

# **All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community Study Guide**

**All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community by Carol B. Stack**

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## Plot Summary

It is commonly believed, both by scholars and by laymen, that the ingrained behaviors of the black urban poor are conducive to keeping them poor and a large part of the reason for their apparent lack of economic mobility. However, this study, which is based on direct, face-to-face experience with the black urban poor themselves, shows that far from being conducive to continued poverty, these practices are actually creative responses to dire economic circumstances. The real reason for their lack of social mobility is that the middle and upper-classes, realizing that a subclass of unskilled workers is necessary for the economy, support policies, like welfare, which maintain the status quo rather than policies which would change the economic structures which force the black urban poor into poverty.

The primary problem faced by the black urban poor is a scarcity of resources. In response to this, communities have spontaneously developed an intricate system of exchange known as swapping. Swapping does not generally entail an immediate change of goods. Rather, one person gives another, say, a couch with the expectation that at some point in the future, that person will help him out. The utility of this system is that it protects those members of the community who happen to be facing the harshest financial conditions from ruin, thus maximizing the value of scarce goods.

This flexible system extends not only to material goods but also to the care of children. It is common for a child to be raised by its older sister, an aunt, the father's mother, or even a friend of the mother who is not related to the child by blood. These movements of children can be temporary or permanent. One effect of this behavior is that familial relationships among the black urban poor stray from the paradigms of family organization common in white American culture. The rights and duties of motherhood are not centralized in the biological mother, necessarily, but may be held by the grandmother or even diffused over a number of people who have, at some point, cared for the child.

The economic conditions of the black urban poor also lead to frequent changes in living arrangements. When a bread-winner loses his job or a relative dies, a family may decide to move to a friend's house, or the family may split up among several households. Economic instability also puts a strain on long-term, lasting personal relationships. A woman's relatives will often discourage her from marrying because a husband represents a threat to them continuing to receive money and other goods from the woman. Likewise, a man who loses his job is likely to have feelings of insufficiency and will often respond to them by cheating on his girlfriend or wife.

# Introduction

## Introduction Summary and Analysis

A preliminary question one must ask before engaging in a study that involves living in a poor urban black community is how one's own personal identity will influence the results (in this case, the author is a white female). In the past, sociological studies of communities have started by contacting the community's authority figures, usually men. For poor black communities, these authority figures generally have been older professionals and church leaders. The problem with this method is that the families researchers are put in contact with are usually exceptional: a preacher will mainly know churchgoing families and will often not recommend families that have gone through a divorce or other domestic disruptions. Despite discouragement from her colleagues, Stack decided to find families for her study without resorting to a middlemen.

All the research in the study was done through informal interviews with the consent of those involved. Since much of the information in the study is intensely personal, the names of the city and the study's participants were changed. The researcher naturally brings her biases to her research, and the subjects naturally bring their own. Therefore, in order to ensure the research was as fruitful as possible, Stack spent three years living with the people of The Flats, to best understand their perspectives and biases.



# Chapter 1: The Flats

## Chapter 1: The Flats Summary and Analysis

The Flats is the poorest section of Jackson Harbor. (The reader should bear in mind that the names of the actual locations were changed.) It lies along a railroad line connecting the South with Chicago and was one of many black communities to spring up after the great migration north when many of the southern plantations began to close down. The living conditions in the Flats are abysmal. Black families generally only earn about \$4000 a year (figure from the late 1960s and early 1970s) and this is often split among ten or more people. To put the number into its proper context, economists have estimated that an average sized family of three or four needs about \$8000 to survive. Accordingly, blacks in the Flats often live in houses in desperate need of repair and are sometimes displaced when the government condemns them. Few have access to adequate health care.

Stack was introduced to two different families in the Flat. The first of these was the Jacksons. Viola and Leo Jackson had moved, with their eleven children, fifteen years prior to Stack's arrival. Like many black families, their house is literally falling apart and not nearly large enough to accommodate their family: Their children have to share just a few beds. Privacy is non-existent. Leo works a seasonal minimum-wage job and often spends days waiting for work to no avail. Viola works occasionally at a restaurant but domestic necessities—a child becoming ill, for example—make it impossible for her to work long periods of time.

