



Updates



The
Crime and Deviance
Channel



Overt Participant Observation “Gang Leader for a Day”

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Gang Leader for a Day: Sudhir Venkatesh

Introduction

While some aspects of study at **AS level** encourage students to “take for granted” a relatively clear-cut, highly differentiated, view of the social world, **A2 study** encourages a more-questioning approach to received wisdoms – even, or perhaps especially, those wisdoms they have been explicitly taught...

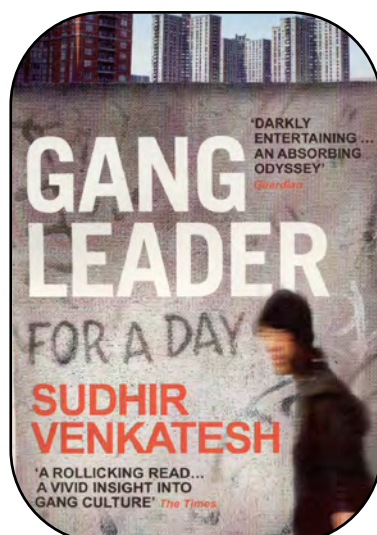
As a case in point, the teaching of research methods at AS encourages students to think in fairly basic, clear-cut, terms about the “**advantages**” and “**disadvantages**” of various research methods – such as, in this instance, **overt participant observation**.

Using **Venkatesh’s** “Gang Leader for a Day” (2009) we can demonstrate that although research methods may have distinctive advantages and disadvantages, the reality is not always quite as neat and clearly-defined as we may have suggested at AS level...

A2 students will be familiar with **participant observation** (both **overt** and **covert**) as a research method and will, at various points, have been introduced to a range of crime and deviance studies that have employed this method (such as William **Whyte’s** “Street Corner Society” and James **Patrick’s** “Glasgow Gang Observed”).

Venkatesh’s “Gang Leader for a Day”, however, is a useful study for students to add to their academic arsenal for two main reasons:

1. It’s a contemporary piece of work (the author began his research in 1989 and completed the main body around 1996).
2. It can be used to illustrate a range of issues surrounding the use of participant observation – practical, theoretical and methodological – as a research method.



Background

In 1989 Sudhir **Venkatesh**, a graduate student at the University of Chicago, entered the Lake Park housing project armed only with a questionnaire and a desire to learn more about the lives of the people who lived in “The Projects” (the general name given to Public Housing provision across the USA).



He was almost immediately surrounded by a group of young black men he later came to understand belonged to the Black Kings – a well-organised gang that controlled a significant part of the drug trade in a territory dominated by the Robert Taylor Homes – one of the largest public housing projects in the world and home to a wide variety of some of the very poorest Chicago blacks.

During this initial encounter (and period of incarceration as a virtual prisoner of the gang), **Venkatesh** got to ask only one of his questions – “How does it feel to be black and poor?” – before being forced by his “captors” into the realisation that to make sense of this question it was pointless to ask it; to understand what it was like “to be black and poor” he had to experience what it was like to be both of these things – and to do this he needed access to the lives of the people in the Projects. He had, in other words, to live the lives they led (or as close to such an experience as it was possible for “an outsider” to have).

To this end **Venkatesh** spent around 7 years in his study, producing a vivid description of the lives and relationships of the black residents, gang members and non-members alike, of Robert Taylor Homes. In so doing, **Venkatesh** revealed a complex mix of **subculture** (the Black Kings were a highly-organised gang with a clear hierarchy, recruitment rituals, and socialisation processes) and **culture** – the gang were embedded in the day-to-day life of the Projects. Although their primary purpose was to make money through selling drugs (mainly crack cocaine), they also performed a range of secondary functions within their territory – from the provision of protection for Project residents from other gangs, through the organisation of social activities (such as Basketball games), to policing the Projects (involving things like the provision of shelter for “the homeless”).

Although **Venkatesh’s** findings are sociologically interesting what particularly concerns us here is how his research can be used to highlight some of the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of participant observation in a contemporary setting.

Research Methods

Venkatesh’s study was based around **overt participant observation** – the people he was observing knew he was engaged in a sociological study – and we can relate some of the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of this general method to his research in the following ways:

1. Access

How, in basic terms, to “get in” to a group is always an issue in observational research and **Venkatesh** solved this problem in two ways:

a. Ethnicity: His South Asian ethnic background allowed him to pass among the overwhelmingly African-American subjects of his study in a way that would have probably been denied to him if he had been white (since the only “white faces” in the Projects were those of the police – and, with one or two notable exceptions, they rarely ventured into the place except to make arrests and, it is implicitly suggested, extort protection money). **Venkatesh’s** initial encounter with the Black Kings was one where he was mistaken for a member of a rival (Mexican) gang – his ethnicity was variously considered by the people in the Projects to be “Mexican, “Spanish” or the largely-ubiquitous label “Ay-rab”.

