adults, many had part-time jobs working in restaurants, as janitors and other legitimate pursuits. Men who held down jobs stayed out of sight because there were limitations as to how much a tenant family could earn.

The women earned money by selling meals they cooked, babysitting, hiding drugs for gang members, cleaning and prostituting themselves. He interviewed pimps and prostitutes and learned how much they earned versus what they had to pay to J.T. The pimps took 33% of what their prostitutes earned. The majority of the prostitutes, both independent and affiliates working under pimps, were on crack or heroin which compelled them at times to take drugs in exchange for sex. Some female tenants sold food or clothing they made, babysat or did hair.

The women who earned money illicitly at Robert Taylor did not translate into lucrative incomes for them and their families. It was always enough, or nearly enough to just get by. Women in public housing often pooled their resources in a bartering system and did jobs in exchange for other services or products they needed. They would pool their money to make sure there was hot water and working plumbing in at least one apartment among several. They would all take showers in one apartment, cook in another and sleep in yet another apartment.

Sudhir met the male hustlers in the parking lot. There were carpenters, handymen, preachers, drivers, cooks, car thieves, janitors and musicians. Their earnings were all under the table. The men, like the women, developed a support system for eating and sleeping. Many were police informants. Porter Harris, an elderly man, scoured the neighborhood for junk to sell. He once had a robust business but was kicked out by the gangs. The most lucrative jobs for men were those that required manual labor. Most claimed they wanted a legitimate job and a better life but there was little hope for either.



The Robert Taylor Homes

Sudhir did most of his field research for his graduate dissertation at Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago; it was the largest public housing project in the nation and one of the worst ghettos in America. Projects like Robert Taylor were built decades before because, it has been speculated, white people didn't want black neighbors. The project consisted of twenty-eight high-rise buildings that spanned a two-mile area. The housing project was considered the heart of Chicago's gang and drug activity. In addition to drugs, it was a South Side locale where crimes like extortion, gambling and prostitution were daily fare. The regular people or non-gang members who lived in the project suffered not only from the criminal and gang element but also from government neglect.

When Sudhir first became involved with J.T. who was a leader of the notorious Black Kings gang oversaw three buildings in Robert Taylor. Part of J.T.'s routine was to first check the stairwells for hustlers, rival gang members and drug activity. He was always accompanied by some of his foot soldiers. The stairs, the only areas J.T. zoned for hanging out, were in total disrepair and filled with people and odors of all description.

Just as the old men in Washington Park had told Sudhir, blacks lived inside of a white world. It was certainly true in the case of Robert Taylor. During his many years conducting research at Robert Taylor, he learned that if someone was hurt, even shot, no one called the cops or ambulances simply because the project was considered so dangerous that law enforcement and emergency service personnel just stayed away.

Many homeless people found refuge and a place to sleep in the staircases. The foot soldiers charged the homeless guests a squatter's tax which they were allowed to keep. The overall project buildings were run by J.T. and his gang but there were ways for hustlers and tenants to make money in zones that J.T. made available to them. A fellow named Creepy was the boss of that staircase and it was really up to him to decide what to do with someone who was sick or injured. Mrs. Easley was on Tenant Patrol to make sure that gang members didn't hurt the young children. J.T. gave her money for after-school parties. On the top floor there was an apartment without a door which was used by squatters, to sleep, keep food and clothes. There was a noxious odor in the dark room. There was even a squatter leader whose name was C-Note. Some rooms were designated for crackheads and others for prostitutes.

At night people pulled out barbeque grills, card tables, played music and danced in the open gallery areas. When the people weren't too high, they'd talk to Sudhir about their lives. It seemed that most of the younger set smoked crack or at least were accused of it. They worked and took care of their families but spare money was set aside for crack.

During the Clinton Administration, it was decided that high-rise public housing projects would be torn down. They had become dens of drug dealers and were intensifying poverty and increasing crime. Some tenants looked at the demolition as a way to have a fresh start. Residents would have help in relocating but extended family members who were staying with tenants would be on their own. Ms. Bailey, like most of the building presidents, had agreed to cooperate with the demolition and not try to fight it. The



building presidents were all asking for a big payoff for their cooperation. Ms. Bailey wanted a five-bedroom house on the South Shore. She estimated that she would be able to help only about a fourth of the families relocate. She and the other building presidents made lists of those who should have priority in the relocation process.