The second family Stack was introduced to was the Waters. Their living conditions are very similar to the Jacksons. Their house is in poor shape and too small. Magnolia Waters is the mother of eleven children, six of them by Calvin, her husband. She introduced Stack to Ruby Banks, her daughter. Ruby would prove to be one of Stack's closest and most helpful contacts. Ruby had a tough attitude and was slow to trust people she just met; her mother attributed this to the fact that her father had never made any effort to know her as a little girl. Ruby thought of her step-father as her real father because he took on all the responsibilities of a parent for her, even though he did not have to. Many in the Flats were initially hostile to Stack, but Ruby helped ease these tensions. To Stack's surprise, one of the easiest ways to do this was to make a show of toughness. Thus, Ruby would sometimes help Stack gain the respect of people who did not trust or like her by insulting her, giving Stack the opportunity to stand up for herself.

Stack helped many of the black families with various daily chores, like picking out clothes or looking at a refrigerator someone had for sale. One thing that impressed Carol was the resignation with which the children approached their poverty: They just accepted the fact that they had to wear clothes that did not fit them well or that they did not like, because nice clothes were too expensive. Carol also began to discover the intricate interdependency of the families when she purchased a car. Since no one else had a car, Stack found herself spending nearly all of her time driving people from one



place to another or dropping off food at someone's house. Though during these times she would frequently ride with someone else and be able to talk to them, she was happy when the car broke down, and decided not to fix it.

Black interactions with whites were almost always influenced by racism. If a white person, like a social worker, had to visit a black family, they would never touch or sit on the furniture, as if it were too filthy for a white person. Health care professionals would not pay the same attention to black families as they would to white families. One time, when a black woman Stack knew was trying to rent a new apartment—her previous one had been condemned—the landlord refused to believe she could pay the rent and the woman's social worker, who knew that she paid her rent, refused to call the landlord as a reference.

# Chapter 2: The Black Urban Poor

## Chapter 2: The Black Urban Poor Summary and Analysis

Racist theories, which attribute the economic inferiority of blacks to racial inferiority, were common at the time this book was published. Many published studies do nothing except reinforce various stereotypes about poor blacks and their authors seem to be satisfied with the results. The perspective and beliefs of the poor blacks themselves have generally been ignored in favor of armchair theories concerning the "culture of poverty," a theoretical construction which hypothesizes that among the poor blacks there is a culture which teaches and reinforces a variety of destructive behaviors which are responsible for keeping them poor. Such a theory is difficult to maintain in light of the fact that there are so few economic opportunities available to poor blacks that, regardless of their behavior, they could do little to improve their economic status. Other authors, who reject the racist theories of some of their colleagues, still nonetheless accept various stereotypes about black family structure or social organization and believe, for example, that all black families are fatherless, a belief which has little basis in reality. These others often connect the social maladies which they believe to be uniformly applicable to all, or nearly all, black families with their social immobility and poverty.

Others, however, reject this notion of a culture of poverty and look for the roots of the poor economic situation of blacks in causes external to the black communities. Some argue that the structure of the American economy depends upon the existence of a work force which is willing to work for basically nothing. If blacks were to climb up the socio-economic ladder, this would threaten the country's economic foundations, and thus those who are fortunate enough to benefit from the system are happy to maintain the institutional racism and discrimination inherent in American economic systems.

Taking this research into consideration, Stack decided that the best method for learning about the black urban poor was to live among them and observe their daily lives. In this way, she would first of all avoid the problem which plagues so much research on the project, namely, a lack of any personal experience with the subject. Second, by observing their daily lives and by talking with them, she could learn the motivations behind various practices they adopted, helping her (and others) see how some practices, which are labeled by some as part of the "culture of poverty," are in fact creative adaptations to extreme poverty.

# Chapter 3: Swapping

## Chapter 3: Swapping Summary and Analysis

Stack quickly discovered an intricate network of exchange, which the residents of the Flats called "swapping." Despite the fact that no one really had very much in the way of possessions in the Flats, people would often freely give their time, money, and possessions to others in the community. These swaps were never direct trades and would generally not involve immediate reciprocation. Instead, it was understood that the receiving party would help the giver out in some way in the future. This obligation to help others out was taken very seriously, and a person who failed to reciprocate would be sanctioned socially by the community.

