Gender under Construction: Volunteerism in a Women’s Group in Rural Appalachia

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ABSTRACT

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Participants in Habitat for Humanity International’s “Women Build” program build homes for low-income families with minimal involvement of men. This is a case study of a Women Build group located in rural Appalachia. While previous studies have focused on contexts in which women’s volunteer work is consistent with traditional notions of what constitutes women’s work, this study examines what women’s volunteer work means to them when participating in a traditionally male-dominated activity. Using qualitative methods including participant observation, interviews, and an inductive coding scheme, this study found that the volunteers frame their experiences in three main ways: in terms of interpersonal relationships, their participation in construction work, and as an important service to the community. In addition, while the group seems to alleviate gender and class-based inequality by involving women in the construction of a house for a low-income family, it also reproduces inequality in other, more subtle ways.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The funniest thing was when the cabinets came, and we were hanging the cabinets and the cabinet guy said, ‘No well here let me just show you how to do one of them.’ And then all the women stepped back into like the submissive role, and we just let the guy do it. And ... we were all like going, ‘Did you see how fast we all changed back to being submissive and letting him do the work, and we just stood there and watched?’ ... So that was very interesting that day to see you know ... if he would take the lead or if a male took the lead how quickly women went back to their sort of original roles.

Habitat for Humanity International, a non-profit organization that builds homes for low-income families using volunteer labor, has a number of “Women Build” groups. Those groups construct houses with minimal involvement of men. As McLead (2003) noted, female volunteers have made up 50 percent of Habitat for Humanity’s total volunteers but only 15 percent of its construction volunteers. Furthermore, the quotation above indicated that female volunteers tended to feel marginalized when they worked with men on construction projects. By joining a Women Build group, however, female volunteers had the opportunity to actively participate in construction work.

This is a case study of a Women Build group in Richmond County, located within rural Appalachia. Richmond County is a micropolitan county, which means that it has an urban center consisting of more than 10,000 but fewer than 50,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Although Richmond County is not as isolated as some counties in Appalachia, it is similar to the rest of the region because of its high poverty rates; about one in five individuals in Richmond County falls below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2006).

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1 The county, volunteer group, and all respondents are referred to using pseudonyms in this thesis to maintain anonymity.
The Richmond County Women Build group is a subgroup of the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity affiliate. The Women Build group began work on its first house in 2000 and has built four houses in Richmond County to date. Some members of the Women Build group serve on the county-level Habitat for Humanity board; however, the Women Build also has its own organizational structure, which includes a steering committee and co-chairs who coordinate activities such as planning the group’s construction projects and fundraising.

The group’s leadership for activities on the construction site has varied over the years. For the most recent build, a man worked as the group’s construction supervisor, and he was paid a small stipend for his involvement. Female leaders, or “day leaders,” worked as volunteers on the construction site, and their jobs primarily involved coordinating other volunteers and assisting the construction supervisor. Volunteers who did not have leadership positions within the group participated in construction tasks on the site, and many also took part in the group’s fundraising activities outside the construction site.

This research aims to discover what the volunteers’ work meant to them, specifically in the context of doing volunteer work in a traditionally male-dominated field in rural Appalachia. It is a partial replication of a study done by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), who examined what women’s volunteer work meant to them in the context of rural tourism and hospitality work. I conducted participant observation during the group’s most recent construction project in Richmond County to gain in-depth knowledge of the
volunteer experience. In addition, I interviewed 14 members of the group to obtain additional information about how volunteers frame their experiences in the group.

With its emphasis on women describing their own experiences, as well as examining sources of gender inequality as well as opportunities for human agency within the group, this research is oriented toward feminist scholarship. While there is a growing body of research on gender and volunteer work, it often focuses on women’s experiences in volunteer work that is consistent with activities traditionally done by women, such as fundraising or hospitality tasks. This research seeks to expand upon previous studies of gender and volunteer work by examining women’s experiences in work that has traditionally been done by men. It also situates their experiences in terms of historical efforts to help the poor in rural Appalachia, an area with high poverty rates.