The fact he was relatively young, casually dressed and a student at the University also gave him credentials accepted by both those in the gang and the Projects generally – something that leads into a second consideration:

b. Sponsorship: Access to the gang – and by extension the people who lived in the areas controlled by the gang – was secured in a classic way; **Venkatesh** was “sponsored” by “JT”, the local leader of the Black Kings (a situation that echoed **Whyte’s** much earlier (1930s) entrance into an Italian street gang through the sponsorship of its leader “Doc”).

JT’s sponsorship also gave **Venkatesh** access to various influential individuals in the Projects who were not gang members. After a time, once **Venkatesh** had earned JT’s trust, he was introduced to various people who, through a chain of further introductions, allowed **Venkatesh** to widen his research – away from the specific workings of the Black Kings and into areas like how tenant leaders dealt with various channels of “official power” (such as the Chicago Housing Authority who owned and managed the Projects or the police) that would have been denied to him without such sponsorship.



However...

While the ability to access all areas of a group is generally considered an advantage of overt – when compared to covert - participant observation, it's not necessarily the case that a researcher, simply by virtue of the fact they are acting overtly, can gain access to all areas of a group.

Venkatesh, for example, was sponsored by a then relatively junior gang leader in terms of the Black Kings' organisational hierarchy (above JT were various "lieutenants" and "captains" who controlled and managed "groups of gangs" across the city and they, in turn, were managed by a Board of Directors who had overall control of the "Black Kings franchise". It was only when JT started to rise in the gang hierarchy that **Venkatesh** began to get some, albeit very limited, access to the higher reaches of the organisation. This highlights the significant point that where the researcher is being sponsored by an individual within a relatively complex, hierarchical, organisation access may be limited to those areas where the sponsor can vouch for – and protect – the researcher.

In a slightly different way Venkatesh found his **physical access** to various parts of the huge and sprawling Robert Taylor Homes was actually restricted by his association with the Black Kings – his "known association" with this gang made it dangerous for him to venture "unaccompanied" into areas where rival gangs operated.

2. Recording data

One advantage of overt participant observation over its covert counterpart is the ability to conduct interviews, ask questions and openly record data – and while, after a time, **Venkatesh** was able to do the first two his data recording was largely confined to the classic *covert technique* of keeping a **field diary**; that is, he would write up his observations and conversations at some point *after* they had taken place. One significant advantage **Venkatesh** enjoyed was access to the flat of JT's mother (Ms. Mae); this enabled him to write-up his field diary shortly after the events he was recording took place.

However...

Although this technique meant the conversations **Venkatesh** reported were written up soon after they occurred this does raise questions about data **reliability** and **validity**. Although "Gang Leader for a Day" is filled with *apparently verbatim* reports of conversations it's evident they were actually reconstructions pieced together at some point "after the event".

Whether this "reliability problem" casts doubt on the validity of **Venkatesh's** observations is a matter for debate; he was able to capture the *spirit* of various conversations even where one might doubt their specific reliability. The problem – as with all forms of participant observation – is that the reader has to take on **trust** that the observer did what they said they did, saw what they said they saw and, of course, reported their observations accurately. While we have no reason to doubt that the events **Venkatesh** records actually happened, it is highly doubtful that the speech he reports as *verbatim* exchanges happened in exactly the way he reports them. In this respect, therefore, we should either ignore the problems relating to the recording of data presented by overt participant observation nor overstate the researcher's ability to record data easily and reliably.



3. Validity

In terms of research validity, it's generally the case that personal involvement and experience with the subjects of a study means the researcher gains valuable insights into the meanings, motivations and relationships within a group that, in turn, may explain *why* people behave in certain ways. Participant observation generally treats social research as a:

Two-way process – something that involves allowing people to “speak for themselves” as well as the ability to “experience things from the point-of-view of those involved”. This idea is significant for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, it suggests that research **validity** can be improved by observing a situation from different viewpoints – what **Denzin** (1970) has called:

Data triangulation: This conventionally involves gathering data through differing sampling strategies – such as collecting data at different times, in different situations or contexts and from different people.

