

BOOK REVIEW

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A Review of Detective Work: A Study of Criminal Investigations

REFERENCE: Sanders, W. B., *Detective Work: A Study of Criminal Investigations*, The Free Press, New York, 1977, 226 pages, \$12.95.

The author, a sociologist, spent a year as a participant-observer studying detectives at work in a county sheriff's office. The result is the best writing about criminal investigation this reviewer has read. It stands in direct and favorable contrast to the regrettable study released in 1975 by the Rand Corporation of "The Criminal Investigation Process." Sanders' work, a major contribution to the literature, is a typical piece of good academic (yet practical) research—the kind that seldom seems to be supported by the federal government. On the other hand, the half-million dollar funding of the Rand Study by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration resulted in a product that charitably can be described as less than memorable.

The difference in cost and outcome between these two studies is attributable, in part, to the point of view adopted by Sanders to study criminal investigation: "Since detectives are essentially information gatherers, detective work is a form of information work, and detectives provide a resource for understanding information in a generic sense" [p. 6]. "Thus, we will be examining the methods used in making sense out of people, things, and events. Because these methods involve interpretive work, we will refer to them as 'interpretive practices.' When we discuss the detectives' development of information, then, we are talking about the development of the *sense* of information through interpretive practices" [p. 11].

Since "what detectives do explicitly is done (implicitly) by most others" [p. 12], that is, gather, analyze, and organize information, this text sheds a great deal of light on the handling of information in wider areas of social interaction.

The author requires nine chapters and an appendix to cover his material:

- Chapter 1—Detectives and the Study of Information
- Chapter 2—Detectives in the Police Organization
- Chapter 3—The Organization of Information
- Chapter 4—Working a Case
- Chapter 5—Making an Investigation
- Chapter 6—The Juvenile Detail
- Chapter 7—The Burglary Detail
- Chapter 8—The Major Crimes Detail

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Chapter 9—The Reality of the Research
Appendix: Research Forms and Logs.

In Chapter 1, information is examined in novel fashion according to the following outline:

- Information and Interaction
 - Concepts of Information
 - The Development of Information
- Detective Work and Information
 - Complete Information
 - Inconsistency and Incongruity
 - Ambiguity and Games
- Recognizing and Gathering Information
 - Evidence and Leads
 - Recognizing Clues
 - Case Illustration
- Information and Decision Making

In Chapter 3 a perspective for the organization of information is developed. For example, report forms are seen as instruments that give a sense of order to the information that is collected. However, not all of this information is written down in reports, and what is written down is expected to be elaborated orally by the detective who worked the case. Memory serves to interpret reports in terms of “what really happened,” to link people to one another, and to recall old cases and criminals [p. 52].

While informal communication among detectives is not a planned pattern in the flow of information, the real utility of departmental forms is to a large extent contingent on it. How refreshing this view is in contrast to the usual treatment of records found in texts on criminal investigation. In another example, informants are seen as part of the “information networks in society” rather than as an anomalous group unique to detective work.

Chapter 4 details the facts in several cases and illustrates how and why detectives decide whether or not to “work” a particular case. The author develops some “case rules” that help explain these discretionary decisions, which are extralegal but nonetheless govern detectives’ conduct. Examples of the detective subculture that governs reality formulation and hence investigative behavior are sprinkled throughout the chapter.

Chapter 5 completes the discussion on how detectives develop information, concentrating on how they identify, locate, and obtain confessions from suspects. It is in this chapter that Sanders attempts to deal with crime scene evidence. While mirroring detectives’ general ignorance of physical evidence he refers to source material that he obviously read but did not fully comprehend. Reflecting reality, he stresses what is rather than what might be. It is this lack of critical evaluation and suggestions for improvement that the sophisticated reader will miss—a minor flaw in an otherwise excellent book.

The next three chapters examine the informational resources and strategies unique to the specialized units—juvenile, burglary, and major crimes—found in the “Mountain-beach” sheriff’s office.

The last chapter, “The Reality of the Research,” offers an interesting discussion on initiating and carrying out a research project. Problems and pitfalls are treated honestly. For example, the question of co-optation (detectives are masters at this) in participant-observer studies is recognized: “I was very much aware of what was happening, and instead of trying to stop it, I attempted to see why it took on the texture that it did. After a time I came to sympathize more with the detectives than with the crime victims or suspects. Sometimes victims were seen as unfortunates who had been hurt by criminals and deserved help, but often, and with increasing frequency as I came to take on the

detectives' viewpoint, they were whining, ignorant, uncooperative people who did little to help the detectives, demanded impossible feats from them, and deserved what they got from the criminals" [pp. 202-203].

Finally, there is one minor flaw that requires mention. The author, apparently to achieve authenticity, employs detective argot that reflects a West-Coast provincialism. "Righteous crime," "cop-out," "making rips," and "hype" are not commonly employed by all criminal investigators. Furthermore, jargon does not necessarily have the same meaning when it is used in jurisdictions separated by distance or culture. In any case a glossary would have been helpful.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature. It makes excellent supplementary reading for the so-called texts on criminal investigation.