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Household Arrangements and Multiple Jobs in San Salvador

Isabel Nieves

In the slums and shantytowns of San Salvador, survival can depend on the households in which people live. Some types appear to be more successful than others in adapting to a hostile and insecure urban life. In this paper, I argue that one type of living arrangement, the consanguineal household group, seems to contribute more than others to the well-being of its members. The strength of the consanguineal household group is that it frees adult women to become economically active and to help support the group, contributing to a degree of economic stability.

In order to understand the dynamics of social organization of household groups in the shantytowns of San Salvador, we must make the analytical and empirical distinction between the family and the household group. The family is based on the kinship links of its members; the household, the unit of analysis in this paper, is a group of people who reside together. The family group, the household group, and the group that provides economic support and child care and provides and prepares foodstuffs can be one and the same, and in many cases they are. But domestic tasks can conceivably be performed by a group of persons

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who do not reside together.¹ An analysis of the social organization of the slums of San Salvador requires conceptual precision, since, to a large extent, family and household groups do not correspond exactly.²

Interpreting household composition as a form of adaptation to the vicissitudes of the urban environment is not a new idea. Social scientists have applied the concept of a "coping mechanism" to culture as a whole,³ to illness behavior,⁴ to secondary associations in urban neighborhoods,⁵ and to residence patterns.⁶ Stack has demonstrated how the composition of household groups among urban blacks in the northern United States varies according to the changing economic circumstances of a wide network of kin-related individuals. Stack implied that these household groups could cope because they modified their composition over time. Whitten and Szwed presented the same argument about the formation of social groups in other circumstances: "... in many New World Negro rural communities, where by one means or another individuals are kept effectively outside of the sources of economic change, *definable, bounded groups are maladaptive, and survival value for them is thereby limited.*"⁷ In urban mestizo populations, consanguineal household groups may be more adaptive than other varieties of household composition, precisely because they are unmarked and unbounded.

The inhabitants of the marginal communities of San Salvador (the term refers to urban communities such as ghettos, slums, and shantytowns that remain economically and politically marginal to city life)

1. For an example, see Donald R. Bender, "A Refinement of the Concept of Household: Families, Co-Residence and Domestic Functions," *American Anthropologist* 69, no. 5 (1967): 493-504. Nancie L. González ("Toward a Definition of Matrifocality," in *Afro-American Anthropology*, ed. N. E. Whitten, Jr., and J. F. Szwed [New York: Free Press, 1970]), and R. T. Smith (*The Negro Family in British Guiana* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956]), for the Circum-Caribbean area, and M. G. Smith (*West Indian Family Structure* [Seattle: Washington University Press, 1962]), for the British Caribbean, demonstrate conclusively the lack of congruence between nuclear family and household in these regions. Carol Stack ("The Kindred of Viola Jackson: Residence and Family Organization of an Urban Black American Family," in Whitten and Szwed) has shown that blacks living in ghettos in the United States sometimes separate household and nuclear family groups.

2. González's definitions of the household group do not make the conceptual distinction between the household group and the collaborating group which carries out the domestic function and hence are inadequate.

3. John Gillin, *The Culture of Security in San Carlos: A Study of a Guatemalan Community of Indians and Ladinos* (New Orleans: Tulane University, Middle American Research Institute, 1951).

4. Douglas Uzzel, "Susto Revisited: Illness as a Strategic Role," *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 2 (1974): 369-78.

5. Bryan Roberts, "Protestantism and Coping with Urban Life in Guatemala City," *American Journal of Sociology* 73 (May 1968): 753-67.

6. Stack.

7. Norman E. Whitten, Jr., and John F. Szwed, "Introduction," in Whitten and Szwed (n. 1 above), p. 45.

frequently are people of rural extraction in search of economic opportunities. Marginal-community dwellers often hold several jobs in order to raise their income and to reduce the risk of unemployment.⁸ They frequently suffer from job instability, underemployment and unemployment, illiteracy and truncated elementary education. They work either in the industrial labor force or in service occupations.

The 110 shantytowns I identified in 1976 in San Salvador resemble each other physically. Makeshift dwellings, overcrowding, inadequate or absent sanitary facilities, substandard municipal services, and spontaneous and unplanned settlements characterize them all. Yet, the marginal community is often a community in the sociological sense.⁹ Despite high spatial mobility and constant residential turnover, relations among slum residents are intense, personal, and frequent. Substituting for the kinship links of traditional communities are ties of friendship and neighborliness, fictive kinship and reciprocity.