In this instance the idea of **data triangulation** can be extended to include gathering data from both the individuals involved in a particular situation and, most significantly perhaps, the sociological observers own experiences in that situation. In this respect the sociological insights a researcher brings to the role of “participant observer” meant **Venkatesh** was able to make sense of certain forms of behaviour (such as dealing crack cocaine) or experiences (such as being black and poor) in ways that would not have been possible if the researcher had not been involved in the world they were reporting and studying.

Secondly, it distances itself from the idea of research based around the concept of a “*human zoo*” – that the researcher is somehow a “detached outsider” observing and recording the behaviour of a captive audience.



However...

One of the great “trade-offs” in sociological research generally occurs between reliability and validity – the higher the level of research validity, the lower its level of reliability – and while this is not inevitable (it is possible, of course, to produce sociological research that is both reliable and valid) it is generally the case that the more complex the social interaction the researcher is trying to capture the less reliable the overall data – and this is certainly true in Venkatesh’s research.

Apart from the general problems of data reliability posed by participant observation (the data is ultimately taken from one person’s (the researcher’s) point-of-view; some data – but not others – is always selected by the researcher for inclusion / exclusion from the study; it is impossible to replicate the research; we have to take “on trust” that the researcher observed what they claim to have observed and so forth) there is a specific reliability problem in this research that impinges directly on data validity, namely that **Venkatesh** reports conversations *as if* they were verbatim recordings – when clearly they were nothing of the sort (the reported conversations must have been reconstructed by **Venkatesh** at some later point in his field diary). While this doesn’t necessarily invalidate **Venkatesh’s** observations (we have, for example, no reason to believe the conversations and events he reports didn’t take place) it does illustrate the fact that the “reality” described by participant observation studies is invariably:

Reconstructed: That is, it represents a view of the world filtered through the eyes and ears of the observer. It is arguably therefore a *version of reality* that is no-more and no-less a “social construction” than, for example, an interview or a questionnaire. Those being observed do not so much speak directly to the reader as speak through the medium of the researcher.

4. Depth and Detail

A further aspect of **validity** here is the level of **data depth and detail** that can be obtained with this particular research method. As we've seen, **Venkatesh** spent a substantial amount of time with his research subjects (measured in years, rather than the months or weeks that is more common with alternative, largely quantitative, methods) and while the scope of the study was potentially vast – the Projects were home to many thousands of people – the amount of time spent on the research meant that it would be possible to generate a depth of data that gave a unique and wide-ranging insight into the daily lives of people living within the Projects.

However...

The ability to spend years studying a group in great depth and detail does, of course, have its problems, the most obvious of which is that the sociologist has to have the resources at their disposal that allows them to live with and among their subject matter. The kind of overt participant observation carried-out by **Venkatesh** meant that he had to have the economic resources at his disposal to maintain a certain lifestyle outside of his research since, unlike with covert observation, there is no real necessity to live with, or indeed like, the people being studied.

This highlights- and brings into sharp relief - a major problem with overt participant observation, namely that the involvement with the subject matter may actually be fairly **superficial**; while **Venkatesh** certainly experienced some of the things that were part-and-parcel of many people's life in the Projects (such as being shot at, injured or killed), he didn't seem to have any interest in actually trying to experience the day-to-day grind of workless poverty or life in apartments that could, at times, appear fairly grim. One of the problems with this particular style of research, therefore, is that researcher is there through **choice** – which meant they always have the choice of leaving (a choice that, in **Venkatesh's** case, was not available to the vast majority of the people he studied).

5. Going Native

A significant advantage of overt participant observation is that it generally makes it easier for the researcher to *separate* the roles of participant and observer (and thereby reduce the chances of becoming so involved in a group they stop observing and simply become a participant). In terms of sociological research the avoidance of "going native" is important because it suggests that research differs from, for example, journalism in that it brings a certain critical and evaluative eye to the behaviour being studied; the sociologist, in this respect, is not simply a biographer for the behaviour of the people being observed.

However...

Venkatesh's study is a good example of the way this general rule can become a little fuzzy around the edges. There were, for example, times when **Venkatesh** became so involved with the people he was studying that he acted "like one of them" as "they would behave" in a particular situation and effectively ceased to be an impartial observer. This occurred quite understandably at times – such as when a rival gang started shooting randomly at people, including **Venkatesh**, on the street. However, for the majority of the time it seems clear **Venkatesh** saw his role as identifying very clearly with the people he was observing.