The benefit of this system of swapping is not immediately obvious, nor is it obvious why a person who was barely surviving on what they have would be willing to part with some of their possessions. Upon analysis, however, swapping is actually a very creative way of maximizing use of very scarce resources. For example, Mary may give Sally a half of a pot roast because Sally happens to be in a time of especially desperate need. In addition to being simply generous, this act is actually economically smart for Mary, because when and if she finds herself in the same kind of need, she can call upon Sally for a favor.

Swapping is also an important method of forming and extending social networks. Since it is vital to the community of the Flats, and urban black communities in general, if a person is unwilling to swap with others, they are not really considered part of the community, and may be considered selfish and stingy. On the other hand, anyone, even a white person, as Stack discovered, can become part of the community by engaging in swapping. Swapping also creates pressure to constantly expand one's social circle: The more people one knows, the more people one can call upon in time of need.





# Chapter 4: Personal Kindreds

## Chapter 4: Personal Kindreds Summary and Analysis

One flaw in the approach of many who would study the black urban poor is to impose upon them the paradigms of family organization common in white communities, namely, the nuclear family. For various social and economic reasons, black communities often take on very different organizations. For example, many unmarried black women often become pregnant at a young age, a phenomenon which is generally not frowned upon by the community. In fact, when a black female becomes pregnant, it is considered a sign of maturity and womanhood by the community. However, often the biological mother does not possess the maturity or financial means to support a child, at which point another family member—the grandmother, an older sister, the father's mother—will step in and take over the responsibilities of raising the child, often, it seems, without the full consent of the mother. As the child grows up, he will identify his "mama" as the woman who raised him, not necessarily his biological mother.

While the absence of the black father is exaggerated in some literature, it is true that the biological father is often not around for his children. For one thing, when the mother discovers she is pregnant, she may no longer be in a relationship with the father (if they ever were in a relationship to begin with). Second, the father may claim that he is not actually the father and base his claim on the fact that the mother slept with other men. The community generally accepts this. For the most part, however, the father would give some kind of support to the child. Black men do not generally make enough money to be of tremendous help and usually cannot support a child on their own. Their contributions will be in the form of making occasional visits and buying various goods for the child, like diapers and milk.

Domestic networks can include people who are not biologically related to anyone in the family, and this inclusion was usually based on shared experience of sacrifice. For example, if a woman grew up with another woman and they frequently sacrificed for one another's good, they would often consider themselves sisters. On the other hand, actually related people could be excluded, or exclude themselves, from domestic networks. For example, if a father denied responsibility for taking care of his child, he would not be considered part of that child's network. In fact, not only would the father be excluded from the network, but so, too, would other members of his family, like his parents or siblings.



## Chapter 5: Child-Keeping

### Chapter 5: Child-Keeping Summary and Analysis

Along with food, money, and furniture, children and their various needs are also among the things which the people in the Flats exchange with one another in their intricate swapping network. Though most children will reside, for at least most of their non-adult lives, with their mother, it is very common for children to be raised by an older woman related to the mother, an older woman related to the father, or by a family which is unrelated to the child but simply wants to have a baby. It is important to distinguish between temporary arrangements and seemingly permanent arrangements. The first is so common that probably nearly every child has experienced it, and it is not viewed as anything different from a normal favor, like helping fold clothes.

Permanent child-keeping, however, can lead to significant changes in who the community perceives to hold the parental rights to the child. While the law generally favors the biological mother, in the Flats the parental rights over a child are generally determined by a number of factors, including the mother's intention to raise the children and the amount of time the foster mother spends with the child. These claims to parental rights can be so strong that sometimes foster parents will deny the child's biological parents the right to take back the children, and may sometimes decide to give the child to another family instead.

Parental rights can also be shared partially by several people. Thus, for example, a woman may leave her child with her sister for several months and then return and take the child back. The woman who cared for the child, however, will still feel some sense of maternity over the child and will thus be able to discipline it, even physically, and may be expected to provide for it or take it back. It is important to realize that these rights are not generated automatically merely by relationship. Thus, a woman may have certain rights over the children of one of her sisters, but not over the children of a different sister. These rights, rather, are earned by spending time caring for the child. Additionally, the same "swapping" rules that apply to physical commodities apply to children. If a woman does not allow her sister to take care of her children, or does not agree to take care of her sister's children, then the familiarity which the swapping system normally creates is absent and parental rights will not be shared.