Examining the experiences of the volunteers in this group has several important implications. First, it will expand the literature on gender and volunteer work by exploring how volunteers’ frame their experiences in a context not previously studied. Second, it will identify ways in which a women’s construction group has the potential to empower participants, perpetuate inequality, or both. Lastly, this study has important implications for the Richmond County Women Build group itself because it will analyze volunteer input to assess the group’s successes as well as aspects that could be improved.

This thesis first examines the theoretical context for the research in a literature review of scholarship on gender, volunteer work, and community service in Appalachia. It then outlines the methodology used for research. Finally, it presents findings regarding how volunteers in the Richmond County Women Build group frame their experiences.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides context for viewing the volunteers’ perceptions of their experiences. It begins by examining scholarship on the social construction of gender, as well as gender inequality within paid work and volunteer work. In addition, this chapter examines the role of women in community service in the region of Appalachia from historical and contemporary perspectives. This literature review will show that the Richmond County Women Build group’s volunteer work is likely to alleviate some forms of inequality but may also reproduce inequality.

The Social Construction of Gender

The women in this study who volunteer to help a family by doing construction work are involved in an activity that has traditionally been dominated by men. To understand their experiences, it is important to examine how gender shapes the larger society as well as the experience of individuals. According to Acker (1992), to recognize the impact gender has on society, “it is necessary to go beyond gender as a category, social role, or identity” and to focus on how social institutions, such as the state, religion, or the economy, are gendered (Pg. 566). More recently, it has been suggested that gender not only affects other institutions, but gender itself is a social institution (Martin 2004) and is part of the social structure (Risman 2004). As a social institution, gender “determines the distribution of power, privileges, and economic resources” (Lorber 2005: 242), and leads to inequality in other institutions, including the government, education, and the family.
Rather than being a result of biology, gender is socially constructed. As stated by Lorber (2005) “Through parenting, the schools, and the mass media, gendered norms and expectations get built into boys’ and girls’ sense of self as a certain kind of human being” (Pg. 242). This social construction of gender serves to reproduce male power in the society, and despite the fact that gender differences and different roles for men and women are socially constructed, they are rarely challenged and often viewed as normal and natural (Lorber 2005).

The construction of gender is related to social interaction between individuals. One early attempt to understand how gender shapes interaction is by Erving Goffman. Goffman (1977;1997) argues that gender distinctions were created through everyday interaction, not determined by biology. However, according to Goffman (1976;1997) gender displays in everyday interaction do not “color the whole scene” but instead “occur selectively in it” (Pg. 211). Therefore, gender is a social construction that is manifested in everyday interaction, but is not pervasive within that interaction.

However, in contrast to Goffman’s view of gender’s limited impact on social interaction, West and Zimmerman (1987) make the argument that gender is manifested in all interaction; they write: “Gender is not merely something that happens in the nooks and crannies of interaction, fitted in here and there and not interfering with the serious life” (Pg. 130). Their concept of “doing gender” is a way of explaining that people are constantly enacting gender and reproducing distinctions between men and women during everyday interaction. In addition, the way in which people do gender is not fixed and “must be finely fitted to situations and modified or transformed as the occasion demands”
(West and Zimmerman 1987:135). They argue that to alleviate gender inequality, there must be changes at an institutional level, as well as at the level of everyday interaction.

Despite the way in which West and Zimmerman (1987) shift studies of gender to emphasize the importance of social interaction to the social construction of gender, Deutsch (2007) argues that there should be more attention to ways in which it is possible to “undo gender” (Pg. 106). Instead of viewing everyday interaction as always producing gender inequality, Deutsch (2007) proposes more of an emphasis on “interaction as a site of change” (Pg. 206). Thus, the relationship between gender and everyday interaction is both a way in which inequality is constructed and maintained, as well as a way in which gender inequality can be subverted or alleviated.

