



Copyright © 2002 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)  
Vol 3(1): 91–111[1466–1381(200203)3:1;91–111;021725]

## 'Doin' the hustle'

### Constructing the ethnographer in the American ghetto

■ Sudhir Venkatesh

*Columbia University, New York, USA*

**ABSTRACT** ■ My own recently completed ethnographic study of a poor public housing development in Chicago provides the empirical frame for an examination of the social production of the ethnographer from the informants' point of view. I argue that reconstructing the informants' point of view – in this case their perceptions of the fieldworker as, variously, academic hustler, 'nigger just like us' and 'Arab' – can aid the researcher in determining patterns of structure and meaning among the individual, group, and/or community under study. This article reflects on informants' construction of my subsumption within a field of social relations in which the 'hustle' was a dominant organizing principle.

**KEY WORDS** ■ hustling, informants, fieldwork relations, image of fieldworker, gangs, black American ghetto, urban poverty

It is not altogether surprising that the ethnographer studying the American ghetto has become a curio for American sociology. Indeed, he (nearly all are male) is nothing short of a fetish. Hearing the factors that enabled him to enter the heart of the ghetto has become as interesting a tale as the 'ghetto specific' behavior lurking in the emergent narratives. There are certainly interesting and curious dimensions of fieldwork practice in the American ghetto, particularly since most ethnographers are male and non-minority,

while the subjects are blacks and Latinos. But the sociological interest in the fieldworker–informant relation has not gone much further than veiled voyeurism. It has not received the critical scrutiny or self-reflection of its counterparts in anthropology (see, for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). Indeed, one aspect of ethnographic practice has received almost no attention at all, namely, what was the informants' experience of having an ethnographer in their midst?

For nearly a decade, I have been conducting ethnographic research in poor, urban, predominantly African-American communities in Chicago, Illinois. In order of frequency, the three most common fieldwork-related questions presented to me by other scholars are: 'Were you scared?' 'Did they *know* you are an Indian?' 'What kind of illegal acts did you have to commit in order to gain entrée?' I sometimes mention that I am equally busy studying the drug consumption patterns among rich, white 20-year-olds in New York who come from elite families, but I am never questioned about their capacity for intelligent reasoning, my fear or issues of legality and ethical compromise in the field.

This article examines the social production of the ethnographer, in the sense of how they are viewed by informants – a critical moment in any observational study – by reconstructing the status and identity of the researcher from the informants' point of view. It is an exercise in 'reflexive science' (Burawoy, 1998) and is meant to investigate the conditions that made possible the completion of one particular ethnographic study on the American urban poor (Venkatesh, 2000). I argue that if we take seriously the proposition that relations between fieldworker and informant form a constitutive part of ethnographic research, then reconstructing the informants' point of view – in this case the perceptions of the fieldworker and the research initiative – can aid the researcher in the more general objective of determining patterns of structure and meaning among the individual, group, and/or community under study. The 'data' of an ethnography, then, should not be restricted solely to conventional informational documents, such as fieldworker observations of subjects' behavior and interactions, interview data, earnings and expenditure surveys, etc. The interaction of fieldworker and informant is itself potentially revealing of the local properties of social structure and may also be mined to illuminate chosen research questions.

The argument builds on an established history of reflection on participant-observation and qualitative methods (Stocking, 1992).<sup>1</sup> The article extends current meditations on ethnography (Willis, 2000), but it parts company to some degree by documenting the progression of the informant–fieldworker relationship over the course of a field study (Johnson, 1975; Rabinow, 1977; Burawoy, 1998; Daniels, 1999). Typically, ethnographers do not attempt systematically to reconstruct the researcher's identity from the vantagepoint of the informants. Instead, it is more common for the informant–researcher

interaction to appear in a brief discussion of the process of entering a field-work site and negotiating with informants to secure valid and reliable data (see Hannerz, 1969: 205–7; Stack, 1974: 17–20; Gans, 1982; MacLeod, 1987; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Patillo-McCoy, 1999: 7). As Pollner and Emerson (1983: 235) say, 'it should not be surprising that processes of becoming an insider have tended to preoccupy fieldworkers'.

My own recently completed ethnographic study of a poor public housing development provides the empirical frame here for a more systematic consideration of the informant-researcher relationship. From 1990 until 1995, I studied the relationship of street gangs, tenants, local organizations, and various arms of the state in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes 'project'. The resulting book, *American Project* (Venkatesh, 2000), focuses on the reproduction of social order in the context of neglectful state practices, concentrated poverty, and eviscerated public institutions. My focus was in part on how tenants expended their resources and great energy to meet basic needs. Sometimes they flouted laws in the process. 'You got to hustle to survive,' is a well-worn phrase that tenants use to describe 'project living' (for comparative studies, see Merry, 1981; Wacquant, 1998). Even if it means taking advantage of friends or kin, no opportunity is missed to procure a good or service or to supplement income and symbolic capital. 'Doin' the hustle' is a set of behavior with particular salience and meaning in Robert Taylor – as it is generally and historically among the ghetto poor. It is both a 'survival strategy' (Stack, 1974; Anderson, 1976) and a means of crafting an identity: that is, simultaneously, about adapting to material constraints and attempting to reproduce a self-efficacious, meaningful existence (Valentine, 1978). This article is a reflection on my subsumption within a field of social relations in which the 'hustle' was a dominant organizing principle.