# Chapter 6: Domestic Networks

## Chapter 6: Domestic Networks Summary and Analysis

The swapping network, which includes the care of children—and even the permanent possession of children—and the exchange of various material goods, also includes domestic arrangements. A given person living in the Flats may find his or herself living in several places over a very short period of time; the reasons for these moves is often the result of several factors working simultaneously. One of the most obvious reasons for changing one's living arrangements is some change in the family's economic circumstances. If, for example, a woman is living with her children and a boyfriend, and he loses his job, the family may no longer be able to afford rent. While the entire group—mother, children, and boyfriend—may move together, it is common for them to split up. The boyfriend may move in with his mother; the children may be split among various kin of the mother, and the mother may move in with a friend or sibling. As economic circumstances change, these arrangements will be shuffled again.

Living arrangements are often dictated by welfare regulations. Eligibility to receive welfare is partially determined by the income of one's household, and thus it may make more economic sense for a woman to live by herself than with a boyfriend who makes only very little money. These regulations also lead to various deceptive schemes to trick the welfare agency into continuing to send money, despite ineligible living conditions.

The beginning and end of sexual and non-sexual relationships also can determine living arrangements. If a woman and her boyfriend are living together and break up, they will obviously stop living with one another and will perhaps each move in with other kin and friends. Any children produced by their union will likewise be displaced and may wind up living with neither the mother or father. Since friends live with each other on occasion, too, a falling out can change living circumstance.



# Chapter 7: Women and Men

## Chapter 7: Women and Men Summary and Analysis

Much of the analysis of sexual relationships have been produced from a male perspective, and thus Stack decided that her analysis would be from a female perspective, in part because most of her closest contacts were women. Various factors militate against permanent, long-lasting relationships between men and women in the Flats. First of all, the earning power of men is severely limited, since few can find non-seasonal jobs. The welfare system, which awards eligibility in part on the number of people living in a household, thus unintentionally penalizes such long-term relationships; if a woman finds herself living with a boyfriend, and he makes no money, then not only is her income stretched to include him, but it may be taken away altogether, or at least reduced. While children often will reside with their father's kin, they are generally taken care of by female kin of the father and not by the father himself. The father's relationship with his children is usually more in the pattern of a family friend who occasionally stops by and gives them gifts.

A female's kin will often discourage her from marrying a man because such a long-term relationship can represent a threat to their ability to receive money and goods from the woman. This discouragement can take the form of explicit advice or the more insidious form of spreading rumors and gossip. These pressures can be so strong that one woman Stack talked to said that if she ever wanted to get married she would have to leave the state.

Another force working against lasting relationships is the emotional toll men experience as a result of their generally frustrating, unsuccessful income-earning efforts. While a man is employed and earning a good income, domestic life will generally be happy because he feels like he is fulfilling the perceived masculine role of a bread-winner. However, when he loses his job—which is very common in the Flats, as much of the available work is seasonal—he will feel emasculated and may look to cheating on his girlfriend as a way to cope with the stress. Naturally, when the woman finds out about his infidelity—and her kin are often all too eager to expose it—the relationship will usually end.

Cheating is so common, in fact, that women often view men as universally untrustworthy. Women take the attitude that they should look out for themselves first of all in a relationship, and this can even make sexual relationships purely exploitative: Women start keeping men around only so long as it benefits them. This assumed non-trustworthiness also makes women more likely to believe the rumors spread by their jealous kin, whether the rumors are true or not.

Despite the instability of sexual relationships, both mother and father are generally proud of their children. It is socially sanctioned for a man or woman to become a parent even in their teenage years. It is especially a point of pride for men to be the "daddy" of

several children, even if they are unable to provide much financial support for them. For women, bearing a child is a sign of womanhood and a kind of rite of passage, and thus young women will desire to have children early to prove their maturity to their elders. However, if their kin decide that they are not mature enough to care for children, they will often take the children away and raise them themselves.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

## Chapter 8: Conclusion Summary and Analysis

While many stereotypes, believed even by serious academics, suggest that the behaviors common among the black urban poor are self-destructive and conducive to continued impoverishment, this study has shown that these behaviors are actually creative adaptations to desperate economic circumstances. The complex system of swapping for example is a way of distributing scarce resources in such a way as to ensure that the most needy at any given time are taken care of. By giving one's resources to another in his time of need, that person is thereby obligated to reciprocate in the future. Likewise, unstable living arrangements are a response and adaptation to unstable economic circumstances.