Realty v. Statistics

Sudhir Venkatesh took a unique approach to the research it was necessary for him to conduct during the years he worked on his dissertation under the stewardship of the professors of the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago. There were standards that had been established for decades for conducting research in the department. Statistics were an important part of that research. Sudhir had decided to focus on race and poverty in his dissertation. He was dismayed because the sources for these topics were limited. The “best” source were census reports that provided statistics about the population of the poor blacks in Chicago and about their education, employment, earnings, culture and health. To Sudhir, these statistics stared back at him with no life and little meaning. What was it really like to be poor and black on Chicago’s South Side, he wondered. He read about early sociologists who had become famous for their up-close studies of everyone from hobos to socialites. But in modern times that methodology had been abandoned in favor of statistics.

Despite its obvious avant garde nature and departure from the norm, Sudhir decided to conduct his research in the field and to virtually live with these people and come to understand them from an ethnological point of view. He would infiltrate their world and learn first-hand the conditions these people lived under, the challenges they faced and how the notorious gangs of Chicago’s South Side impacted the lives of the average person who found himself in the ghetto. Sensing that his professors would not be an advocate of such research, he gave them only sparse details and did not for years admit how much time he spent with the poor black people of the Robert Taylor project and that his closest relationship was with the leader of the Black Kings a gang that ran a lucrative drug business in three buildings of the 28-building complex.

During his six-year research project, Sudhir at times found himself in danger and criminally complicit after observing crimes without reporting them. He stayed above the fray but while he was there he had to choose between J.T. and the people of Robert Taylor or the Chicago police which he had learned were corrupt and more dangerous than gangs because they had power, authority and guns. Sudhir had ups and downs in an experiment in which he was the lab rat but he didn’t regret his experience. He was right. He learned so much more about race, poverty, crime and gangs than statistics would have provided him with. His hope was that what he learned will help people like the ones he knew at Robert Taylor to escape their bonds and find a better life. Maybe it has already helped some.



The Black Kings

When Sudhir Venkatesh decided to focus on the black and poor for his dissertation for the Sociology Department of the University of Chicago he had no idea how to start. So he just followed his best instincts and began infiltrating the South Side of Chicago, an area that the University had warned their students to stay away from. But the premise of his dissertation was what was it like to be black and poor. He decided to start in Washington Park and after talking to a few old black men who hung out in the park, he decided he needed input from more youthful subjects. He could walk to the Lake Park projects so he decided to visit there.

Sudhir was very naïve and had no idea he was trespassing on gang territory. He was not so subtly enlightened about his transgression when he was badly beaten by gang members who took him for a member from a rival Mexican gang. They had no idea that he was a grad student of East Indian heritage. But the leader, J.T., told his soldiers to back off after he believed that the young nerdy guy was conducting research for his studies. Unwittingly, Sudhir had walked into the web of the Black Kings, one of the most dangerous gangs on Chicago's South Side.

The Black Kings were a large regional gang with a scope that reached beyond Chicago and even Illinois. They had factions in Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cleveland and western Iowa. Sudhir was surprised that there were gangs in Iowa known for their corn and farms. J.T. explained that they tried to recruit local dealers there because drugs had permeated even in the conservative Midwestern state. The Iowa market was a potentially lucrative so the Chicago gangs, including the Black Kings, aggressively competed for it.

J.T. was not shy about telling Sudhir his personal ambitions with the gang. He wanted to move up into what he described as the gang's hierarchy. He was the gang leader of the territory surrounding the Lake Park housing project. He got a "promotion" soon after Sudhir got to know him. Lake Park was being razed by the government so J.T. was moved to the Robert Taylor housing project, the largest public housing project in the nation and one of the most dangerous. The housing project was huge with twenty eight high-rises in all. J.T. was placed in charge of three of the buildings which became the focus on Sudhir's field work.

Sudhir learned that the tenants of the housing project who were not officially affiliated with the gang cooperated with them. The gang protected its drug territory from encroachment by other gangs and by doing so also kept potential robbers, murderers and rapists away from the residents. The residents complied with the authority of the gang because they had no choice. If anyone crossed them, there was bruising punishment and retribution in the form of beatings or worse. J.T.'s operation served as the de facto administration of Robert Taylor. His soldiers patrolled the premises much more than the Chicago police who preferred not to enter the Robert Taylor area.