In some ways this may have been relatively trivial (**Venkatesh** always seems to have accepted the general view of the residents that the local Housing Authority was corrupt) but it is evident he was also willing to trade privileged access to powerful people within the Projects in return for turning a relatively uncritical eye to their behaviour. While **Venkatesh** does, for example, suggest an element of corrupt behaviour among the "Project leaders" he generally declines to explore its possible consequences on the lives of "ordinary" Project dwellers. Similarly, while **Venkatesh** touches on the problems caused by a drug-dealing gang having effective control of the lives of the people living in the Projects he rarely tries to distance himself from the behaviour and interests of such people. In other words, we could argue that while **Venkatesh** didn't "go native", as such, he did "take sides" in a complex and convoluted debate.

The question of whether or not this is a “problem of the method itself” or simply an inevitable trade-off that a researcher has to make in some situations (gaining access to people who couldn’t be effectively studied in any other way) is a matter for debate. However, **Venkatesh’s** experience does show that the general question of “going native” is rarely an “either / or” situation (either the researcher does over-identify with the researched or they do not). Rather, this research highlights a couple of significant **ethical** and **methodological** points that we can illustrate in the following terms:

Hustling: One of **Venkatesh’s** key observations about what it meant to be “black and poor” in America was that the general worldview of such people was framed in terms of “hustling”; that is, the broad idea that “life in general” involved trying to gain an advantage over others in whatever way one could. In short, “hustling” involved dividing the world into two types:

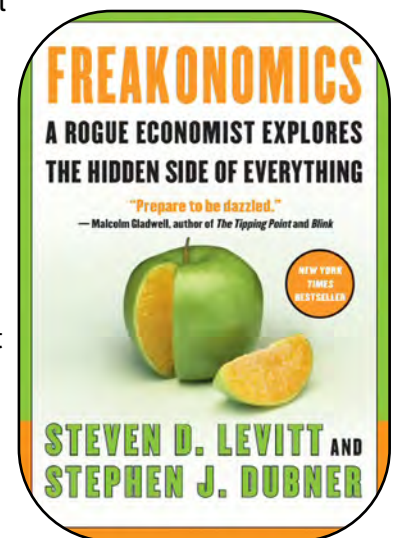
a. The Players – those who were able to use whatever means were available to their own advantage.

b. The Played – those who, in short, were the “victims” of the players.

In terms of **Venkatesh’s** research, an example of this distinction was that between those who sold drugs (the players) and those who bought them (the played). A more-subtle distinction was introduced, by **Venkatesh**, between different levels of gang membership. Within the gang hierarchy there was a very clear economic and political distinction between those at the top (the Black Kings’ Board of Directors) and those at the bottom (the ordinary gang members who sold drugs on the street). The economic rewards, as **Venkatesh** made clear, were very different, but the vast difference in power and influence was also apparent in his descriptions of how each group lived. In this respect, “the hustle” within the gang itself involved a small, select, band of players and a much larger, undifferentiated, mass of the played – those who risked their lives “on the street” selling small amounts of drugs for very little reward.

The study showed that the Black Kings gang structure was organised in a similar way to the organisation of a “legitimate business” – those at the very top (the Board of Directors) earned huge amounts of cash and lived in large, expensive, houses away from the Projects. One of their “problems” was dealing with this cash – they had started to “invest” the money where possible in “legitimate businesses” and some seems to have found its way back to the Projects in terms of sponsorship of social activities (such as Basketball competitions and a social club for residents). The “middle-ranking” members (such as JT) earned good money (certainly well above the national average) but those at the bottom – the “foot soldiers” who did the day-to-day dirty work of selling drugs, actually earned very little.

An interesting off-shoot of **Venkatesh’s** research – considered in much greater detail by **Levitt and Dubner** (2005) - was the observation that the vast majority of gang members “lived with their mums” – something that, while it didn’t fit very neatly with the general media stereotype of gang members living a wild, hedonistic and very lucrative lifestyle did reflect the fact they earned so little from crime that they couldn’t afford a home of their own. As they put it “whenever there are a lot of people willing and able to perform a job, that job doesn’t pay well”.



While this observation about the way poor blacks constructed their view of the world is not particularly new, **Venkatesh** was aware that during the course of his research it became apparent that he, too, was engaged in “hustling”; regardless of whether he could maintain an observational detachment from the people he was studying (a sense of **personal objectivity**) he saw that the more he tried to gain entrance to a world that was not really his, the more he tried to “exploit” people in terms of using them to get information

The longer his research went on, the more he came to realise he was objectifying the people with whom he came into contact; rather than seeing them “as individuals” with stories to tell he started to see them as people who could be “hustled” and “played” in order to allow him to gain more and more information about the world he was studying.