Communal solidarity finds expression in the slum dwellers' emerging realization that, together, they constitute the underprivileged, exploited masses. They have become increasingly articulate in the political sphere. Group solidarity also manifests itself in reciprocal economic arrangements among residents, the credit that storeowners extend to people in the community, and the informal code of behavior that proscribes stealing from or cheating another member of the marginal community but condones these activities in other parts of the city.

The data on the composition of household groups were collected in thirty-five marginal communities, chosen to represent the range in size, educational facilities, sanitary provisions, availability of electricity, and other variables. The data were collected with standardized questionnaires designed to elicit information on socioeconomic factors associated with malnutrition. The working sample contains 197 households.

In order to understand the processes of household formation and maintenance in the marginal community, I suggest using the type of bond or link relating members of a household as the basic principle of analysis.¹⁰ Households, in this scheme, can be consanguineally based,

8. Lambros Comitas, "Occupational Multiplicity in Rural Jamaica," in *Work and Family Life: West Indian Perspectives*, ed. L. Comitas and D. Lowenthal (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), pp. 163-64.

9. Roberts, *Organizing Strangers: Poor Families in Guatemala City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), p. 13 (hereafter cited as *Organizing Strangers*); Larissa A. de Lomniz, *Cómo sobreviven los marginadas* (Mexico, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975).

10. E. A. Hammel and P. Laslett ("Comparing Household Structure over Time and between Cultures," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 1 [1974]: 73-109) base their classification of household types on the presence or absence of a conjugal family unit (CFU) or nuclear family unit. Households containing one or a combination of CFUs constitute subtypes of one major classification, while households formed by single people and groups of kin with no marriage bonds are classed in another major grouping. This

affinally based (including conjugal pairs), or based on another principle of organization. Household formation based on ties of consanguinity or affinity results in a degree of correspondence between household and family, since these groups constitute families. Of the total Salvadorean sample, 79.2 percent of the households are organized around a conjugal or affinal link; the relations among household members are defined in terms of or around those of the conjugal pair. This figure includes households with no conjugal family unit (CFU), those with one CFU (otherwise known as nuclear-family households), and those with more than one CFU (extended-family households of all types). Affinal household arrangement is not only the cultural ideal, but also the most common.

The remaining 20.8 percent of the sample—one-fifth of all the interviewed households—was composed of people related through blood ties. Consanguineal households have been defined as “co-residential kinship groups which include no regularly present male in the role of husband-father. Rather, the effective and enduring relationships within the group are those existing between consanguineal kin.”¹¹ Persons linked by kinship tend to form the permanent and stable nucleus of the household group. Other people may attach themselves to the group transitorily, establishing ties of distant kinship or affinity with members of the household core. In this way, a woman who belongs to the consanguineal household nucleus can have a relationship with a man who calls on her regularly and even spends some nights with her but who does not become a member of the group.

According to González, the relationship among the adult members of the cohabiting cluster should be the focus of study, since they must collaborate to maintain the household.¹² Any number of men and women in a variety of relationships to each other can form a consanguineal household, although affinal ties are not focal. Typically the men are sons, brothers, uncles, or nephews of other individuals in the group. In San Salvador, two or more adult sisters and their children commonly lived with their elderly parents or with their mother and her spouse. This form of household composition seems to present some problems of classification. But the existence of one affinal link does not, in my opinion, make the group an affinal household. The male is economically inactive in most cases and does not contribute to the household's income. The most important relations are among the adult

classification cannot be applied to data which require the conceptual separation of household composition from family or kindred.

11. González (n. 1 above), p. 236.

12. González, “The Consanguineal Household and Matrifocality,” *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 6 (1965): 1542–49 (hereafter cited as “Consanguineal Household”).

Table 1
Consanguineal Household Groups

	N	% of Total Sample	% of Consanguineal Groups
Single women with children	12	6.1	29.3
2 or more consanguineally related women with children	11	5.6	26.8
2 or more consanguineally related women with children and an elderly couple	6	3.0	14.7
2 or more consanguineally related women with children and adult men consanguineally related to the adult women	12	6.1	29.3
Total	41	20.8	100.1

NOTE.—Total sample = 197 household units.

females: the sisters and their mother, who form the core of the household group. This type of residence is a variation of a consanguineal household group, to which other members are attached through affinal ties. I have included such coresiding clusters in the category of consanguineal households.