As J.T. advanced further in his career with the BKs, Sudhir was able to learn more about the hierarchy of the gang. In July 1995, Sudhir drove to Calumet Heights which was



home to some of the most notorious gang leaders in the Midwest including Jerry Tillman and Brian Jackson of the Black Kings. The BKs were throwing a pool party at Brian's house. The house was lavish; expensive sports cars were parked in front of the house. It was a members-only party in the large house that was surprisingly sparsely furnished and in disrepair. The house was crowded with upper echelon gang members and they were partying, drinking and playing video games like elite students at a frat house. The gang members weren't reluctant to talk to Sudhir and proudly tell him about their operation. Sudhir was shaken when one of the gang leaders introduced him to the others as their new director of communications. Sudhir was frightened – what dark hole had he fallen into?

But Sudhir had chosen to learn what it was like to be black and poor first hand. He had stayed above the fray and was not tempted to join the gang. An unexpected bonus from his field work was the knowledge he gained about gangs and their impact on their communities when he unintentionally happened upon the Black Kings and formed an unusual but strong bond with one of its leaders.

Police Corruption

Sudhir learned very quickly after becoming a permanent fixture of the Robert Taylor housing project, that tenant and gang member alike did not want to deal with the police. When a young woman was badly beaten in her apartment, Sudhir wanted to call the police but no one else did. For one thing, everyone told him that the police wouldn't show up. Robert Taylor was so dangerous that even the police didn't want to get near.

But there were a small number of cops who would venture into the ghetto – cops who were more dangerous than gang members because they were not only armed they were powerful and had authority. Sudhir attended a party that J.T. threw for the tenants. He rented out a private room in the Elks Lodge. Everyone was having a good time when suddenly five men dressed in black burst into the room. Everyone was ordered to get up against the wall. J.T. whispered to Sudhir that they were cops. The men threatened the partygoers and stole money and jewelry from them. They badly beat a man who resisted. J.T. told Sudhir that this sort of thing happened all the time. It was almost a game. J.T. and the gang knew they were cops and the cops knew that J.T. knew who they were. But who was J.T. going to tell? It was J.T.'s theory that the cops were envious of the big money that the gangs made and it was their way of retaliating, evening things out.

Officer Reggie had been born and raised in Robert Taylor. He was one cop that would come to help the people because of his ties with the place. He admitted to Sudhir that there were some bad eggs in the department but that most of the cops were honest and just wanted to do their jobs. Reggie invited Sudhir to go to a bar where black cops hung out. As it turned out, the cops wanted to meet him because they were concerned about what he was writing about. Sudhir's car was broken into. He later learned from Reggie that it was cops who broke in. They wanted to find the notes he'd been taking about Robert Taylor fearing that there was something about them. One of the cops that Sudhir met



was named Jerry. He threatened Sudhir to mind his own business. Later, Sudhir realized why Jerry was so hostile to him. He had witnessed Jerry assault a young man at the project and steal a large amount of money.

In the end, Sudhir didn't know whether to be more afraid of the tenants, the gang or the cops.

Styles

Structure

Gang Leader for a Day is told in a chronological order that covers the six years that Sudhir Venkatesh devoted to the research for his dissertation on race and poverty. He begins his story in 1989 when he was accepted into the graduate program of the Sociology Department of the University of Chicago. He starts by describing his initial outreach to the poor black in the projects of the dangerous South Side of Chicago.

The story follows the arc of his interactions with the impoverished people of the infamous Robert Taylor housing project, the largest public housing project in the nation and one of the most dangerous. He describes how initial suspicion ultimately turned into some level of trust and even admiration. He describes the evolution of his relationship with a gang leader, J.T., an unexpected element that became an important part of his research. He describes how the gang impacted the lives of the poor black people who he was studying. His research included both his reaction to the people and the perspective of the people themselves on how gang activity impacted their lives and the community's economy.

As the years of Sudhir's research were coming to an end, Sudhir had few regrets. Although there were many ups and downs and danger in the path he took to gather the most honest and accurate data possible for his dissertation, he was in the end happy with his choices. Sudhir believed that the wealth of information that he gathered could one day be transformed into methodology and practices that could help people like those he knew and encountered at the Robert Taylor Homes.