A further **ethical** consideration was that while this particular study may have begun with “an interest in people” the longer it continued the more apparent it became (to **Venkatesh** as well as the reader) that the overall objective had subtly changed; rather than documenting the “little picture” of individual lives and experiences the objective broadened to take in the “bigger picture” of life in the Projects – with the problem being that the people being studied were reduced to objects who could “aid or blockade” **Venkatesh’s** research. In other words, there is the (strong) suggestion that by the end of his study **Venkatesh** had started to use the people he met for his own particular ends.

Venkatesh also noted a further **ethical** and **methodological** dimension to his relationship with his sponsor “JT”:

At an early stage in the research JT seems to have used the idea that **Venkatesh** was “writing his life story” as a way of justifying **Venkatesh’s** presence in the Projects. Whether or not JT actually *believed* this is what **Venkatesh** was actually doing is not made clear, although **Venkatesh** does make passing reference to it at various points.

What is clear is that **Venkatesh** seems to have either gone along with this story (the best interpretation we can give is that both men were tacitly involved in the deception) or simply used JT’s belief as a means of carrying on his research (the worst interpretation here is that **Venkatesh** was hustling and playing JT for his own research ends).

Either way, this deceit raises **ethical** issues about the nature of participant observation; either the various respondents were being deceived about the true purpose of the research or, in the worst interpretation, **Venkatesh** allowed JT to believe his sponsorship was a *quid pro quo* for writing his life story; in other words, **Venkatesh** was engaged in a fundamental deception about what he was doing and why he was doing it.

6. The Observer Effect

A frequent criticism of overt participant observation is that the observer’s presence changes the way the people behave - and it’s probably true that, at least initially, **Venkatesh’s** presence had some (unknown and unquantifiable) effect on people’s behaviour. The question here, therefore, is the extent to which people who *know* they’re being studied change (consciously or subconsciously) the way they normally behave.

Venkatesh’s study goes some way to resolving this issue in that while there was some initial fascination about what he was doing and why he was doing it, the fact he became a very familiar figure around the Projects over an extended period suggests that he was, by-and-large, observing and recording people’s normal everyday behaviour.



However...

A couple of things qualify this conclusion:

1. **Venkatesh** was given “special treatment” in terms of access to people and places within the Projects; that is, he was invited to meetings or had personal access to people he would not have had if he hadn’t been identified as a researcher (or biographer...) allied to a powerful player within the Projects. Although the reasoning behind these invitations are not made clear, there is a suspicion that powerful individuals within the Projects saw association with **Venkatesh** as somehow advantageous – but whether their behaviour actually changed as a result of **Venkatesh’s** presence is, of course, arguable.

2. **Venkatesh** seems to have assumed a certain *special status* within the Projects’ – as someone with access to powerful people without having the kind of traditional powerbase (gang membership) normally associated with such power.

One of the (methodological) problems this seems to have created is that **Venkatesh** became not just a *part* of the story he was documenting (something that is probably unavoidable in this type of research) but, much more significantly perhaps, he became a central player in the story. In other words, **Venkatesh** didn’t simply document the behaviour he witnessed, he became, at times, the **focal point** around which everything developed and crystallized.

This comes across not just in the (sub) title of the book – “A Rogue Sociologist Crosses the Line” (UK) and “A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets” (US), both of which suggest the research was “sociologically unique” (it isn’t) - but more significantly in the way the behaviour he observes is centred around **Venkatesh**; in this respect **Venkatesh** is less the lens through which the behaviour of poor black Americans is filtered (which is something very difficult to avoid with this type of research) and more the central cog in the narrative. It illustrates, in other words, a particular problem with participant observation, namely that it has a danger of becoming more about the *researcher* – how *they* feel about what *they* experience – and less about the meanings and motivations of those nominally being researched.

Video Links



If you want to explore Venkatesh’s work from a slightly different angle there are a couple of video clips available in which he reads from and talks about being “Gang Leader for a Day”...

[Venkates Web Site](#)

The official site contains a range of video and text resources (such as book reviews). There’s even an email address for the man himself...

[Fora TV](#)

A 50-minute programme from Fora.tv (split into a number of much shorter discrete chapters for your easy-viewing pleasure) that cover Venkatesh reading from “Gang Leader” and answering questions about the book and research.

References

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Levitt, Steven and **Dubner**, Stephen (2007) “Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything”: Penguin