Many writers who have studied the problem of black poverty have concluded that the way to alleviate it is to reform the existing welfare programs, increase funding, and add programs of a similar kind. However, these recommendations fail to ignore that the existence of these programs have had no perceptible effect on black poverty. They further ignore the fact that the current economic system depends upon having a large pool of unskilled unemployed people. While it may be counter intuitive to think that there is economic value in maintaining a largely unproductive class of people through an expensive welfare system, it should be understood that the classes above them view their social mobilization as a threat to their own economic status. They are, therefore, happy to support policies which maintain the favorable status quo. The only reforms that will effect real change must touch the structure of the economy itself.



# Characters

## Carol Stack

Carol Stack is a white female who spent three years of her life living in the Flats and forming relationships with the residents in order to create this study. The study was not an impersonal, abstract endeavor. Rather, she is critical of those researchers who attempt to pigeon-hole the behavior of blacks without having any firsthand experience with their conditions or any personal knowledge of how they think. She believes that any accurate sociological study of black urban poverty must be informed by the perspectives and beliefs of the black poor themselves; they are, after all, the ones closest to the problem and should be able to provide useful information.

While living in the Flats, though her purpose is to conduct research, Stack is eager to engage with the residents and, to what extent is possible, become accepted as a member of the community. Swapping—the exchange of goods with other members of the community—is an important part of being a member of the Flats community and, as such, Stack gave (and received) like any member, donating her time and goods to help out those in need, while simultaneously receiving the gifts they would give her. Initially, Stack was treated by many people with suspicion and even hostility because of her race. Almost all the contact the Flats residents had with whites previously was colored with contempt and disgust. However, Stack quickly became part of the community by accepting their practices with tolerance and trying her best to adopt their customs.

## Ruby Banks

Ruby Banks is Magnolia Waters' oldest daughter, who proves to be Stack's most trustworthy and helpful contact within the community. Initially, Ruby is standoffish towards Stack, like many others, because of her race and because of her naturally harsh personality. However, as Ruby and Stack begin to know each other, Ruby starts to like Stack and they become friends. Ruby is particularly helpful in making others accept Stack. Stack discovers that one way the residents of the Flats would come to like and respect a person is if that person were seen to be tough and willing to stand up for herself. Thus, one way Ruby would help Stack get accepted by a dubious group of people would be to insult her, giving Stack the opportunity to insult Ruby back and thereby raising herself in the respect of those around. Ruby and Stack would test racial expectations by going out to dance at clubs with each other and judging the reactions they received.

One of the first and most important stories that Ruby tells Stack is about her relationship with her father. Ruby's mother claimed that Ruby's harsh exterior came from her relationship, or really lack of a relationship, with her father, who had not stayed around to raise her. While it is common for a father to not live with his child in the Flats, usually he at least comes by occasionally and gives gifts to the family to help with raising the



child. Ruby's father never did and she did not see him until she was in "third or fourth" grade. The first thing she told her father was to buy her shoes since he had never done anything for her. He told her to come by his house later to get money for shoes, but when she arrived she was chased off by his wife. Fortunately, Magnolia married and Ruby's stepfather helped fill the role of father for Ruby.

## **Magnolia Waters**

Magnolia Waters is one of Stack's first contacts in the Flats. She is a mother of eleven. She introduces Stack to her daughter, Ruby.

## **Calvin Waters**

Calvin Waters was a sharecropper in Mississippi before moving north to the Flats. He is married to Magnolia Waters.

## **Viola Jackson**

Viola Jackson is a mother of eleven who lives in the Flats. She is one of Stack's first contacts in the community and one of the women she gets to know the best.

## **Leo Jackson**

Leo Jackson is Viola Jackson's husband. He worked on a plantation in the South before moving to the Flats.

## **William Ryan**

William Ryan is a sociologist who rejects many of the racist theories which attempt to explain black poverty, yet still believes that the poverty results in broken homes which prevent them from climbing out of poverty. Stack disagrees with that claim.

## **Piven and Cloward**

Piven and Cloward are two sociologists who provided theories which influenced Stack. They argued that the behavior of the poor is best explained if it is seen as a means of coping with their financial circumstances.

