

On the legacy of Elliot Liebow and Carol Stack: Context-driven fieldwork and the need for continuous ethnography

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Over the past four decades, U.S. social scientists who use observational methods have attempted to understand the many consequences of living in poverty through fine-grained descriptions and interpretations of social interaction and ordinary life, most notably in the domestic realm of the family and the public realm of the street corner. On this occasion of IRP's 40th anniversary, it is useful to recall the contribution of two anthropologists writing around the time that the Institute was founded, who eschewed the traditional method of entry into the community through authority figures and community leaders, approaching poor black women and poor black men through participation in their lives. By looking back to Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* and Carol Stack's *All Our Kin*, we may see more clearly some of the strengths and weaknesses of what we are doing today in the qualitative study of poverty.¹ Their books highlight some very important issues concerning the relationship between quantitative and qualitative data, the rise of the ethnographic interview in poverty research, the centrality of political context for understanding the significance of ethnographic work years after it is produced, and the importance of reflexivity in research on the urban poor.

Liebow and Stack published their books during and after the War on Poverty, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the riots of New York City, Rochester, Jersey City, Philadelphia, Elizabeth, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Watts, when social scientists were grappling with the "culture of poverty" thesis developed by Oscar Lewis and by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.² Though neither of them makes much reference to Lewis or Moynihan, a careful reading of Stack and Liebow against these currents shows a dialogue with them on every page.

Liebow took his readers into the social world of a group of black men in their twenties and thirties to explain why they seemed so different from white middle-class Ameri-

cans in the priority they placed on holding down a job and in their commitment to their children, wives, lovers, and friends. The central dialogue of the book, often implicit, was with the ideas that poverty is transmitted from generation to generation through culture and that the black family was now *the* effective cause of perpetuating black poverty in the U.S. Though Liebow was trained as an anthropologist, we see in his work the influence of the sociologists Everett Hughes, Howard S. Becker, and Erving Goffman, who had brought the concerns of symbolic interactionism into the air of social science in a very prominent way. The emphasis on roles, "definition of the situation," presentation of self, acting, concealment, and vulnerability of the self in social life and group life are central in this account. Liebow argued that "the desire to be . . . noticed by the world he lives in is shared by each of the men on the street corner. Whether they articulate this desire . . . or not, one can see them position themselves to catch the attention of their fellows in much the same way as plants bend or stretch to catch the sunlight" (p. 60). Like Goffman in *The Presentation of Self*, he looked for ways in which friendship is a relationship between people who remain "unrevealed" to one another as they conceal their failures, but also like the Goffman of *Stigma* and *Asylums*, he shows us people who must deal with the emotional toll that comes when audience segregation cannot be maintained—when one has been fully exposed as a failure and has lost all confidence in oneself.³

Sometimes he sits down and cries at the humiliation of it all. Sometimes he strikes out at her or the children with his fists, perhaps to lay hollow claim to being man of the house in the one way left open to him, or perhaps simply to inflict pain on this woman who bears witness to his failure as a husband and father and therefore as a man. Increasingly he turns to the street corner where a shadow system of values constructed out of public fictions serves to accommodate just such men as he, permitting them to be men once again provided they do not look too closely at one another's credentials (p. 213).

Liebow's book is an ethnography of failure, an account of the black male loser. He builds a theory that might be seen as an early version of Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson's "stereotype threat"—that when a person's social identity is attached to a negative stereotype, that

person will tend to underperform in a manner consistent with the stereotype.⁴ Liebow's basic premise is that the street corner men's "social identity"—their membership in the category of poor black men, the category of "their fathers and probably their sons" (p. 54)—has significance when grounded in the situations like work or marriage, where they will be treated as someone with the social identity of the black male loser. It is a short step from Liebow's men on the street corner to the underperformance of Steele's and Aronson's laboratory subjects manifesting distraction and increased body temperature, all of which diminish their performance in the face of stereotype threat.