The household arrangements of consanguineal groups at the time of the study appear in table 1. These residential groups are subject to expansions, reductions, and other modifications in response to changes in their socioeconomic environment, a fact not reflected in these figures, which document the state of affairs at one point in time.¹³

Scholars have reported similar patterns in other parts of Central America. According to Roberts,¹⁴ household groups composed of mothers with children and without spouses accounted for 17 percent of his total sample in Guatemala City in the mid-1960s. Among the black Carib of the Atlantic coast in Guatemala, whose cultural tradition has more in common with Caribbean groups than with rural Guatemalan populations, the proportion of consanguineal household groups is much

13. These variations in composition are more a consequence of exogenous social and economic factors than of natural processes of domestic-group evolution. Therefore Goody's analysis of the developmental cycle of domestic groups (*The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, ed. J. Goody, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, vol. 1 [London: Cambridge University Press, 1958]) cannot be effectively applied to these cases, as the changes in composition are not cyclical or unidirectional, nor do they respond to recurrent or patterned events.

14. Roberts, "The Social Organization of Low Income Urban Families," in *Crucifixion by Power*, ed. Richard N. Adams (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 488 (hereafter cited as "Social Organization").

higher. Forty-five percent of the households in Livingston were of consanguineal composition in 1959.¹⁵ The consanguineal household group is an established prototype of social organization for the Afro-American Caribbean.¹⁶ Studies carried out in Costa Rica report that consanguineal households prevail in urban settlements.¹⁷ Consanguineal household organization appears to be typical for considerable portions of the urban population of Central America.

Why is consanguineal household organization viable for the residents of marginal urban settlements? The information I collected in San Salvador sheds some light on the question.

The urban milieu offers more opportunities for salaried employment to females than rural areas do. In San Salvador, 33.5 percent of the economically active female population (the potentially economically productive population between the ages of 10 and 65) actually works in remunerative positions. Of the rural population, only 10.5 percent of the women of productive age work for a salary.¹⁸

Thus, it is not surprising that women outnumber men among rural-urban migrants. Roberts¹⁹ shows that in Guatemala, as in El Salvador, women migrate to the cities more frequently and at younger ages than men. The city of San Salvador offers employment to lower-class women in service occupations, commerce, and light industry. The middle classes provide domestic employment for many women. Because women are paid less than men, they can find work more easily; hence, women have more economic security than men. Women's diminished economic dependence on their spouses under these circumstances helps explain the proliferation of household groups formed by women with children to support but no stable partner, where adult male kin contribute to the group's budget.

All women who live in the marginal zones of the city can, theoretically, participate in the urban labor force and receive a relatively stable income, but not all of them can take advantage of it. In the Salvadorean sample, single women with families to support ("single" here refers to a woman without a stable partner, regardless of her legal or religious marital status) generally preferred city to rural life; married women with working spouses liked rural life; men favored city life more than their wives, but less than women without partners. These results resemble

15. González, "Toward a Definition of Matrifocality," p. 236.

16. M. G. Smith (n. 1 above).

17. Eugenia López de Piza, "La familia matrifocal como mecanismo de adaptación de la mujer a su marginalidad" (paper presented at the Primer Simposio Mexicano Centroamericano de Investigación sobre la Mujer, Mexico City, November 7-9, 1977).

18. INCAP and Ministry of Public Health of El Salvador, *Clasificación funcional de problemas nutricionales en El Salvador—reporte final* (Guatemala City: INCAP, 1977), Appendix E.

19. Roberts, *Organizing Strangers* (n. 9 above), pp. 66-67.

Roberts's²⁰ findings in marginal areas of Guatemala City. Lower-class women who maintain a household alone or in conjunction with near kin appear to be conscious of the economic opportunities in the city.

A household group whose members are recruited on the basis of kinship has a greater capacity for internal modification than a household group formed around the ties of affinity of one or more couples, at least in societies which do not practice polygamy. Kinship ties can be filled with any number of individuals in different capacities, while ties of affinity can be filled only with one individual at a time. When the household group is organized around father, mother, and unwed children it is difficult, although not impossible, to add new members to the group. The modifications of the consanguineal household group are more viable and less complicated. The consanguineal household group has the capacity, for example, to absorb immigrant relatives, since its limits are less bound and its composition loosely defined.

