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## The Role of Sense of Belonging in Gang Leader for a Day

Humans are innately social creatures who group themselves together to satisfy their hierarchical need of belongingness. Within these groups, individuals find comfort in surrounding themselves with others who share similar beliefs, values, characteristics, and goals in life. This fundamental aspect of human nature ultimately creates an “Us versus Them” mindset, in which the “in” group will view its fellow members as superior to other groups, differentiating themselves by means of ridiculing and making up false analogies about the other group. To individuals, especially adolescents, who live in poverty and less-than-adequate conditions, having that sense of belonging to a gang whose members struggle with similar hardships may be what ultimately gives them hope to continue on. In his novel, *Gang Leader for a Day*, Sudhir Venkatesh uses an ethnographic approach to give a firsthand, inside out analysis on the internal dynamics of the Black Kings gang. By directly submerging himself into the gang as a graduate student, Venkatesh bridges the gap between the media’s portrayal of gang members and individuals who live in poverty on television and how they actually act, and he illuminates the misconceptions that many external people have surrounding gangs in relation to gang violence, power, police involvement and protection, and the gang members’ work or economic dynamics.

News stations often broadcast the most horrific scenes surrounding gang activity, such as images of homicide evidence, drug busts, and stores that have been broken into. Rather than stepping in and experiencing life with prevalent gang activity, many people passively accept the scenes that they see and will automatically view the people involved as criminals. The gang members depicted in the novel only used violence as they deemed fit, which was mostly to assert power or dominance over one another. Often times, they did not necessarily want to be violent, but felt as though they had to keep up an intimidating image to protect themselves from rival gangs or intruders. In fact, after a drive-by at Robert Taylor, the young gang members who were left to stand guard usually “bragged about toughness and their willingness to kill for the family...But with the danger real, they looked shaky, eyes wide full of fear” (Venkatesh, 2008, p. 223). It was not necessarily a total facade because other instances proved that the gang members were more than willing to physically harm those who have wronged the gang. In the event of beating up Billy and Otis, J.T. chooses to punish both of them by punching them to the ground because of money issues, stealing, and being in debt to the gang (p. 134). Billy and Otis held their hands behind their back and willingly allowed J.T. to hit them. Violence in this case is used more as a punishment than doing it off the cuff as others may assume. It demonstrates that asserting violence is a byproduct of having high status and power within a gang, which is what gang members ultimately wish to obtain.

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Power within the Robert Taylor community as a whole usually stems from how close a person is to the Black Kings gang, their association with the gang's economical benefits, or how high up they are in the hierarchy within the gang itself. J.T. and Ms. Bailey, for example, were the "neighborhood's most formidable power brokers" (p. 201). J.T. achieved his power simply through instilling fear among others. The other gang members below him are generally young, spiteful, men who are tired of the social system that put them in the gang in the first place and keeps them and their families in Robert Taylor, succumb to its unforgiving poverty. Once a person gains enough power within this gang, others are willing to work below them or be associated with them because they know they will have protection. Even when Venkatesh leaked confidential financial data of different hustlers in Robert Taylor, nobody came to beat him up because of his association with J.T. Ms. Bailey is "the local IRS' who manages the building (p.192). She is powerful because she has the ability to take shelter and welfare benefits away from residents. She is able to get the residents' apartments fixed, get them inexpensive electricity, and found other projects due to her connection with J.T. and the gang, as well as with multiple hustlers throughout the building. She realizes that it may be a little crooked to do business with a gang like she does, but she explains to Venkatesh, "In the projects it's more important that you take care of the problem first. Then you worry about *how* you took care of the problem" (p. 164).

This interconnectedness within the community echoes throughout the economic system as well, which very much mirrors legal business models. However, Venkatesh refers to this system as "outlaw capitalism" (p. 37). People on the outside think that the gang members are simply thugs who sell crack and other drugs to make a quick dollar and run off, kind of like a pastime, when in reality it is all part of a very fragile system. If one person messes up, such as coming up short with a payment, it affects the entire web of people working together to stay afloat. This is why gang members try not to get in trouble as much; not because they are scared of the police, but if one person get arrested or murdered, they are unable to carry out business and then everyone else has to pick up their slack or bring in someone new for the business. Essentially, people at Robert Taylor make more money in the streets and off of their welfare checks than they would if they went out and tried to get a legitimate job (p. 176). Due to social pressures and stigma, they would have an extremely hard time finding such jobs, and there are basically no economic opportunities for people besides the underground, illegal commerce even if they wanted to leave. For example, J.T. himself went to college on an athletic scholarship, loved reading about history and politics, and got a sales job after but felt limited because of his racial boundaries in the workplace (p. 27). Furthermore, the economic ledgers provided by Tbone to Venkatesh showed that their economy unequally distributed profits earned on the street. This means that there was also a hierarchy through which those who had more power, like J.T. got paid more, while his foot soldiers, usually teenagers or new members, were paid considerably less even though they were more exposed to street dangers. Ultimately, however, it was worth it because the jobs associated with the gang come with valuable benefits that legitimate jobs

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could not offer, such as the gang's protection if someone is ever in trouble.

Such protection proved to be extremely valuable, considering that the gang had more power and influence in the Robert Taylor neighborhood than the Chicago Police Department did. Due to "decades of government neglect," if a shooting occurred or someone got robbed, the gangs are called to come help well before the police would be called (p. 37-38). A very large misconception that the police are always just, unbiased, and lawful rings false throughout the novel. Because they know their influence and power is so little over this demographic of people, the police seemingly get revenge by directly robbing them of their goods and money (p. 231). This is best described through the contrasting characterization of officer Reggie, who grew up in Robert Taylor housing and genuinely wants to give back and help the community, and officer Jerry, who uses his uniform to manipulate people. The police are able to break into the gang's parties, rob the members, and get away with it simply because they wear a uniform. Interestingly, this robbery is no more legal than the hustles that compose the gang's underground economy, but there are seemingly no repercussions for the police.

Venkatesh took his notes from memory throughout his years with the gang, which questions his validity in terms of the conversations he had and the details surrounding his experiences. However, these details do not make or break his overall ethos as a man who was able to pull off such a dangerous feat. He was successful at becoming one with the gang and so close to J.T. most likely because J.T. took pride in telling about his community's history. Presumably, J.T. was used to being interrogated by the police who questioned his authority. Venkatesh, however, showed fascination in his life so J.T. probably felt that he could freely discuss the details and show him what really happens without fear of getting caught or reported. J.T. himself also showed interest in how sociologists and academia were portraying gangs and life in poverty in their studies. No law will prevent gangs from emerging, and no war on gangs will extinguish their growth. Venkatesh demonstrates the key to understanding the other side of any situation is through direct discussion and interaction between both parties. Without this communication, people limit themselves of gaining such knowledge, and potentially solving problems that would create the social divide in the first place.

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