Tally's Corner came out in 1967, when Carol Stack was in graduate school. She did her research with her young son, Kevin, by her side. Like Liebow, she barely mentions Moynihan, but reading her book side by side with his report, it is clear that her dialogue is with an intellectual atmosphere significantly defined by this work, as well as Liebow's, which focused on the lives of poor black men in such a prominent way. Stack sought, in part, to provide a portrait of the women, sisters, aunts, girlfriends, and other kin connected to the type of men featured in Liebow's study. She described the lives of the children they fathered, the kin who stepped in and cared for these children, and the impact of absent, unemployed fathers on the lives that their lovers and kin created for themselves. She showed that families in the Flats, an African American ghetto community, adapted to their poverty by forming large, resilient, lifelong support networks based on friendship and family. These networks were very powerful, highly structured, and surprisingly complex.

All Our Kin updates and significantly deepens insights about reciprocity and adoption in black family life that one finds in prior generations of scholars. Stack does so through a systematic analysis of the fact that the men and women she studies "know that the minimal funds they receive from low-paying jobs on welfare do not cover their monthly necessities of life: rent, food, and clothing" (p. 57). She introduces a poor black woman named Ruby Banks and the daily life of her matrifocal family in the Flats, showing the solutions they search for in order to survive: "Friendships between lovers and between friends are based upon a precarious balance of trust and profit" (p. 57). Exchanges occur in a process whereby "pervasive distrust is offset by improvisation: an adaptive style of behavior acquired by persons using each situation to control, manipulate, and exploit others. Wherever there are friendships, exploitation possibilities exist" (p.39). She shows how the support system of family and friends, including mutual exchange and exploitation, enables people to cope with poverty.

All Our Kin was hardly a romantic account, not only in highlighting exploitation and deviance in black family life, but also because, like Moynihan, Stack recognized



Eliot Liebow.

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that the black family was in a precarious position. The difference between them was that he saw the black family as a uniform social form that had reached "total breakdown" devoid of males, while Stack shows *how* these families actually work from day to day—how a poor black matrifocal family actually often provided a warm, supportive environment, or prepared a child for life within or beyond the ghetto. And like Liebow, she showed the uncles, brothers, and stepfathers who were actually present. Stack believed no less than Moynihan in the importance of mothers and fathers participating in the upbringing of their children. If AFDC would only allow fathers to be members of households, she wrote, this would be ideal. For Moynihan, by contrast, the rise of single-parent families was the single effective cause of higher rates of welfare dependency. Stack ends *All Our Kin* by arguing that:

Two necessary requirements for ascent from poverty into the middle class are the ability to form a nuclear family pattern, and the ability to obtain an equity. Close examination of the welfare laws and policies relating to public assistance show that these programs systematically tend to reduce the possibility of social mobility. Attempts by those on welfare to formulate nuclear families are efficiently discouraged by welfare policy. In fact, welfare policy encourages the maintenance of non-co-residential cooperative domestic networks. It is impossible for potentially mobile persons to draw all of their kin into the middle class. Likewise, the welfare law conspires against the ability of the poor to



Carol Stack with her son, Kevin, in 1972.
Photo printed with permission from Carol Stack.

build up an equity. Welfare policy effectively prevents the poor from inheriting even a pitifully small amount of cash, or from acquiring capital investments typical for the middle class, such as home ownership (p. 127).

Family deterioration, a lack of wealth, and welfare policy were mutually reinforcing. In focusing on the role of wealth inequality, Stack was forty years ahead of her time.⁵ While faithful to the same fine-grained ethnography that Oscar Lewis used in his studies in Mexico, and later on in his studies in Puerto Rico and Cuba, her data and findings led to different interpretations of the causes of persistent poverty. Unlike Lewis and Moynihan, she did not see family life as the continuing cause of poverty. Like Liebow, she viewed the family in the context of the social, political, and economic conditions of the Northern ghettos.