## **W.E.B. Dubois**

W.E.B. Dubois was a black writer in the early 20th century. Stack identifies him as the first writer to recognize the "double consciousness" of blacks—the conflict between their



identity as Americans, with all of its hopes and dreams of social mobility, and their identity as blacks, with the reality that social mobility is hard or impossible.

## **Elliot Liebow**

Elliot Liebow is a sociologist who wrote a study of black poverty named "Tally's Corner."



# Objects/Places

## The Flats

The Flats is a poor black community in Jackson Harbor. It should be noted that Stack changed the name to protect the personal lives of those involved in the study.

## Jackson Harbor

Jackson Harbor is the city where the Flats is. "Jackson Harbor" is not the real name of the city, but a fake name made up to protect the personal lives of those in the study.

## Chicago

Chicago is the nearest large city to Jackson Harbor.

## AFDC

AFDC, or Aid to Families with Dependent Children, is the primary form of welfare that families in the Flats receive.

## Racism

Racism is present in nearly every interaction the residents of the Flats have with white people. White doctors are not willing to give blacks much time or attention; white landlords do not trust that blacks can pay rent, and white social workers try to cheat them out of welfare.

## Kin

A person's kin are all of those related to them through blood or marriage. Kin networks are an important part of the community organization in the Flats.

## Swapping

"Swapping" refers to the complex network of exchange which occurs within the Flats. Individuals habitually give and receive things from one another—food, money, furniture, even children. Stack identifies this as a vitally important adaptive mechanism the Flats residents use to survive desperate poverty.



## **Child-Keeping**

The economic conditions in the Flats often mean that children are not raised by their biological mothers, but by other relatives or even non-kindred friends. This is referred to as "child-keeping."

## **Double Consciousness**

Double consciousness refers to the interior conflict in the mind of a black person who simultaneously identifies himself as American and as black. As an American, s/he believes that anyone can be successful and climb the socioeconomic ladder. As a black person, s/he recognizes that institutionalized racism and an economy that depends upon a class of unskilled, perpetually unemployed people means that s/he cannot succeed in life.

## **The Great Migration**

A large influx of Southern blacks to northern industrial cities as a result of the shift in the economy of the South when many large plantations failed after the civil war.



# Themes

## Behavior of the Black Urban Poor as Adaptive Improvisation

Stack's major thesis in this book is that the behavior of blacks, which many believe to be foolish and contrary to climbing out of poverty, is actually a response and adaptation to abysmal economic realities. At the start of the book, Carol cites the various sociologists and economists who accept and promote the "culture of poverty" theory. According to this theory, poverty causes various social maladies which inhibit the poor from moving into the middle class. In other words, the lack of social mobility is the fault of the poor people, and not the fault of the economic system as a whole. These theorists point towards such facts as the family organization of poor black communities, which are often unstable and involve shifting children from household to household with great frequency, and the lack of a father figure in the home—which, as Stack shows, is exaggerated.

Stack endeavors to show, first of all, that far from being destructive, these behaviors help the poor black families in the Flats survive on very sparse resources. For example, the residents of the Flats engage in a complex system of "swapping" goods and favors for one another, and Stack shows that this system allows the community to distribute resources in such a way that the most needy are always taken care of by those who happen to have (relatively) more at the time. The organization of families is also a direct adaptation to the economic and legal circumstances the families face. If a woman lives with a husband or boyfriend, she will be ineligible to receive welfare and thus there is great incentive for the child to live with the mother and without a father in the home. However, the father is not as absent from the life of his children as many researchers believe. The father will often take an active role in the child's life and will be expected to help provide for the child as best as he can; however, full financial support is not expected since black men generally have very little income.

## Existing Welfare System Is Not the Solution

Stack points out that many researchers of the black urban poor, even those who are genuinely sympathetic, believe that the solution lies in tweaking and reforming the existing welfare system or expanding it with more funding. Such a plan has at least initial plausibility: Poverty is, at its root, a lack of money, so it seems as if it could be solved by giving the poor more money. Stack draws a different conclusion, however. She believes that the current economic system depends upon having a large pool of people who lack any useful skills and are perpetually unemployed. The beneficiaries of the economic system have no desire to see it changed and so they support the welfare system, not as a means of eliminating black poverty, but to ensure its continued existence; as long as things are going well for the middle and upper classes, they are happy to maintain the status quo. Thus, Stack argues, the only real solution to black



poverty is to reform the structure of the economy itself, a suggestion which would surely meet great resistance from even the middle class.