Although the social construction of gender shapes the experiences of women in the United States, all women do not experience gender inequality in the same way. For instance, poor women have different experiences from middle- or upper-class women who are closer to the ideal of “hegemonic femininity” (Pyke and Johnson 2005). Therefore, considering “multiple systems of domination,” rather than simply gender inequality, is vital to understanding women’s experiences (Zinn and Dill 1996: 324). Furthermore, examining ways in which people do “difference” – with respect to factors such race, class and gender -- is necessary to understand how social inequality is produced in everyday interaction (West and Fenstermaker 1995:8).

**Gender and Paid Work**

One area in which women have been found to experience gender inequality is within paid work (Acker 1992; Martin 2003; Lorber 2005). However, there is some
argument regarding whether gender inequality affects volunteer work in the same way that it affects paid work. As Rotolo and Wilson (2007) explain, “spillover theory” suggests that volunteer work mimics the inequality documented in paid work; however, another line of argument asserts that in volunteer work, “neither men nor women need conform to the pattern of sex segregation found in other work spheres” and that “women can either ignore the constraints placed on them at work and at home, or look for ways to overturn them” as they participate in volunteer work (Pg. 559). In their study of sex segregation and volunteer work, Rotolo and Wilson (2007) find more support for “spillover theory,” which suggests that examining studies on gender and paid work can be useful to understand how gender shapes women’s experiences in volunteer work. Furthermore, it is important to examine previous findings on gender and paid work because the dynamics of gender in the workplace have been more extensively studied with regard to paid work than they have in terms of volunteer work.

Acker (1992) explains that the structure of work organizations favors men because work related to “production,” which involves producing “material goods, or commodities” has traditionally been considered “men’s work” (Pg. 567). By contrast, work related to reproduction, which includes low-prestige and low-paid or unpaid domestic duties such as caring for children, has been associated with women. And according to Lorber (2005) “The structure of work – hours, overtime, travel – as well as pay scales and promotion ladders reflect that the ideal worker is a man and not a woman” (Pg. 251). Gender inequality in the structure of the workplace has negative consequences
for women, as they earn only 80 percent of the salaries of men (Blau and Kahn 2006) and are less likely to obtain high-paying management positions (Rubin 1997).

Along with the structure of work and salaries favoring men, women’s everyday experiences while performing paid work are also affected by gender inequality. In *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Kanter (1977) explains the challenges that women face when they enter occupations that have traditionally been dominated by men:

Those women who were few in number among male peers and often had “only woman” status became tokens: symbols of how-women-can-do, stand-ins for all women [...] Sometimes they faced the loneliness of the outsider, of the stranger who intrudes upon an alien culture and may become self-estranged in the process of assimilation. In any case, their turnover and “failure rate” were known to be much higher than those of men [...] (Pg. 207).

Kanter’s (1977) research makes the important points that women who work in male-dominated fields could feel alienated and may not be taken seriously. However, Lorber (2005) notes that Kanter’s hypothesis – that as workplaces become more gender balanced, gender inequality would lessen – has not been shown to be true.

More recent research by Martin (2003) on gender in corporations shows that gender inequality has continued to affect the everyday experiences of women. According to Martin (2003) people learn “gender practices” from the larger society, such as the idea that women should be secretaries, not business executives (Pg. 354). Additionally, “practicing gender” is a dynamic process that involves how gender is actually done in everyday situations in the workplace. It is similar to West and Zimmerman’s concept of “doing gender,” but emphasizes that gender is practiced in a way that is often subtle and that people do not usually think about how they – and others – practice gender.
Martin (2003) gives an example of how practicing gender during every interaction in the workplace leads to a woman being treated as inferior:

Tom and Betsy, both vice-presidents in a Fortune 500 company, stood talking in a hallway after a meeting [...] a phone started to ring in one office and after three or so rings, Tom said to Betsy, “Why don’t you get that?” Betsy was surprised by Tom’s request but answered the phone anyway and Tom returned to his office. Afterwards, Betsy found Tom to ask if he realized what he had done. She told him: “I’m a vice-president too, Tom, and you treated me like a secretary. What were you thinking?” Betsy’s reaction surprised Tom. He did not mean anything by his action, he said commenting: “I did not even think about it.” (Pg. 346).