Stack's book was one of the best early models of mixed-method research because she constantly kept her eye on the importance of using her qualitative data to provide better context for quantitative data. *All Our Kin* was conducted only after a review of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) case files for the county she studied, enabling her to determine the typical patterns before she chose Ruby Banks as her key subject. Yet, she did not begin by assuming that the quantitative data could tell the whole story. She described a phenomenon whereby children end up living with adults who are not their biological parents, showing the ways that close kin cooperate in child care and domestic activities. Stack

reveals how the processes that determine where children live are not random, but "the outcome of calculated exchanges of goods and services between kinsmen" (p. 67). She begins by looking at the data from the program on AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), which shows how common fosterage is and suggests that 20 percent of dependent children were living with a woman other than their mother. She goes on to show that these statistics are "much lower than actual instances" as her research shows "disagreement between the record and the actual residence patterns" (p. 68). "In the process of switching the residence of children, mothers or grantees rarely report these residence changes to the welfare office." Based on her observations and detailed life histories of adults and children, she estimates that at least one-third of kinsmen have been kept by family members other than their mothers once or twice during their childhood.

In and of itself, this would have been interesting, but Stack takes it one step further. If one goes by data alone, the assumption might be that these dispersed children are not actually living with their biological mother. Stack uses ethnography as a tool to uncover the underlying patterns which show with whom the people are actually living. Her field observations demonstrated that of 139 dependent children who are reassigned to a grantee other than their mother, about half of those children's mothers resided in the same home as their children. Many of these mothers were teenagers when their first child was born, and their own mother (the child's grandmother) was the welfare grantee for purposes of receiving benefits from public aid.

Stack creates several dialogues between numbers and patterns on the ground. When she observed that children were cared for or informally fostered by their *father's* mother or sisters (a pattern in contrast to stereotypes of the commitment of fathers and fathers' families to their children), she returned to the county AFDC data once again. She discovered that when mothers were officially asked by the welfare agency who they would want to raise their child in the event of their own death, more than a quarter named the children's father's kin, rather than their own. This observation disrupts the characterization of urban black families as uniformly matrifocal in that "both a child's mother's and father's socially recognized kinsmen are expected to assume parental rights and duties" (p. 73).

Today in the study of poverty, all too often the essential function of qualitative data is to serve or assist quantitative studies by putting a human face on the numbers produced by economists and demographers, or else qualitative data is seen as most useful when it is shown to be typical or representative of larger macro-level trends or populations. While Stack frequently uses quantitative data to place her ethnographic findings in the proper context, she is also sensitive to "the confusion that can

arise when statistical data is interpreted out of context” (p. 71). She shows how ethnography has the possibility of unearthing culturally meaningful questions that can inform the ways in which surveys ask questions, and can give meaning when relevant to quantitative findings.

Liebow and Stack shared with Oscar Lewis the fundamental concern that “the structured one shot interview does not give us some of the kinds of information that we sorely need [in low-income family research] . . . Right now . . . there is a crying need to be aware of—and to try to record and interpret—the complexity, change and variability in [low-income] family life and organization” (Lewis, quoted in Liebow, p. 9). Both Liebow and Stack sought to make ghetto domestic life intelligible through observations of residents *in* the context of their kin- and non-kin-based networks. In their work, one gets a sense that talk is cheap, or at least not fully adequate for making valid inferences. By looking at their studies, we see what has been lost as interviews are becoming the dominant form of qualitative evidence in poverty research.

In *Tally's Corner*, Liebow regards talk and action as dissimilar units that can only be understood in comparison to one another. His book is a project in comparative sociological explanation, whereby the major strategy is to compare what his subjects say against the wider context of what he has learned about them. He focuses not merely on what they talk about, but also on what they don't say, which topics don't come up, what kinds of things don't get referred to in a spontaneous way, and what they won't admit. He contrasts what people say they want to do against a more realistic appraisal of what is possible in their lives, given their particular abilities. He assesses subjects' interpretations at a moment in time by looking at how events unfolded later. He is perceptive about the ways that subjects' explanations for their behavior are public presumptions and common narratives which do not bear up in the actual lives of people who use them. He compares what people say in one conversation against what they say in another. He is sensitive to the way that both boasting and modesty can be self-serving. He compares declarations of intent to what subjects actually do later on. And he speaks with both male and female partners, gauging what his male subjects say about their relationships against the views of their wives and lovers.