### **Hustling in the 'seventy-million dollar ghetto'**

Constructed in 1962, the Robert Taylor Homes is the largest of three housing developments in Chicago's 'South Side'. Its 28 nearly contiguous high-rise structures appear as a set of large uniform, concrete boxes, 'cookie-cutter' in design and colored in bleak gray and brown. They were built to provide decent, affordable housing to poor and working-class African-Americans who were confined to the ghetto by residential discrimination and legally-enforced segregation in the housing market (Hirsch, 1983). From the beginning, though, Robert Taylor's landlord, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), neglected to provide sufficient upkeep and social service provision. Conditions quickly deteriorated, and Robert Taylor soon came to be characterized variously as the '\$70-million ghetto', the 'Congo Hilton',

and a 'deathtrap . . . where the dangerous life is routine'.<sup>2</sup> Today Robert Taylor stands as a disenfranchised community with a 90 per cent unemployment rate and a similar percentage reliant on government transfers as their sole income source.

From the outset tenants had to look outside the government and the formal economy, where few jobs were available, to meet their needs (Venkatesh, 2000: chapter 4). They coped by devising intricate systems of exchange and reciprocity to share resources and help each other make ends meet. For example, households in Robert Taylor tend to appear as headed by single women with children, but behind public view lies a complex 'domestic network' (Stack, 1974) with a permutation of income earners, kinfolk, lovers, partners and spouses lying outside of the state's gaze. On a more or less continuous basis the leaseholder must simultaneously hide occupants while trading favors with – or directly bribing – tenant management and law enforcement officials to ensure that companions, boarders, and income earners are not evicted and that government income streams are protected. Such physically tiresome but necessary labor is part of a generic effort to ensure social reproduction by supplementing income through off-the-books work,<sup>3</sup> procuring enforcement services through bribes and quid pro quo exchanges (whether from the municipal police or from street gangs who also provide protective services in exchange for silence during police investigations), and developing instrumental relations with CHA personnel to obtain apartment repair. In short, they are the stuff of the 'hustle'.

At its core, hustling is undeniably 'a particular type of symbolic capital, namely the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive them, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gain' (Wacquant, 1998: 3). Myriad hustling practices can destroy the social fabric, as evidenced by disputes over underground trading that lead to fighting, reduced public safety, and possible eviction from a government-subsidized apartment. The majority of hustlers are reacting primarily to the impossibility of finding meaningful, less risky, and better-paying employment in the wider state-sanctioned markets; 'hustlers . . . are on the street to turn a dollar any way they can' (Liebow, 1967: 3; see also Milner, 1972). No goods and services are per se inadmissible in public housing-based 'hustles'. A leaseholder who reports to the Housing Authority manager the illicit behavior of a neighbor may win temporary relief from surveillance over her own improprieties. A five-dollar payment to the elected tenant representative – who typically receives first notice regarding employment opportunities in municipal agencies – may enable the tenant to acquire information before it becomes widely known. In this manner, a number of resources, goods, and services are drawn into the social field (Moore, 1969).

To secure their 'hustles', tenants guard personal information regarding domestic arrangements and income generation from state agents who punish

incidents of illicit activity and violations of co-habitation. A fuller list of those who search for such information, and to whom tenants voice their private affairs circumspectly, would include: police officers, social workers and public welfare bureaucrats rooting out unreported income; tenant leaders surveying transgressions of apartment 'upkeep' standards; journalists interested in a human interest feature or criminal incident; and gang leaders exerting monopoly control over underground economies. Knowledge of household activity and income is valuable for their respective efforts to enforce laws (informal and formal) and recoup debts. We must add to this list the social scientist – most often a fieldworker, psychologist or survey researcher, but occasionally a medical student administering a public health questionnaire. By virtue of his or her interest in household information, s/he is a potential threat. Thus, by seeking information about a wide range of tenant affairs, I became a participant in their 'hustle'.

To cope with the influx of information seekers, tenants employ a masking device: they usually provide only short, stilted answers that reveal just the barest details of their lives. Alternatively, they stay close to the narratives that the agents expect to hear: I asked Oattie Davis, a tenant living in Robert Taylor since the late 1960s, 'Why do all of you look like you've seen a ghost when someone interviews you?' He replied:

We tell all of you the same fucking thing – crime is real bad around here, gangs is getting out of control, we love America, we hate public aid, we want jobs [Isn't all that true?] . . . We just trying to keep you happy, get you off our backs, you know, answer all them ridiculous questions about 'how you feel living here?' 'What you going to do to better yourself?' Nigger, you know we know you don't care about us. Or you wouldn't be asking that stupid shit all the time.

I adjusted to tenants' strategic interaction with information-seekers by forgoing the use of standard interview protocols, but this did not necessarily mean that I received more accurate or truthful responses as a result. In addition to their interpretation of the interviewer as a potentially intrusive *state agent*, they interpreted students and other information gatherers in two other ways. Some were *conduits* to the wider world whom they could coax, beseech, request, or prod into giving up a resource or service. For example, they might ask a visiting social worker to persuade a police officer to forgo arrest of a household member. Others became *customers* for local entrepreneurs – for instance, a case worker administering a psychological evaluation might need an oil change or other car maintenance while s/he is inside a local apartment; and, in my case, a sociologist dressed like a hippie and with a stated interest in the drug economy might have friends and family members who might want to buy marijuana, cocaine, or heroin.