Therefore, although Tom was aware that Betsy was an executive and not obligated to answer the phone for him, his perception of her as a woman led to his asking her to do the job of a secretary, which has traditionally been a woman’s job in work organizations. Although Martin (2003) notes that individuals do have some agency regarding how they practice gender, the previous excerpt suggests that often people may not realize the ways in which they enact gender in everyday situations.

Furthermore, in a review of literature on gender and sexual harassment, Welsh (1999) indicates that that there is an emerging body of scholarship in this area. Sexual harassment can take the form of more blatant “quid pro quo” harassment, which involves “sexual threats or bribery” or more subtle behaviors such as “sexual jokes, comments, and touching” (Pg. 170). According to Welsh (1999), citing Reskin and Padavic (1994), “At its core, sexual harassment is often about letting women know they are not welcome in certain workplaces and that they are not respected members of the work group” (Pg. 170). Thus, sexual harassment represents another way in which gender can have a negative impact on women’s work experiences.
To address the gender inequality that exists in the workplace, Lorber (2005) notes that the politics of “social construction” feminists have focused on “recognizing and counteracting the power of gender norms at work” (pg. 241). Furthermore, Deutch (2007) argues that more research is needed regarding how “institutional and interactional levels work together to produce change” in the form of alleviating gender inequality (Pg. 106).

Most of the existing literature regarding women’s work experiences focuses on paid work. However, the next section examines growing literature on women and volunteer work. It suggests that although women’s experiences in paid work and volunteer work are not necessarily the same, both types of work involve the themes of gender inequality and opportunities for agency.

**Gender and Volunteer Work**

In a frequently cited book on gender and volunteer work, Kaminer (1984) writes that volunteering has “both liberated women and kept them in their place” (Pg. 1). The following review of literature on gender and volunteer work indicates that as Kaminer argues, volunteer work can perpetuate inequality but also has the potential to empower women.

Hook (2004) explains that time spend on unpaid and paid labor varies according to gender: “On average, women are more likely to perform and spend more time on child care, housework, informal support, and volunteering than are men. On the other hand, men are more likely to engage in and spend more time on employment” (Pg. 113). Along similar lines, Abrahams (1996) suggests that women’s involvement in volunteering instead of the paid workforce could reproduce gender inequality:
Women’s unpaid and therefore devalued community labor in a capitalist system reproduces gender inequality and at the same time keeps women financially dependent on men (Pg. 768).

Therefore, women who volunteer and do not participate in paid work could find themselves in a situation similar to women who work inside the home – they must depend on someone else to support them financially.

Furthermore, when female volunteers do unpaid work that fits gender stereotypes, such as cooking or watching children, the ideology suggesting that women are best suited for tasks that are undervalued in society is left intact. In a study of female volunteers in rural Iowa, Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) note the possibility of volunteering reproducing gender inequality: “Women’s volunteer work in the rural tourist industry may have the effect of reinforcing traditional gender roles since it involves women’s doing what women are presumed to do best: offering help and comfort to those around them” (Pg. 237). Thus, like formal work organizations studied by Martin (2003), organizations that utilize volunteers have not been able to avoid the larger society’s expectations regarding gender roles.

In addition, just as paid work is structured to promote stereotypical gender roles and male dominance, the structures of community organizations are also gendered. Stall and Stoecker (1998) describe a well-known model for urban community organizing called the “Alinsky Model.” The Alinsky model emphasizes the importance of an organization gaining power in a community. The model invokes images of sports and the military, which have historically been male-dominated activities, to motivate participants to accomplish the goals of the organization. Furthermore, women were not encouraged to
get involved in such efforts because they were considered to be “too delicate” (Stall and Stoecker 1998: 735). Also, because women often had, or were assumed to have, commitments in their households, men were more likely to be leaders in such organizations.