With the proliferation of ethnographic interviewing today, there is a danger of forgetting how cheap talk can be. Researchers increasingly use interviews to try to discover the reasons that people did things in their lives, to discover motivation. They let their subjects' attributions of cause and effect stand, as they take explanations of why things happened to them at face value. They write as if there is a clear correspondence between confident statements by subjects and reality, rather than understanding how what their subjects tell them are actually public poses, public displays, or public fictions.

These interview studies are usually based on anywhere from a dozen to a couple hundred respondents. Investigators tend to use the data to tell readers the specific or rough percentage of people who characterize their experiences in a particular way. Treating data in such a way would be appropriate if they were generated by a simple random sample from a well-defined population. Yet, respondents in these interview-based studies are almost always chosen through snowball samples.⁶

Nor are scholars who employ these contemporary approaches to qualitative work able to take the time to follow individuals in their networks, groups, and communities. There have, of course, been some real achievements with interviews. Here I think of the work of Kathryn Edin, who asked welfare and working mothers the basic question, How much money do you spend in an average month on different goods and services, and how do you pay your bills? Piecing the story together took considerable shoe leather, including many interviews spread over several months, and eventually her subjects provided budgets that more or less balanced, showing that none lived on AFDC alone, and that none reported all of their income to the welfare department, findings consistent with Stack's earlier observation to that effect. But despite such outstanding exceptions, I believe that the kind of depth we saw in the studies of Liebow and Stack is getting lost in contemporary poverty research. As Edin and Lein wrote in *Making Ends Meet*, it is possible that because they observed mothers' behaviors at a point in time, they found little of the mutual exchange between kin that Stack did. “Had we been able to follow mothers over time, we might have seen some of our mothers move into a position to help others in their network.”⁷

When I entered sociology in the early nineties, I found myself looking back to the work of Carol Stack and Elliot Liebow as I sought models of scholars who had been interested in learning about the everyday lives of people living in poverty through the eyes of the people themselves, and understanding the social life in the ghetto by virtue of discovering contextual connections through participant observation. I was looking for work by people who had a sophisticated sense of the significance of their own social position. Liebow introduced the concept of the “chain-linked fence” to indicate the kind of inherent separation between himself and his poor black male subjects. He wrote that “despite the barriers, we were able to look at each other, walk alongside each other, talk, and occasionally touch fingers” (p. 250–251). He also wrote, “I used to play with the idea that maybe I wasn't as much of an outsider as I thought. Other events, and later readings of the field materials, have dissuaded me of this particular touch of vanity” (p. 249). He knew that he would never be “one of them,” but also wasn't so far distant that he couldn't understand them. He left open the possibility of a white man entering into a serious dialogue with the lives of poor blacks and producing a book

that gave the reader a set of significant interpretations. Stack's book was a precursor to a lot of contemporary developments surrounding reflexivity in sociological and anthropological ethnography. Stack was certainly not in dialogue with any of the kind of methodological thinking that came about in anthropology during the 1990s in the "reflexive turn," with the advent of post-modern thinking, critical race theory, or whiteness studies. But she pulled off a powerful self-reflexivity about her own white privilege and her own place in the lives of the poor black women whom she got to know. She also involved her subjects in defining research topics and specific questions for investigation. There was no illusion that she was one of them. She always understood the difference between herself and her subjects. In this way, *All Our Kin* anticipated changes and transformations that would come about in cultural representation, including the value and possibilities of redistributing ethnographic authority. In a sober way, she anticipated many of the best things that have happened in ethnography over that period.