All three roles that researchers could occupy – state agent, conduit, and

customer – were shaped by dynamics occurring outside the housing development. Tenants recognized their relatively limited capacity to shape public discourse about ‘project living’; specifically, the ways in which their identity as public housing tenants was constructed in larger publics. Many local stakeholders were deeply skeptical of researchers who promised that their analyses would have ‘social policy implications’ to improve life for tenants. In fact, one pastor had been collecting the ‘informed consent’ forms distributed by local researchers for over a decade. A three-inch-high pile of promissory notes from prominent academics, some based in local community colleges and others as far as away as Harvard University, greeted me in his office as I tried to explain sincerely, with an overstated sense of self-importance, that my own study would reframe ‘the way we think about poor people, the way talk about “community” in America, and how we think about devising social policies to remedy social inequities’. While some individuals expressed their support for the role that research could play in promoting social advancement, their anger and cynicism about research initiatives were shaped by an inability to exercise a public voice such as social scientists seemed to enjoy as well as by the refusal of researchers to provide them with data, information, and assistance. Yet, understandably, most did not refuse the entreaties of interviewers because the five, ten or 50-dollar interview fee that researchers usually paid was not a trivial amount relative to their household earnings.<sup>4</sup>

### **The academic hustler**

The ‘hustle’ was a social-structural attribute of ‘project living’, so it would be mistaken to think that over time, by gaining the trust or confidence of tenants, my relations with the tenants could escape or transcend its mediating influence. However, my role in the local landscape did change significantly during my fieldwork tenure and, importantly, each of the personas attributed to me was shaped in some way by the prevalence and importance of hustling in social reproduction. This was apparent even in the early phases of my fieldwork, when tenants tended to perceive me as either a gang member or a sympathizer. Tenants, particularly parents, grandparents, and guardians, questioned my motives because ‘students’ (usually in college or high school) who visited the community usually tutored schoolchildren. They did not take up quarter in a household, and they remained in the housing development for hours, not continuously for months at a time.

My extended stay in the community and my preference for observation (read: note-taking usually outside tenants’ gaze) over interview-based elicitation gradually reconfigured tenants’ perceptions of me. Over time public accusations that I was a gang member ceased, but my extended tenure in several

households continued to provoke questions: Why did I choose to document practice rather than ask scripted questions about attitudes? Why was it necessary for my research to stay overnight with families? The local Black King's gang members knew that I myself was not purchasing large quantities of narcotics; however, many assumed I was hoping to use my ties to gang leaders in order to purchase drugs and establish an underground business that catered to the University of Chicago student body. Some discreetly offered to work with me to expand the gang's markets, hoping that they might personally benefit from the increased revenue. Local stakeholders and tenant leaders also began using me for their own purposes. Some asked whether I was a friend of the 'Spanish Cobras', a local Puerto Rican gang that had developed ties to the city's African-American street gangs, in the hope of using my good offices to reduce conflicts and to stabilize their drug-trafficking operations. Having observed me passing the time in local parks and parking lots reading Spanish newspapers (I was enrolled in university Spanish-language classes), a few tenants suspected that I was gang-affiliated. A few willingly offered a rendition of my biography, one that wove together 'student', 'gang member', and 'immigrant'. It was rumored that I had come to America with my family to work in the strawberry fields; in Chicago I became a college student and member of a Latino gang; I was trying to supply narcotics to the housing development and, thus, I was interested in the local Black King gang.

In one particularly telling incident, tenant leaders and local gang leaders summoned me to a meeting to address recent conflicts between citywide black and Mexican street gangs. The latter were rumored to be planning a drive-by shooting on the local Black King gang. I was asked to provide assistance.

'Yo Julio, we need your help,' an elderly man barked at me as I entered the room. I thought his invocation of 'Julio' was in jest.

'Yeah, why don't you call your friends,' another tenant said. 'Tell them, Julio. Tell them to get off our backs. You were running with these Mexicans. Tell them we don't need no trouble.'

'Running with them?' I muttered. 'My name's not Julio.'

'Julio, yo, Julio! What's this sign mean,' one Black King member said, contorting his fingers in an awkward position. 'Does that mean they're coming? Does that mean they're coming after us? You speak Spanish, what does that mean?! We have a meeting with these niggers tonight, so you'd better come with us, tell them to back off.'

(from fieldnotes)

This incident demonstrated clearly that I could not occupy a disinterested role. I brought resources to the neighborhood and also offered an avenue to

the wider world, not necessarily in ways I could foresee or liked. I tried to counter local perceptions that I had ties to local gangs, black and Latino. I looked to other ethnographies for techniques to handle informants' perceptions of the fieldworker. These texts offered a standard chronology of fieldwork: initial awkward moments in which the role of the fieldworker required clarification were inevitable but, once 'access' was gained, the subjects' world would reveal itself. Few mentioned that informants might place me squarely in local social organization; in the case of the urban poor, that I would be quickly incorporated into a landscape defined by the continuous need to find any and all available means to ensure social order and to make ends meet on a daily basis.

As I moved through the broader populace, new constructions of my role in the community congealed, each shaped by the contours of the 'hustle'. Most important, I needed to look no further than my own ethnographic labor – reconstructed from the tenants' point of view – to understand that the 'hustle' was not only a practice with particular salience in ghetto spaces but also a perceptual frame. Tenants would make clear over the next few years that they understood quite well that the ghetto was a source of value to me, many opining that I was 'making my money' by translating their lives into presentable, titillating stories for 'the folks who read books all day and who just want to hear stories of black folk killing each other'. They made clear not only that I could not avoid getting involved in their 'hustles', but that in many ways, my own art form, the ethnographic craft, was an exemplary 'hustle'.

### **'A nigger, just like us'**

After my first two years of fieldwork, which had focused on the local street gangs, I wanted to situate their behavior in a wider context. In particular, I wanted to learn more about the overall workings of the underground economy and about the many other actors who hid their income and who sought illegal opportunities for revenue generation. But developing relationships with other segments of the Robert Taylor community was not easy because of my two-year association with the gang. To that point my interactions with tenants had been dominated by attempts to allay their fears that I was a state agent or gang member. I now needed to appease them *and* solicit their involvement in my study. I needed information on their lives and their experiences in Robert Taylor.