Similarly, a study using a national sample of Americans found that volunteer tasks are segregated by both gender and class:

Men are more likely than women to do maintenance tasks, serve on a board or committee, and either teach or coach, while women are more likely than men to solicit donations or canvass for votes, prepare or deliver food or other goods, and help out at events […] As far as education is concerned, the more highly educated volunteers are more likely to do fund-raising or canvassing, administrative work or consulting, helping out at events, serving on a board or committee, and either teaching or coaching. They are less likely to do maintenance work and prepare food or other goods (Rotolo and Wilson 2007:571).

Rotolo and Wilson (2007) argue that rather than being different from the larger society or from paid work, volunteer tasks are often differentiated according to gender and class as well.

A system of inequality is also strengthened by women’s perceptions of their volunteer work. As Petzelka and Mannon (2006) note, some studies find that “women themselves tend to belittle or minimize their efforts” (Pg. 236). For example, in a study of upper-class female volunteers at a breast cancer foundation, the participants tended to focus on the social aspects of their volunteering and “downplay the important role of charity work for their own lives and for the larger society” (Blackstone 2004: 356). This finding suggests that not only do organizations view women’s volunteer work as less
valuable, but also that women themselves sometimes buy into the idea that their work is invisible and unimportant.

Women’s experiences while volunteering are also shaped by their race and class. Abrahams (1996) writes, “Identities formed at the intersection of race, class, and gender reverberate in and through community participation” (Pg. 769). According to Abrahams (1996), women of different races and class backgrounds have different reasons for becoming involved in volunteer work and the work itself has different meanings for different women. For example, volunteering at a Latino Empowerment cultural organization allows middle-class Latina women to maintain a connection to their culture; for anglo women, volunteering in children’s programs is a way to “embrace an identity as a good mother” (Abrahams 1996:780).

In addition, women from higher social classes may have higher positions within a volunteer organization. Although Abrahams (1996) does not characterize upper-class women as “protecting class-based interests,” she notes that the upper-class women in her study, “were presently or had been heavily involved in positions of power on boards overseeing the schools that their children attended” (Pg. 787). Regarding elite women’s philanthropy, Kendall (2002) goes further to argue that while volunteering empowers elite women, it also contributes to the reproduction of racial and class inequality. Therefore, although gender does affect women’s volunteer experiences, it is not appropriate to assume that all women experience volunteer work in the same way.

Despite ways in which volunteering can be viewed as an activity that, like the rest of society, perpetuates inequality, it can also be a way to empower women. Recent
studies have found that volunteering can help women develop positive identities that challenge gender norms that confine women to work that is under-appreciated.

Along with their analysis of the Alinsky model of community organizing, Stall and Stoecker (1998) also recognize the existence of a “woman-centered” model of community organizing. The woman-centered model is rooted in African American women’s clubs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the settlement movement during the same period. Rather than emphasizing competition and masculinity, the woman-centered model focuses on cooperation and building networks within the group and the community. Stall and Stoecker (1998) write,

The goal of a women-centered organizing process is “empowerment” – a developmental process that includes building skills through repetitive cycles of action and reflection that evoke new skills and understandings, and in turn provoke new and more effective actions (Pg 741).

Therefore, the woman-centered model promotes empowerment of women by allowing them to develop new skills and knowledge and also uses empowerment as a way to promote social change in a community. In addition, it blurs the distinction between the “public and private spheres” by conceptualizing “women’s work” as not being confined to the home, but also including participation in community organizing to better the lives of their families (Stall and Stoecker 1998:750).

Although some studies (Daniels 1985; Blackstone 2004) show that female volunteers may belittle the importance of their efforts, a study by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) on women and volunteering in rural areas finds that under certain conditions, women view their work as important and take pride in the fact that the volunteer efforts are spearheaded by women. Thus, Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) make an important point
as to whether volunteering reproduces gender inequality or empowers women and whether women take pride in their volunteer work or belittle it: context matters (Petrzelka and Mannon 2006). According to Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), one context that can lead to women taking pride in their work is when their work provides assistance to a struggling local economy.