Stack answers one obvious objection to this theory: Why would an economy depend upon having a perpetually unemployed class of people, which is mostly supported through an expensive welfare system? One must understand the nature of this dependence. As poor blacks are generally economically unproductive, it is not a matter of the economy depending on the goods or services they create. Rather, the existence of such a large group of people is a threat to the classes above them, even and especially to the lower working class. If poor blacks were able to acquire useful skills and acquire jobs, they would take them away from white workers already comfortable with their jobs. The white workers would, in turn, begin to compete for the jobs of others, beginning a large structural overhaul of the entire economic system

## **Social Analysis from A Female Perspective**

Stack, a woman herself, is eager to understand black poverty from the perspective of the women in the community and her study reflects this sympathy throughout. In the opening chapter of the work, Stack criticizes other studies from focusing too much on the male perspective of poverty and neglecting the role of women in social organization in poor urban black communities. While gender equality itself might dictate that some attention be paid to women, Stack attempts to show that ignoring the role of women is especially egregious in the case of black social organization, since women play such an important role in the creation of social networks. Since fathers are generally not expected to raise their children, the child inherits his entire network of kin from his mother or whomever raises him (which, almost invariably, is an adult female). The child's relationship with his father, while not as insignificant as many sociologists have claimed, is certainly inferior to his relationship with his mother.

In her chapter on sexual relationships, Stack explicitly tries to present the material from a female perspective. She shows how black women view men as inherently untrustworthy, accepting the stereotype that men are always unfaithful and will leave a woman to avoid responsibility. As a result, women view their relationships with men as, first, temporary and, second, as an opportunity to reap some economic gain. Love certainly exists among the poor black, as it exists in any human community, but it is a love which is necessarily moderated by basic the need to survive under very adverse circumstances.

# Style

## Perspective

Stack is writing as an academic sociologist interested in understanding and explaining black poverty. She references studies she completed before writing this project, but the majority of her work is founded upon the three years she spent in the Flats. Conscious of how her attempts to study the community might bias or even invalidate her findings, Stack decided to simply live among them as one of them. As a white woman, she knew this was imperfect; she represented the dominant race in a community which dealt with racism almost as often as it dealt with white people. Fortunately, she found that after she overcame initial suspicion and hostility, the Flats community was willing to accept her and, therefore, she does not believe that her results were greatly distorted on account of her race.

Though writing as a sociologist, Stack makes no attempt to conceal the fact that she has a specific economic and political agenda in mind. In the book's conclusion, she argues that the existing welfare system not only does not help the problem of black poverty but perpetuates it. Further, she accuses the system's supporters of merely wanting to maintain a favorable economic system for their own gain. Instead of promoting or tweaking the welfare system, then, she advocates a total and radical change of the nation's economic system, such that it does not necessitate the existence of the black poor.

## Tone

Stack is writing as a serious academic and therefore writes with the voice of a scholar. Whenever she mentions the work of another scholar, whether she agrees with it or not, she always includes a citation. Though the size of the book would not allow her to include all her research, and much of it was acquired through her immersion in the community, an experience which is not easily conveyed to a reader, she does go to great pains to include as much of her methodology and work as possible in a very helpful appendix to the book.

While Stack writes with a scholarly voice, she is nonetheless advocating a position. She clearly cares very much for the black poor, and her work is dedicated to eliminating or at least alleviating the hardship they endure. Throughout the book, but especially in the early chapters, Stack shows the reader, who she assumes is probably educated and middle or upper class, just how horrible the living conditions are for the people of the Flats: buildings are falling apart, roach and rat infestations are commonplace; people sometimes dine on raccoon. These clearly constitute an emotional appeal to a reader who may be indifferent towards or simply ignorant of the economic plight of some members of society. If there is any question about Stack's motives in writing this work, it is dispelled by the conclusion to the work which advocates major economic reforms.

## Structure

The work is divided into eight chapters, preceded by an introduction. In the introduction, Stack considers the viability of her research and particularly whether a middle-class white woman can ever really obtain useful information by observing the daily lives of poor black families. After discussing similar work conducted—with mixed results—she concludes that her approach, the "anthropological approach," is more promising since it gives her direct access to the daily lives of families, rather than mediated access through a community leader.