Accessing other sites of underground trading was difficult because tenants viewed me as a 'friend of the Black Kings'. Importantly, the Black Kings regulated underground economies, a role they had taken over from the elected tenant leaders in the mid 1980s. While tenant leaders suspected that



I might be an advocate of the local group that had usurped one base of their power and a source of extra income, those in the general tenant body feared that I would report their hidden work to the gang leaders – who would then extort 'street taxes' from them.

Over the next year I sought ways to signal my independence from the gangs – usually, by spending less time with its members – and I spent little time attending gang meetings and gang-sponsored social events. Instead, I concentrated my attention on the sites at which tenants traded goods and services with one another. On several occasions I participated in the informal economy by buying some food or bringing my car to a local mechanic who worked clandestinely in a local parking lot. On occasion, I brought my friends' cars to get repairs and maintenance. Having befriended more non-gang affiliated tenants, over time I managed to gain some independence from the gang.

One particular event precipitated the change. A summer basketball tournament involving several factions of the local Black King's gang had reached the championship game. As in most inner-city basketball contests (whether formal tournaments or spontaneous 'pick up' games), the players acted as the referees, calling fouls on one another. With no third party arbiter, disputes could produce lively debate as players jostled verbally and, less frequently, to defend and challenge fouls physically. Near the end of the game, with the score tied, a number of questionable calls by players led to a search for an impartial referee – an unusual occurrence signifying the importance of the contest in the minds of players. Players and fans were nervous partly because the prizes included bragging rights for tenants (each team represented a set of residential buildings); to heighten the public interest, the gang leaders had waged several thousand dollars on the outcome. According to tradition, part of the winnings funded a community-wide party that evening.

'Yo, Sudhir,' Anthony, the Black King leader, yelled to me, waving his arms. 'Come over here nigger and referee this game. It's almost over, so hurry up.'

'OK, fine, let him ref. He's *fair*,' a member of the opposing team concurred.  
(from fieldnotes)

The thought of refereeing the game frightened me. I had little experience refereeing. To that point, I had refereed one game in which I called so many fouls on one team that there were no substitutes left – a feat that led them to physically accost me en masse.

I decided to minimize my presence, running up and down the court appearing to be attentive and authoritative. This was a fanciful strategy; within the first few seconds it was clear that players would make their own calls and look to me for affirmation. Indeed, I was asked at each turn not simply to adjudicate the alleged infraction, but to state my allegiance for one or the other segment of the community. Players and fans asked not whether

I saw a violation occur, but, 'whose side are you on, who are you with?' On one of these occasions, as a player drove to the basket and was struck in the head by an opponent, I was asked to call a foul. In response to a cry from the crowd, 'Who are you going for?', I replied inexplicably, 'Whoever's losing, that's the side I'm on, I'm making *all* calls for the losers'. This declaration was met with a roar of laughter, which added much-needed levity, and for the remainder of the contest and into the evening I repeated my subaltern leanings by saying how much I identified with 'losers' in the context of the American class structure.

The invocation of 'loser' and the discussions that evening about politics and class, where I made clear my own left political proclivities, proved to be significant in the months ahead. As I have indicated, I sought ways to signal my independence from the gangs and in my use of 'loser' I had meant to demonstrate my affinity for the excluded and the underdog. Tenants shared this meaning, but many understood my use of the term as signaling empathy for – and perhaps even proximity to – their own social standing. In the coming days, the word 'nigger' increasingly colored their greetings. I thought that 'nigger' was an in-group designation. In America the word has two powerful historical roots and associated uses. It is a derogatory term used by whites to insult blacks. But it has also appeared among African-Americans in uses intended to have more affectionate connotations, indexing a common social status premised on a racialized and outcast subjectivity. I asked Ottie Davis and Kenny Davenport, two tenants who had been supportive when I had encountered problems earlier in my fieldwork, about this change in my treatment and the reasons for the increasing use of 'nigger'. Their reply was revealing of my own ignorance and the fact that the 'hustle' remained the modal framework in which my behavior was framed:

'Do you think that people like me more now than before?' I said to Ottie and Kenny, wanting to understand the significance of my new label. 'Is that why they're calling me nigger and acting different?'

'You're a nigger, Sudhir,' said Ottie, putting his hand on my back. 'Ain't nothing wrong with that. You don't work, you ain't making much money, you living with families in the projects. You trying to get by. You're a nigger just like us.'

'You see, Sudhir, we don't discriminate, man,' Kenny chimed in. 'If you struggling, you struggling. And, look at you, hair all messed up, you ain't had no new clothes since I known you. You poor, just like us. Tell me that ain't the truth.'

'It's like we was talking about before,' continued Ottie, recalling our discussion of the distinctions among the city's African-Americans. 'You got

African-Americans, folks that got money, you know, but that forget where they came from, and you got niggers. Niggers ain't just folks who ain't got nothing. It's folks who never forget where they came from.'

(from fieldnotes)

I could hardly deny that my economic circumstances might warrant this new interpretation. When people asked, I told them that I was earning approximately \$12,000 per year as a graduate student, slightly more than the average income of local households. At that point, I was taking public transportation nearly everywhere, I dressed with bohemian tones and, perhaps most important, I spoke often of a professional desire to find a full-time teaching job. In other words, I was unemployed and perceived to be an active hustler in my own way, searching for any available means to supplement my income like the majority of the tenant body.