According to Lorber (2005), feminist scholarship since the 1980s has suggested that one way to address gender inequality is to rebel against the traditional gender norms and ways of looking at gender. But doing tasks traditionally considered to be men's work may not be the only way that women can be empowered by volunteering. Abrahams (1996) explains how volunteering that is based on women's role as nurturers can still have benefits for them: “Ironically, community participation on behalf of children and in support of traditional motherhood provided an avenue for developing skills, networks, and talents beyond the nuclear family” (Abrahams 1996:782). That suggests that women need not be "gender rebellion” feminists who aim to subvert traditional gender roles, to be empowered by volunteer work (Lorber 2005).

To explain how conforming to and subverting traditional gender roles can both be empowering for women – but in different ways – Seitz (1995) makes a distinction between women's "practical" interests and women's "strategic" interests: practical interests include community service that is for the benefit of both women and men, while strategic interests go further to alleviate women's inequality relative to men. Therefore, volunteering may empower individual women or challenge the gendered social order, but it depends upon the context in which the volunteering occurs.
History of Women and Community Service in Appalachia

Although the research on women’s volunteering in rural communities is limited, it is important to examine women’s community service in Appalachia, a region “characterized by significantly higher rates of poverty than average for the United States” to understand the context in which the volunteer work occurs (Billings and Blee 2000:4). Appalachian poverty and efforts to alleviate it have been the subjects of much scholarship. However, Smith (1998) argued that studies of Appalachia have not given sufficient attention the role women have played in Appalachian society:

Women have been extras, hidden behind quilts and sunbonnets in tradition-bound domestic roles that supported their husbands, sons, and fathers as they transformed the region and made its history (Pg. 5).

Because of the tendency of scholarship to focus on class issues, such as the exploitation of Appalachian men by the coal industry, Smith (1998) finds that gender inequality, as well as ways in which women have been actors contributing to Appalachian society, have remained invisible. Furthermore, ways in which women contributed to communities are often ignored because of a tendency to only view women’s work in paid labor force as important. Thus, work done in the home or volunteer work is left out.

Following such criticism, scholars (Barney 1999; Appleby 1999; Duff: 1999; Baker 2005) have begun to view Appalachia through a gendered lens. One pattern that becomes evident upon review of such scholarship is that throughout history, women have played an important role in efforts to promote development and to alleviate poverty in Appalachia via education, healthcare, and economic development. Furthermore, although some of those women were from outside Appalachia, women from within the region were
also involved. While Billings and Blee (2000) seem skeptical about community efforts to alleviate poverty, and Duncan (1999) notes that a national policy is the best way to reduce the inequality perpetuated by local elites, it has been argued that grassroots efforts as described above can not only reduce poverty but can also empower Appalachian women (Seitz 1995).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, settlement workers represented an effort to promote development in Appalachia. Settlement workers were predominately women, who came from wealthy families outside Appalachia and had often attended prestigious universities. Some of the main goals of settlement workers were to educate Appalachian women and children on “moral values, proper nutrition and healthcare, sanitary housekeeping practices and community values” (Duff 1999:6).

As part of the settlement movement in sociology, which was popularized by efforts to help the urban poor in Chicago, Appalachian settlement workers were eager to use their educations to promote social change and to alleviate poverty. Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley (2002) noted that some important characteristics of settlement sociology were that “people from a relatively privileged class attempt to live with people who are from disempowered classes” and that “it expects settlement residents to use what they learn to change society to effect a more just distribution of socially produced goods” (Pg. 7). Appalachian settlement workers followed the models of urban settlement workers such as Jane Addams and aimed to educate people to improve their lives.

Duff (1999) explains that along with helping Appalachians, settlement workers themselves derived empowerment from working in Appalachia:
Settlement work provided not only a socially acceptable profession for women to exercise their new knowledge and skills, but the opportunity to recreate the woman-focused and woman-controlled environment of the woman’s college (Pg. 5)

Therefore, female settlement workers found that by offering to assist Appalachians, they also had more personal freedom than they would if they had become housewives or stayed with their parents.