The first chapter discusses the basic setting for her study. It describes the Flats community and the living conditions of its residents and introduces the two families—the Jacksons and the Waters—

through whom she gained access to the community at large. Chapter Two discusses previous research into the social organization of poor black families and attempts that have been made to understand the causes of black poverty. For the most part, she rejects this work, criticizing much of it for being racist or at least misguided.

Chapters Three through Seven document basic survival strategies of the Flats residents. Chapter Three discusses the "swapping" economy which occurs in the community, whereby goods and favors are distributed in exchange for the implicit promise of reciprocating in the future. Chapter Four discusses kin networks and how the Flats community defies the paradigms of family organization common in white society, which paradigms are often assumed in sociological work studying poor urban blacks.

Chapter Five discusses how the concept of motherhood differs from the concept understood by white society; children are frequently not raised by their mother, and even when they are, many parental rights and duties are often spread among relatives and non-relatives. Chapter Six discusses the unstable and frequently changing living arrangements of the Flats residents and how this, like swapping, is a response to economic realities. Chapter Seven discusses romantic relationships and how they are affected by extreme poverty in poor black communities. Chapter Eight, the conclusion, summarizes the study's findings and evaluates the effectiveness of existing social programs aimed at alleviating poverty. Stack concludes that they are ineffective, and intentionally so; the only way poverty can really be eliminated is through fundamental economic reorganization.



## Quotes

"This introduction anticipates curiosity about how a young white woman could conduct a study of black family life, and provides a basis for evaluating the reliability and quality of the data obtained." (ix)

"In 1968, a year of record economy in the country, unemployment among Blacks in Jackson Harbor was more than 20 percent." (2)

"In one home roaches exceeded one per square foot on all of the walls inside the house. Children sleeping in this house were covered with sores and scabs from insect bites." (3)

"Despite increasing public assistance for medical needs, many black people put off seeing a doctor as long as possible. Feelings of mistrust run deep." (3)

"Also, as I assisted in the search for new housing when people I knew were evicted or were living in condemned houses, I observed the direct confrontation between residents of The Flats and white landlords and social works. In the two or three months I spent in process of looking for housing with companions, I saw indifference and racism expressed by the larger white society toward Flats residents." (19)

"Despite the stated intentions of scholars, from the thirties and forties through the sixties and seventies, studies tended to reinforce popular stereotypes of the low class or black family—particularly black family in poverty—as deviant, matriarchal, and broken." (22)

"Black families living in The Flats need a steady source of cooperative support to survive." (32)

"Since an object swapped is offered with the intent of obligating the receiver over a period of time, two individuals rarely simultaneously exchange things. Little or no premium is placed upon immediate compensation; time has to pass before a counter-gift or a series of gifts can be repaid." (41)

"A girl who gives birth as a teenager frequently does not raise and nurture her firstborn child. While she may share the same room and household with her baby, her mother, her mother's sister, or her older sister will care for the child and become the child's 'mama.'" (47)

"From the point of view of the children, there may be a number of women who act as 'mothers' towards them; some just slightly older than the children themselves." (63)





"In The Flats the responsibility for providing food, care, clothing, and shelter and for socializing children within domestic networks may be spread over several households." (90)

"The value-mosaic of the poor is assembled from a wide range of values from the larger society. Hyman Rodman (1971) has suggested that poor people 'stretch' their values in order to cope with poverty. 'They share the general values of the society with members of the other classes, but in addition they have stretched these values, which help them to adjust to their deprived circumstances.'" (125)



## Topics for Discussion

In what ways was this study influenced by the fact that Stack is a white female?

Why does Stack take issue with the "culture of poverty" thesis?

Why is Stack critical of the welfare system which the families in The Flats depend upon for survival?

If the swapping system means everyone ends up receiving about as much as they give, how is it an adaptive and beneficial system as Stack claims?

Why, according to Stack, does the economy depend upon the existence of a pool of poor, unemployed, unskilled people?

Stack mentions that a new health clinic opened up in The Flats, but few availed themselves of its services. Why?

Stack takes issue with the claim that black families are "matrifocal" and yet, according to her analysis, black children are brought into kin networks largely through their mothers. Are these statements compatible?