In subsequent days, fewer underground entrepreneurs actively hid their illegal entrepreneurial activity when I passed by. I spent more time with older segments of the community, which allayed tenant fears that I supported the gang's taxation of local entrepreneurs. In addition, I had helped nearly two dozen residents find employment in the neighborhoods surrounding Robert Taylor, which, to some tenants, meant that I was probably receiving some type of monetary 'payoff' from the employer. And there had been no surprise police busts for the long stretch during which I had been intimately observing local underground entrepreneurs. This helped erase suspicion that I was working undercover for law enforcement purposes. As a consequence, I entered hitherto unrevealed arenas of non-state regulated trading, such as prostitution, illegal sales of food stamps and government-issued social security cards, and car theft rackets. I do not think that tenants simply trusted me more than in the past; they merely thought I had my own 'hustle going on'. In other words, in relentlessly seeking information on mundane as well as extraordinary aspects of their lives, I was 'hustling' like them. They assumed that data collection was part of my world of work, one of the many ways I gained income. And for those who understood that data on the urban poor was in fact a sought-after commodity in social science, their speculations were 'on the money'.

Owing to my connections with actors and organizations in the wider world I was seen as a special type of local 'hustler' (Stack, 1974: 20). Tenants tried to enlist me in countless entrepreneurial schemes, typically requesting that I find clients for small-scale services such as house painting or auto care and, on occasion, soliciting support for more elaborate ventures such as drug sales and the resale of stolen weapons. I knew that if I avoided collusion in their schemes entirely, doors would close in front of me quickly. I decided to be selective in my involvement. I would offer token support for those entrepreneurs who sold *licit* goods and services, such as a gypsy cab

driver or a car mechanic. But I refused to participate in the drug trade and would not find prospective 'johns' for prostitutes. What harm was there, I thought, in bringing a friend's car to the housing development for repair? What was immoral about buying boxed lunches from a leaseholder earning off-the-books income? Doing so would demonstrate my empathy with their struggle to survive harsh material circumstances.

But the ethical and practical lines I drew between the world of licit and illicit commodities did not match those of the tenants who labored in the underground economy. Assistance to entrepreneurs, however irregular, only increased my reputation as a hustler and, when I refused to help certain tenants (because of time constraints or unwillingness to support their specific schemes), I met with hostility. When I explained my calculus for patronizing licit over illicit commodities, many tenants were startled. Did I not understand that the 'shady' entrepreneurs (Drake and Cayton, 1945) also needed to survive like their counterparts who fixed cars and sold lunches? One young woman chastised me for refusing to help her locate prospective johns from the University of Chicago student population: 'What's the matter, you think you're better than us? You're just a nigger, Sudhir, don't forget it.'

Once again, I turned for counsel to Oattie and Kenny. I asked the two young men why people were growing angry at my selective assistance to local entrepreneurs.

'You got to be hustling. You can't understand until you walk in those shoes,' said Oattie, 'It don't really matter if you selling shorts and tee-shirts like my Auntie does or if you slanging dope, man. It's about survival, it's about hustling, getting your shit on, so you can feed your family.'

'Fuck that,' I said impatiently, 'I'm not going to help Peanut find a john. I'm not her pimp. I just don't want to do that around here.'

'You know what it's like? I'm going to tell you, but you ain't gonna like it.' Kenny instructed, sighing as if this required considerable patience. 'You come around here asking lot of questions, getting in folks' business all the time. What you give a fuck if this person dying or if their families are really messed up? You just care if they selling dope, right, 'cause that's what you want to understand? Am I right? You don't care about all these poor niggers. You got to write your book or you don't get your money. You ain't got time to worry what folks think about you, you just got to take care of your hustle. You think they don't know what you doing [with the book you're writing], [that] you gonna make a lot of money. Same thing with these niggers. They just looking out for themselves. You can't just come around here helping who you want, thinking that's OK and shit, that you doing good for folks. Don't work like that around here, man.'

'That's what we call a power thing, right?' added Ottie. 'Folks just see you acting like you a little prince or something. But, who says you the big dog?'  
(from fieldnotes)

Once I heard the parallel between my own fieldwork and tenants' day-to-day 'hustles', I could not help thinking of my own ethnographic labor as yet another 'hustle'. The commonalities were concrete; aspects of my work resonated with their own schemes to supplement income. I had explained my student role as being 'paid' to write a thesis until I found a full-time academic position. This description did not match their profile of 'student'. Instead it appeared to be an opportunistic temporary arrangement similar to those sought after by tenants. Although I did not pay people who participated in my study,<sup>5</sup> I gave rent money to families with whom I stayed and I found employment for others. All this gave the impression that there were material benefits for speaking with me, and it was not far-fetched for tenants to speculate that I paid money for information.

The reconfiguration of my identity as 'nigger' and 'hustler' may have revealed localized systems of meaning, but my immediate reaction was to reduce my ethnographic 'engulfment' in the underground arena (Pollner and Emerson, 1983: 252). Sensing that I had gained sufficient information for a dissertation, I tried to extricate myself from the underground economy – and eventually from active fieldwork entirely. I refused nearly every invitation to help tenants with their underground schemes, and I altered my fieldwork considerably by limiting visits to families to life-historical interviewing. And as tenants saw me less often, my image as 'hustler,' as a 'nigger . . . who's trying to survive . . . just like us', was put to the test.