The relationship between settlement workers and the community in which they worked was complicated. According to Tice (1998), the community’s attitude toward the settlement workers reflected some ambivalence, as they viewed settlement workers not as simply “agents of social control” nor “charitable sisters of mountain people” (Pg. 192). In addition, the relationship between the settlement workers and the Appalachian communities seemed to be rather strained as they worked with one another. For example, as Tice (1998) notes, “in sharing responsibilities for socializing mountain children, both reformers and parents desired validation for their respective knowledge of mothering” (Pg. 209). Therefore, while the assistance of settlement workers was frequently requested by Appalachian communities and the settlement workers usually had benevolent intentions, some conflict and ambivalence existed between the two groups.

Settlement workers were often not from the communities in which they were working. However, local Appalachian clubwomen assisted them with their efforts. Barney (1999) described how settlement workers and middle-class Appalachian women worked together to promote a professionalized medical system to rural and lower-class Appalachians during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. Like the settlement workers, these clubwomen found volunteer work to be empowering on a personal level.
Barney (1999) writes, “Appalachian women volunteers fortified their common class identity through their efforts to remake working class and immigrant women into their image of an Anglo-Saxon ‘good mother’” (Pg. 70). Many of the club women were married to physicians, and through voluntary organizations, they spread information to the poor about scientific medicine, such as the importance of utilizing a physician during childbirth.

Appalachian clubwomen and settlement workers played a significant role in the spread of modern medicine to Appalachia. Barney (1999) notes that while men held the “institutional power and positions of public authority” regarding medical knowledge, “men needed the grassroots support that women could mobilize” to spread such knowledge (Pg. 70). Consequently, in their work to educate the poor and promote healthcare and modernization, both settlement workers and Appalachian clubwomen can be seen as examples of “women as active agents” in Appalachian communities (Barney 1999).

But despite ways in which settlement workers and Appalachian clubwomen were clearly actors who contributed to the development of services such as education and healthcare in the region, they did little to alleviate gender inequality in Appalachia. Although settlement workers were critical of “stern patriarchs [who] ruled the roost and hard-working yet unenlightened mothers [who] spent too much time tending the fields to properly care for their large broods of children,” they did not seek to eliminate the patriarchy in Appalachia, but instead aimed to make the poorer women’s roles more like those of the middle class women, as was described above (Tice 1998:196).
Another factor that limited the impact of settlement workers and the clubwomen is that they were “reluctant to become involved in political or social reform” (Duff 1999:4). As Billings and Blee (2000) and Duncan (1999) noted, one of the main causes of poverty and inequality in Appalachia is the control of politics and the economy by local elites. Therefore, although female settlement workers and local female volunteers did contribute to educating Appalachians, they did not alter the power structure that allowed poverty and gender inequality to persist.

Like the efforts of women during the settlement movement, efforts to alleviate Appalachian poverty during the 1960s included the participation of people from outside the region. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared a “War on Poverty,” which led to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Crook and Thomas 1969). One program created by that legislation was Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA. VISTA was a federally funded program that brought young, predominately middle-class and educated people to assist with efforts to alleviate poverty in various regions of the United States. Participants in the VISTA program made a one-year commitment to the organization, and after receiving training, they worked with local sponsors who had requested assistance (Crook and Thomas 1969). The volunteers in the Appalachian region aimed to make similar contributions to communities as settlement workers by educating people and helping them to move out of poverty.

Another group, the Appalachian Volunteers, who worked along with the VISTA volunteers, was formed at colleges and universities within the Appalachian region. Although some Appalachian Volunteers were from outside the region, many were from
inside Appalachia (Whisnant 1994: 191). However, Whisnant (1994) argued that sexism and racism were problems within the Appalachian Volunteers. He wrote:

Because the AVs were dominated entirely by white males, blacks were left out altogether and white women ordinarily either did menial office tasks or were assigned the drudgery of house-to-house local organizing, for which the “fieldmen” eventually got credit for if the effort was successful (Whisnant 1994: 212).