All urban ethnography is a reflection of the particular moment in which it is written, and it is usually hard for the ethnographer to see the political context in which he or she is working with complete clarity because it is impossible to anticipate the changes. Read together today, these two works say as much about their own times as about the vast changes that have occurred in the lives of the urban black poor since. After welfare reform, in which welfare mothers were forced off public aid into low-paying jobs, the Stack legacy is a new set of questions about how welfare reform would undermine the ability of kin to do for one another those things that had helped them survive all these years. Stack herself would ultimately ask, skeptically, about the grandmothers, sisters, and cousins who had once been able to offer spontaneous child care:

In the serious attempt to adjust to new values of the marketplace, and to the personal responsibility ethic, mothers come face to face with insurmountable dilemmas of adulthood . . . And kin—grandmothers, sisters, and cousins who were once able to offer spontaneous respite care might still have the family system as their primary impulse but could no longer accommodate 10 hour child care days, when many of them are in the same boat trying to make ends meet.⁸

Nor could Liebow have predicted how much worse the plight of his subjects would become. In recent decades, the jobs that Liebow says these men rejected have been taken by immigrants who, unlike Americans, are not comparing them to the jobs of other Americans, but to jobs back home. While the job prospects of poor black men have worsened and welfare benefits have been slashed, the "war on drugs" has led vast numbers of poor blacks and Hispanics to spend their young adult lives in

prison. Whereas Liebow made frequent reference to interactions between his subjects and the criminal justice system, he says very little about any of them spending time in prison, or about the impact of prison on their lives. It is hard to imagine that any street corner today would not be populated by the casualties of all these transformations.

Building on the powerful insights of studies such as *All Our Kin* and *Tally's Corner*, the next generation of ethnographic books about the urban poor must explain everyday life under these conditions. There is a big difference between the context-driven studies of the 1960s and the decontextualized, quotation-driven studies that are becoming increasingly popular today, however insightful they otherwise are. We should be mindful that the most influential first-hand studies have not been produced by interviewing individuals, but by following and showing people in groups and networks, participating in their lives laterally and over time, and then taking into account how local labor markets, policy regimes, and institutionalized racism may affect them. The case for in-depth, context-driven fieldwork may be even more pressing now than in the past because black men are now less accessible to surveys than ever before. Going in and out of jail, they are more weakly attached to households, though they can be tracked down by ethnographers, just as Liebow found the men who were absent from the survey of the census workers who went door to door. The U.S. Census undercount of these men is once again increasing, so ethnographers have even more of an opportunity to fill the gap. There is some irony that many would choose this time to let ethnography mimic survey research based on snowball sampling.

In this look back at the legacy of Elliott Liebow and Carol Stack, we can see how the ethnographer's findings were shaped by the larger structural context, and how their interpretations made visible the social forces of the times. The families Stack studied (and her analysis) depended on the welfare system as it then was, and the men in Liebow's study (and his analysis) depended on the criminal justice system as it then was. Ethnography lights up "structure" and is always in interaction with it. As that structure changes with macro shifts in the politics and the organization of poverty (privatizing it, farming it out to charities, shrinking it, etc.), ethnographers need to be aware of those shifts in order to "see" better what is before them and to speak in a relevant voice. But this also shows why we need to keep at it: we need continuous ethnography because the undergirding reality keeps changing and we need to be there to show how it works. ■

¹E. Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968); C. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

²D. P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965).

³E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963); E. Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961).

⁴In this series of studies, college sophomores matched by SAT scores were given a difficult section of the Graduate Record Examination. When the students were told that the test evaluated verbal ability, black students scored one standard deviation lower on average than white students, but when the experiment was described as a study of problem-solving techniques, blacks and whites scored the same. C. M. Steele and J. Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995).

⁵See M. Oliver and T. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/ White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge Press, 1995); D. Conley, *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); and L. Keister, *Wealth in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶"Snowball sampling" is a technique for developing a research sample where existing study subjects recruit additional subjects from among their friends and acquaintances.

⁷K. Edin and L. Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

⁸C. Stack, "Doing Public Anthropology for Social Justice," *Cecil G. Sheps Lecture in Social Justice*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, March 28, 2003.