### 'Arab!'

Once again, however, my changing profile would be shaped by tenants' interpretations of my actions. My father had allowed me to use his sports car in order to commute to the housing development and so, several evenings per week, I drove to Robert Taylor when attending to offer writing instruction to several young women preparing to re-enter school. During these informal meetings I provided tutoring; we discussed their journal entries and short stories, and we read literature together. One participant, Rhonda, a local high-school senior, was embarrassed to meet with a large group, so I spoke with her outside alone, usually at her boyfriend's home or at a nearby restaurant.

One evening in 1994, the president of the 'tenant council' asked me to attend an open tenant meeting, the most common forum where households aired grievances to their elected tenant leaders. These were typically staid

affairs, unless a gang war was underway or the Housing Authority was acting in an unusually egregious manner. At this particular meeting, the tenant council 'president' stood up and, to my surprise, opened the meeting by saying, 'Sudhir has kindly agreed to come here today, so please treat him with respect and we can clear this up'. Tenants proceeded to fire a volley of accusations regarding my recent interactions with Rhonda and other young women from the housing development.

'Why are you sleeping with my daughter?!' Rhonda's mother shouted at me, her face flushed as she hurriedly made her way up to the front of the room. 'God damn it! You leave her alone. Don't come around here no more. We have enough drug dealers and child molesters and we don't need you.'

'That's right,' yelled another tenant supportively. 'If you want to deal crack, deal it to your own people. You and that Arab can go home. Don't bring that around here no more. And, leave our women alone.'

(from fieldnotes)

More people joined in, cursing me and shouting at me. I sat at the table in shock and at a loss as to how to respond. I looked over at Oattie Davis for assistance, but he was in the back of the room laughing so hard that he had to lean against the wall for support. As the council president begged for decorum, people shouted 'Arab!', 'Julio', and 'Nigger'. The most common cries drew parallels between my alleged sexual liaisons with young women and an Arab-American storeowner whom they suspected to be soliciting sexual relationships from teenagers in the housing complex (he allegedly gave them money and diapers for sexual favors). For a brief moment I was worried because I knew that, on a previous occasion, tenants had colluded with local gang leaders to bring about a brutal assault on the storeowner. They had also abused his brother, fearing that he was spreading the HIV virus knowingly to women.

I countered tenants' charges during the meeting and afterwards, stating that I was only tutoring the young women. There were aspects of my behavior that did not help my pleas. First, for over four years, I had provided relatively little tutoring to tenants, particularly when I was a 'student' (in the first two years of fieldwork), when such behavior was expected of me. Beginning such a program of charitable assistance in the fifth year of my sojourn was viewed with skepticism. Kenny Davenport reminded me that during the middle period of my fieldwork I had refused to use my contacts in the wider world to help the local library expand their services to include after-school day care and adult GED training.<sup>6</sup> I had wanted to restrict my energies to fieldwork, which, according to Kenny, helped fuel rumors that I was only interested in 'hanging out with the gangs and thieves'.

Several months after that surprise encounter I asked the council president

who had organized the meeting if she agreed with Kenny's assessment. She confirmed that my refusal to help the local library had made tenants angry. She also suggested that my reduced presence in the housing development and my new sports car convinced many tenants that I had used them only to climb the underground economic ladder. Now, I was leaving Robert Taylor behind. There were other tenants who had queried me about my car. One elderly female tenant refused to believe that I was not a drug dealer and, aware that I was unemployed, asked rhetorically, 'How can you afford a car like that if you ain't dealing drugs? Don't lie to us, now, I know you were raised right. Don't start lying to us.' That I had become a successful 'drug dealer' – which placed me near the top of the 'hustler' hierarchy – was a plausible interpretation given the recent change in my movements and local activities. Not only was I still 'out of work', but apart from conducting life-historical interviews of elderly tenants, I was spending more time with women than with men (mostly adolescent women as well as some in their early 20s), and usually late at night on the streets and in semi-public spaces.

By this point in my fieldwork (1995) I was leaving Chicago for a doctoral fellowship in Amherst, Massachusetts. As before, I asked Kenny Davenport and Oattie Davis to spread the word that I was not a drug dealer. Rectifying misinterpretations would not be easy, in part because news had surfaced that the Chicago Housing Authority was about to demolish the entire Robert Taylor development. There was little public information available. The CHA and the mayoral administration had made only vague comments about the demolition with no information available about which of the 28 buildings would be demolished first. Rumors circulated that some tenant leaders were 'selling out' by supporting demolition in exchange for a 'nice job and a house in the suburbs from the CHA'. In this atmosphere of rumor and accusation tenant relations were at their nadir. Even I was subject to suspicion: one tenant yelled as I came by to say goodbye to families, 'Yo! Julio, we know you sold us out, nigger. We know you helping them [CHA] kick us out'. The sheer timing of my own departure with the breaking news of demolition was enough to provoke speculation about my role in the political process. Although I tried to counter them, I knew that my attempts to combat charges of collusion could, at best, only be partially effective, because tenants would never be given full disclosure about the private negotiations taking place in government boardrooms and bureaucracies that would determine their fate.

## Conclusion

What might we glean from this reconstruction of the informants' images of my presence in the Robert Taylor Homes? To begin with a basic but

nonetheless important point, taken from Rabinow's (1977: 151) own 'reflections on fieldwork':

The fact that all cultural facts are interpretations . . . is true both for the anthropologist and for his informant – The Other for whom he works. His informant – and the word is accurate – must interpret his own culture and that of the anthropologist.

The informant, Rabinow continues, must 'learn to inform' the anthropologist about his/her world by 'translating' experiences into a language understandable by the anthropologist. I have been arguing that *how* the informant interprets and represents the *persona of the anthropologist* (or sociologist) is revealing of the interpretive properties and resources available to the informant. That is, part of 'their' world is presented and transmitted to the researcher via the informants' images of the fieldworker and the research study.