Perspective

Sudhir Venkatesh, author of *Gang Leader for a Day*, was a graduate student at the University of Chicago who decided to take on the topics of race and poverty with a focus on Chicago gangs, considered to be some of the most powerful and dangerous in the nation. The professors and senior researchers who were guiding him in his graduate work expected Sudhir to follow the guidelines of conventional research and adhere to the accepted standards established by the university and by scholars in the field of sociology in general.

However, Sudhir had a different approach which he didn't initially share completely with his senior advisors. He decided to embed himself in the gang to learn up close and personal how a gang operates, its economics, criminal behavior and impact on its surrounding community. Sudhir sensed not to fully explain his plans because they would be met with disapproval by his professors. But Sudhir felt compelled to follow his instincts for two reasons: to get the best and most genuine information about a gang



and secondly that the information he gathered could ultimately help the impoverished people of the community.

Sudhir decided to visit one of the housing projects unannounced. He was met with suspicion and was beaten and kicked by gang members who thought he was an interloper from a rival Mexican gang and who were unaware that he was East Indian. But he persevered and made contact with the gang leader named J.T. Sudhir and J.T., men from two different worlds, formed a bond. Sudhir tells the story of his first-hand experience and relates J.T.'s version of gang life from his perspective. Sudhir had strong feelings for the people of the Robert Taylor housing project and believed that he told their story, too.

Tone

Author Sudhir Venkatesh is an academic and professor in the field of sociology. Although he virtually lived with J.T. and the BK gang members at Robert Taylor for six years, there was no lure for him to join them. He was conducting research and though he became emotionally involved with the people and their problems, he stayed his distance intellectually. The tone of the narrative that comes across is one of fact-telling, story-telling that is not wrought with emotion although Sudhir does describe the emotions that he felt at the time of various incidents and events.

Sudhir had taken on the topics of race and poverty for his graduate dissertation in sociology. Taking it a step further than traditional research, he entrenched himself in the world of impoverished blacks who lived in a crime-ridden area that was ruled by a violent, drug-ridden gang that represented a schizophrenic reality – the gang protected the people yet was ready to kill them if they turned them into the cops. Sudhir is able to portray the chaos and uncertainty of life in what was considered the most dangerous housing project of the dangerous South Side of Chicago.

Sudhir was part of the world for a time while he conducted his work. He felt for the people but kept his distance emotionally because it wasn't the world that he would eventually live in. He makes obvious in his narrative that he cared for these people and hoped that his work would help them. He was practical enough to know that the climb out of their impoverished and perilous circumstances would be impossible for the vast majority of the people he came to know and gain understanding for.



Quotes

I was particularly intrigued by the old men's view on race, which boiled down to this: Whites and blacks would never be able to talk openly, let alone live together."

-- Author (chapter 1 paragraph 23)

Importance: In researching about race and poverty, the author ran across an old but viable belief that the two races could never live in harmony. His goal was to learn why they held so strongly to that belief.

It seemed they were as confused as I was. I wasn't armed, I didn't have tattoos, I wasn't wearing anything that showed allegiance to another gang – I didn't wear a hat turned toward the left or right, for instance, I wasn't wearing blue or red, I didn't have a star insignia anywhere, either the five- or six-point variety."

-- Author (chapter 1 paragraph 71)

Importance: Sudhir visited a housing project on the south side of Chicago to do research on being black and poor. The gang members he encountered thought that Sudhir, who is of East Indian heritage, was Mexican and from a rival gang but couldn't figure out why he didn't have the usual signs of gang membership. He completely befuddled them.

Everyone wants to kill the leader, so you got to get them first."

-- J.T. (chapter 3 paragraph 19)

Importance: J.T., leader of a sect of the Black Kings in Chicago, explained to Sudhir that he was always at risk and that he couldn't allow anyone to challenge his authority – it could mean his life.

If law-abiding citizens viewed the gang as a politically productive enterprise, they might be less likely to complain about its drugs sales."

-- Author (chapter 3 paragraph 83)

Importance: The author is referring to J.T.'s distorted thinking on the benefits of helping the community by becoming politically active.

That's what BKs are about. We just help keep the peace. We take care of our community."