In the slums of San Salvador, we find that a given household group consists of several adult sisters, their mother, and their children. At another time some nieces and nephews of the adult women may join the group, while one of the sisters leaves to work as a domestic servant. After some time a brother who has been working outside the city or who terminated a relationship with a woman from another household may rejoin the group. Throughout this period some of the adult women may have been having relations with men of other household groups.

Regularly, men belong to several household groups. They may contribute economically to one or several groups, depending on their economic circumstances, but they will not always eat or live with the women. They share some of the domestic functions and thus become members of a domestic group, but they are not part of the residence group.²¹ The principal identification of a man who does not have a conjugal relation is with the household of his mother and sisters, although he may visit one or more women in other residential groups.

In El Salvador, as among blacks in the United States,²² new household groups form and/or existing ones change in response to the need to care for children. The household can reduce its membership when it suffers a sudden drop in cash income, or expand when economic conditions are good, removing the burden from other households that are suffering hardships.

For the female members of consanguineal households this capacity to change composition has important consequences. The residents of marginal communities, women as well as men, hold more than one job at a time in order to reduce the risk of unemployment. Having several jobs requires high physical mobility and flexible scheduling. A woman

20. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

21. Bender (n. 1 above).

22. Stack (n. 1 above), p. 311.

member of a consanguineal household may delegate child-care obligations to another member of the group and domestic responsibilities to a third while she leaves the house and the community in search of work. She and other women who work can take turns caring for the children, going to the market, washing clothes, and cooking. The lactating mother can leave her child during part of the day with another adult member of her household group and can return to give it the breast on the way from one job to another. She can also work outside the home part of the time and look after her children the rest of the day. The economic support given to her by other members of the household group allows her to work part time. On the other hand, the logistical support provided by coresident kinswomen allows the mother of young children to be absent all day, a week, or a month, as is the case with domestic servants.

These household arrangements are not the only way that working women guarantee their ability to leave the household, although they are the principal ones. Extended families or multiple-family households,²³ which make up 10.7 percent of the Salvadorean sample (see table 2), also provide economic, physical, moral, and logistic support to their members. As González says, "... there is no society which has the consanguineal household as its only form. . . . Affinal households of various kinds . . . are always found as alternate structures. Indeed an important characteristic of the type is the fact that households change from one form to another under different kinds of stimuli."²⁴

Domestic arrangements are strongly complemented by arrangements among women of several household groups. They form social networks for the exchange of child care and other necessities. When a mother is desperate, she can obtain food and sometimes cash from a neighbor or friend. She pays the debt when she is in a position to do so, or when her creditors are in dire straits. In this way women establish relationships of reciprocity and mutual dependence, and a small surplus

Table 2

Household Types in Marginal Communities

	%
Affinal households:	
Nuclear-family households	68.5
Multiple-family households	10.7
Subtotal	79.2
Consanguineal households	20.8
Total	100.0

23. Hammel and Laslett (n. 10 above), p. 92.

24. González, "Consanguineal Household" (n. 12 above), p. 1542.

in one household on a given day can be balanced against the deficit of another group. These findings appear to contradict Roberts's²⁵ report that Guatemalan slum dwellers infrequently engage in social exchanges. But Roberts systematically excluded women from his interview sample, and community-based networks are primarily female centered. This kind of interhousehold arrangement is also common among members of ethnic minorities in some cities in the United States. Yanagisako²⁶ has demonstrated how Japanese-American women in Seattle form, maintain, and activate the networks which link kin dispersed throughout the city.

Cross-cultural information seems to indicate that consanguineal household groups enable socially and economically marginal people to adapt to an urban environment. In great measure, the adaptability of these groups derives from the fact that their women can fulfill their roles of mothers, housewives, and providers simultaneously. The consanguineal household allows them the flexibility, mobility, and freedom to participate in the urban labor force and so contribute to the maintenance of the household group itself without neglecting their maternal responsibilities.

*Division of Human Development
Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama
and
Department of Anthropology
Brown University*

25. Roberts, "Social Organization" (n. 14 above), p. 506.

26. Sylvia J. Yanagisako, "Women-centered-Kin Networks in Urban Bilateral Kinship," *American Ethnologist* 4, no. 2 (1977): 207-26.