Fieldworkers interested in uncovering the categories and processes of sense-making through which informants organize their social world meaningfully – what ethno-methodologists call practical reasoning mechanisms or 'interpretive procedures' (Cicourel, 1974) – can benefit by charting the ways that field workers are seen by subjects. Each representation of my position – gang member, 'nigger', storeowner, etc. – revealed to me something of their cognitive landscape, such as the stereotypical associations segments of the ghetto poor made between ethnic groups and positions on the American occupational ladder.<sup>7</sup>

Tenants' reconstructions also become useful when determining the structural properties of local social relations that create the conditions within which local 'meaning making' takes place. In my study, representations of the fieldworker revealed tenants' experience with information-seekers who, as representatives of state, academic, and social policy bureaucracies, all actively sought the most personal details of household members. Tenants' ongoing attempts to interpret my presence revealed the diversity of their experiences with such outside actors, suggesting that there is no single 'native point of view', either generally in terms of a single outlook that exemplifies public housing, or specifically in terms of the attitudes of the poor toward these agents. There is a 'range of discrepant, competing, or warring viewpoints, depending on structural location within the world under examination' (Wacquant, 1995: 490–1). Though all views related to different aspects of the world of hustling, the same tenants assessed my role in Robert Taylor differently as my fieldwork tenure lengthened and as I engaged in one or another practice (see also MacLeod, 1987: 238). Indeed, tenants debated with each other over their respective interpretations, some doing so to defend me against claims of impropriety or speculation concerning such, others to come to terms with an intrusive researcher taking up



quarter locally. Persons occupying different structural positions, such as 'gang member' or 'tenant leader', approached me with varying motives and expectations of my behavior, but over time, the same person could also change his or her image of me.

Reconstructing informants' perceptions proved a highly useful labor. I had commenced my research with the general objective of representing the socio-cultural life of the poor relationally, specifically, to write culture and history by identifying the encompassing spatial-institutional formations within which the Robert Taylor development was embedded. By 'relational' I mean not only understanding the ghetto abstractly, in other words, as an 'institutional form, a historically determinate, spatially-based concatenation of mechanisms of ethno-racial enclosure and control' (Wacquant, 1997: 343), but also, following Rabinow interpersonally: 'fieldwork is a process of intersubjective construction of liminal modes of communication' (1977). In fact my own guiding interest to see the poor relationally was unfolding before my eyes, namely in my own construction as a fieldworker. Tenants imbued my presence with new meanings and significance over the course of my fieldwork. I needed only to look at my changing role and status within the housing development as my interaction with the tenant body evidenced their structured engagement with 'external' actors, institutions, ideologies, and symbols.

It was not unusual for me to hear of incidents in which information-seekers 'hustled' public housing tenants by pursuing information in dishonorable ways, including: using threats to notify state agents of tenant improprieties; demanding bribes and payoffs from tenants; and promising to provide services (for example, apartment repair) for tenants who answered survey or administrative questionnaires (about their own lives or those of neighbors). Irrespective of the veracity of all such claims (of which I substantiated only a handful), the 'hustle' became the dominant frame that shaped tenants' perception of the data collector and that, correlatively, mediated their exchange with such actors. The 'hustle' put in place a set of structural constraints that defined what spaces and practices I could access and whom I could observe.

It is ironic, then, that despite ethnographers' general attentiveness both to the diversity within urban poor communities and recognition of their own limits as fieldworkers, discussions of the participant-observation experience often restrict themselves to scripted narrations that outline the 'goal' of ethnography as being 'to conduct "insider" research' (MacLeod, 1987: 277; Patillo-McCoy, 1999: 7; Taylor, 1993). Scholars have ably documented the heterogeneity of ghetto social organization, whether in terms of multiple identities that people craft in a field setting (Anderson, 1976), taxonomies of lifestyles based on status attributes ('lifestyles') and moral outlooks (Hannerz, 1969; Anderson, 1999), or in terms of differential interests within

a single peer group or social network (Liebow, 1967; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Padilla, 1992). Yet, the 'discrepant, competing, or warring' images of the fieldworker by informants – an equally intriguing indicator of social organizational diversity – generally have not informed this determination (Liebow, 1967; Hannerz, 1969; Duneier, 1994). Instead, many ethnographers proffer fieldwork testimonials in a formulaic manner in order to validate the study by demonstrating successful 'access' and 'entrée'.

A stereotype that has to be driven finally into the grave is the notion of the disinterested fieldworker who needs only to cross a few difficult thresholds before obtaining true, unmediated information. But reflexivity need not lapse into an 'autoethnographic' mode, based on 'a social theory of knowledge that argues the impossibility of knowing anything beyond the self' (Gans, 1999: 542). Nor do social scientists need to adopt the standards of journalists (Duneier, 1999), as if using real names and taking refuge in gritty, thick description helped one maintain control over one's persona in the field. Ensuring that informants are seen as social agents can be accomplished by affording them power not only to shape their own fields of living but also that of their visiting 'fieldworkers' and what they can know.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Herbert J. Gans and John Krinsky, and the editors of *Ethnography* for their criticisms of earlier drafts. The research was made possible by a CAREER award from the National Science Foundation and a research grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

### **Notes**

- 1 Much early social scientific work (i.e. from the 1920s to 1960s), with sociologists at the vanguard, focused on the practical/ethical problems of fieldwork, its relationship to positivist science and theory construction, and the practical reasoning mechanisms of the fieldworker. In recent decades, critical and interpretive perspectives on ethnography have examined the politics and poetics of ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973: 3–32; Smith, 1989), its embeddedness in structures of power and nation-building (Asad, 1974), and the manner by which psychological forces, from 'desire' to the 'subconscious', motivate the ethnographic narrative (Clough, 1992).
- 2 These labels appeared as early as 1965 in M.W. Newman's *Chicago Daily News* series (Newman, 1965) and were adopted in other reportage afterwards.