-- Price (chapter 3 paragraph 152)

Importance: Price was a Black Kings gang member who was in charge of security. The people who lived at Robert Taylor Homes called on the Black Kings for help with criminal activity and during fights rather than call the cops who were averse to stepping foot into the dangerous project.



A drug economy, he told me, 'was useful for the community,' since it redistributed the drug addicts' money back into the community via the gang's philanthropy."

-- Author/J.T. (chapter 4 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote captures the distorted way that J.T. and other gang leaders had about the drug culture. They saw it as a boon to the impoverished tenants of the project where J.T. ran his drug operation.

I found myself wondering how much Ms. Bailey's actions were actually a response to hardships that limited her options and how much arose from her own desire to have power."

-- Author (chapter 5 paragraph 140)

Importance: Sudhir questioned the motivations of Ms. Bailey, the building president, who claimed she had to cooperate with the gang in order to protect the tenants and to get things for the building and people that were needed.

In a neighborhood like this one, with poor police response and no shelter for abused women, the militias sometimes represented the best defense."

-- Author (chapter 5 paragraph 213)

Importance: Gang members were asked to form militias to mete out punishment to tenants or squatters who abused the women or children in the building. It was rare that the police or the city ambulance service would respond to trouble at Robert Taylor Houses.

I resented the fact that the standard tools of sociologists seemed powerless to prevent the hardships I was seeing. The abstract social policies that my colleagues were developing to house, educate, and employ the poor seemed woefully out of touch."

-- Author (chapter 5 paragraph 235)

Importance: Since Sudhir did fieldwork in Robert Taylor, he saw up close in personal the challenges and impossible barriers that kept the poor people in the dangerous world of drugs and violence. He knew that scholars who were far removed from these people were grabbing at straws for solutions and that their theories were not what the people needed.

When it became obvious that the housing authority supported a management system based on extortion and corruption, the women decided their best option was to shrug their shoulders and accept their fate."

-- Author (chapter 6 paragraph 186)

Importance: Women who live in the projects suffer the most. They had to be compliant with the corrupt housing authority, the greedy building president and the powerful gangs because they had to feed and clothe their children and had no power to stand up for themselves.



Not every cop in the projects was corrupt or abuse, but I had become nervous about getting on the cops' bad side. I had no desire to get beaten up or be regularly harassed. I'd grown up thinking of cops as people you trusted to help when things went bad, but that wasn't the way things worked here, even for me."

-- Author (chapter 7 paragraph 161)

Importance: Sudhir learned that the cops were as much to fear as the gangs – perhaps even more so because they had more power and authority. It was a jolting revelation for Sudhir who had been taught to believe that he could rely on cops to help him when he was in trouble.

You need to understand that the Black Kings are not a gang; we are a community organization, responding to people's needs."

-- J.T. (chapter 8 paragraph 8)

Importance: The gang leaders often tried to elevate their position to one of importance and portray their behavior as good deeds. However, the biggest need they met in their community was supply drugs to their addicted customers.



Topics for Discussion

1

What were the classic sociological questions posed by professors at the University of Chicago? What methodology was used in responding to them?

2

What are the two approaches used in sociology to study ethnic groups? Describe each one.

3

Why was Ms. Bailey's role in the project duplicitous? Describe the good work she did for the tenants. What motivated her beyond just doing "good work?"

4

What advice did the attorney give Sudhir about his association with J.T. and the Black Kings gang? What laws was Sudhir possibly breaking?

5

Why did the tenants of Robert Taylor accept the authority of J.T. and the Black Kings gang? Why didn't they report their activities to the police or call ambulances?

6

What was Sudhir's reaction to the beating of C-Note? Who was he disappointed in and why?

7

Why was J.T. and Ms. Bailey eager for Sudhir to interview the men and women who lived in J.T.'s buildings in Robert Taylor about their illicit earnings? Why did they want him to share what he learned with them?



8

What was J.T.'s reaction when word came that Robert Taylor would be razed? How was his world going to change and what were his worries?

9

Why did the tenants of Robert Taylor turn against Sudhir and stop trusting him? Who was probably behind the change of heart that they had?

10

What was J.T.'s reaction when Sudhir told him that he was offered a fellowship at Harvard? What was this reaction probably attributed to?