- 3 The field of underground economic activity is not restricted to its most popular representation – drug trafficking – but includes numerous forms of income generation that evade regulation by the state (see Wacquant, 1998 for a full description).
- 4 From 1990–95, the average household of three persons (one guardian and two children) earned approximately \$6,700 per year, according to Housing Authority Statistics (Chicago Housing Authority, 1990–95). Often, the leaseholder would be responsible for supporting additional children, as well as other adults who may not have brought income into the household. Five dollars could not only purchase several grocery items, but it could also enable households to purchase a family membership to local youth centers that provided free day care, social services, educational training and recreational facilities. Directors of these centers often waived the five dollar fee, understanding that families could not always afford to part with this seemingly small sum of money.
- 5 In his ethnography, *People and Folks*, Hagedorn (1988) draws our attention to the 'collaborative nature of the research'. He is not referring to any dialectical relationship between fieldworker and informant or to any moment in which the fieldwork helped to shape the development of the conceptual apparatus. Instead, he is informing the researcher that market mediation can be appropriated to serve the ends of data collection. By 'paying for interviews', Hagedorn writes, he was able to inject a 'principle of reciprocity: the gang founder had something of value for us and we insisted on giving back something of value'.
- 6 The General Equivalency Diploma (GED) is a state-accredited certificate, equivalent to a high school diploma, that is earned upon passage of an examination; the exam is usually taken by adults who drop out of high school and return at a later period in their lives.
- 7 A parallel incident appears in Hannerz's ethnography in which his informants' awareness of a famous Swedish boxer mediated their relationship with him in the early stages of fieldwork; he became known as 'Swedish' first, and 'some kind of fellow who wants to know about the neighborhood and maybe write a book about it', second (Hannerz, 1969: 203).

## References

- Anderson, Elijah (1976) *A Place on the Corner*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, Elijah (1999) *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Asad, Talal (1974) *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. London: Ithaca Press.

- Burawoy, Michael (1998) 'The Extended Case Method', *Sociological Theory* 16(1): 4–32.
- Chicago Housing Authority (1990–1995) *Chicago Housing Statistical Reports*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Housing Authority.
- Cicourel, Aaron V. (1974) *Cognitive Sociology: Language and Meaning in Social Interaction*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (eds) (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Clough, Patricia Ticineto (1992) *Ends of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Comaroff, John L. and Jean Comaroff (1992) *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Daniels, Arlene Kaplan (1999) 'Standing on the Threshold and Tripping: Awkwardness in Becoming a Field-Worker', in Barry Glassner and Rosanna Hertz (eds) *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Drake, St Clair and Horace Cayton (1945) *The Black Metropolis*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Duneier, Mitchell (1994) *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Duneier, Mitchell (1999) *Sidewalk*. New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1982) *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. London: Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1999) 'Participant Observation in the Era of "Ethnography"', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28(5): 540–8.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Hagedorn, John (1988) *People and Folks: Gangs, Crime, and the Underclass in a Rustbelt City*. Chicago, IL: Lake View Press.
- Hannerz, Ulf (1969) *Soulside*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Hirsch, Arnold (1983) *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnson, John M. (1975) *Doing Field Research*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Liebow, Elliot (1967) *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- MacLeod, Jay (1987) *Ain't no Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Merry, Sally Engle (1981) *Urban Danger: Life in a Neighborhood of Strangers*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Milner, Christina (1972) *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Moore, William (1969) *The Vertical Ghetto: Everyday Life in an Urban Project*. New York, NY: Random House.

- Newman, M.W. (1965) 'Profile of Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes', *Chicago Daily News* 5–11 April.
- Padilla, Felix (1992) *The Gang as an American Enterprise*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Patillo-McCoy, Mary (1999) *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Pollner, Melvin and Robert M. Emerson (1983) 'The Dynamics of Inclusion and Distance in Fieldwork Relations', in Robert M. Emerson (ed.) *Contemporary Field Research: A Collection of Readings*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown.
- Rabinow, Paul (1977) *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sanchez-Jankowski, Martin (1991) *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Paul (1989) 'Writing, General Knowledge, and Postmodern Anthropology', *Discourse* 11(2): 159–70.
- Stack, Carol B. (1974) *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Stocking, George (1992) *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Taylor, Avril (1993) *Women Drug Users: An Ethnography of a Female Injecting Community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Valentine, Betty Lou (1978) *Hustling and Other Hard Work: Lifestyles in the Ghetto*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi (2000) *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wacquant, Loïc J.D. (1995) 'The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about their Trade', *Theory and Society* 24: 489–535.
- Wacquant, Loïc J.D. (1997) 'Three Pernicious Premises in the Study of the American Ghetto', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (July): 341–53.
- Wacquant, Loïc J.D. (1998) 'Inside the Zone: The Social Art of the Hustler in the Black American Ghetto', *Theory, Culture & Society* 15(2): 1–36.
- Willis, Paul (2000) *The Ethnographic Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

■ **SUDHIR VENKATESH** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and in the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. He is the author of *American Project: The Rise and Fall of a Modern Ghetto* (Harvard University Press, 2000). Address: Department of Sociology, 413 Fayerweather Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. [email: sv185@columbia.edu] ■