Whisnant (1994) also indicated that a “macho” attitude among Appalachian Volunteers “prevented the AVs from seriously encouraging indigenous leadership, male or female” (Pg. 212). Although the Appalachian Volunteers aimed to alleviate poverty, the marginalization of women was one of the reasons that the organization had little lasting impact on the region and did not allow local residents to feel empowered to change their communities.

By examining historical attempts to alleviate poverty in Appalachia, two themes emerge. First, from the beginning of efforts to help the poor, women have been involved. The settlement movement in sociology represented a group of progressively minded women who wanted to study social inequality and to help promote social change. By utilizing the methods developed by sociologists such as Jane Addams, settlement workers in Appalachia attempted to educate the poor. Middle-class Appalachian clubwomen also assisted with efforts to educate the poor about modern medicine. Both groups found agency and empowerment through their community involvement. However, their efforts did little to affect gender inequality or poverty within the communities in which wealthy local men had significant power. And although their efforts were limited because of
sexism, female Appalachian Volunteers were also involved in addressing poverty in Appalachia.

Another important theme that can be found by examining efforts to alleviate poverty in Appalachia is that outsiders have frequently been involved. Although it seems that settlement workers, VISTA volunteers, and Appalachian Volunteers had good intentions, their efforts might have been better sustained if they had encouraged the people they were serving to take leadership roles in the programs. Even the local Appalachian clubwomen represented people of a higher class trying to help the rural poor, rather than the poor having the chance to organize for their own interests. Perhaps each of the groups that attempted to help the rural poor had their own interests in mind as much as they did the interests of the poor whom they were trying to help.

Women in Contemporary Community Service

Scholarship on more recent Appalachian community organizing (Seitz 1995; Appleby 1999; Baker 2005), as well as the approaches of the organizations themselves, take a different view of gender from what was the case during the War on Poverty. First, there has been more emphasis on the role that women can play in organizing for community development. Second, there has been more attention paid to the role that indigenous Appalachian people can play in such organizations. Along with helping to alleviate poverty, the involvement of local women can also lead to empowerment for the women themselves.

One way in which women make a unique contribution to grassroots organizations in Appalachia is by providing an alternative to the “macho” attitudes and organizational
structure of groups led by men, such as the Appalachian Volunteers as described earlier by Whisnant (1994:212). According to Seitz (1995), “Women’s groups share a rejection of bureaucratic structures in favor of nonhierarchical and consensus-building forms of organization” (Pg. 227). As was noted regarding the Appalachian Volunteers, an organizational hierarchy tended to be dominated by men and excluded local people of either sex. Therefore, a nonhierarchical structure could help to encourage indigenous participation. And because of their emphasis on making partnerships within the community, women’s efforts regarding community organizing in Appalachia are able to “form multiple external linkages for funding and technical assistance” (Seitz 1995:227). Such networking can allow for grassroots organizations to better sustain themselves.

Although contemporary Appalachian poverty and substandard housing might seem like a class issue, gender is also connected to poverty. For Appalachian women, gender inequality exacerbates poverty, as women tend to be concentrated in low-paying and low-prestige jobs in the service sector (Latimer and Oberhauser 1995). Because of the connections between gender and poverty, Sen (1999) and Seitz (1995) argued that gender inequality and economic inequality must be addressed together. Both Sen (1999) and Seitz (1995) focused on the empowerment of women as a way to achieve those goals. And according to Seitz (1995), one way in which Appalachian women can be empowered is by participating in grassroots community organizations.

Recent literature containing several examples of women’s involvement in community organizations confirms Seitz’s assertions that women are an important part of Appalachian community development and also that community development creates
opportunities for women. These organizations aim to get women involved in community service to alleviate poverty in rural areas.

Appleby (1999) describes The Federation of Communities in Service, or FOCIS, which is an organization run by women in Appalachia that aims to “create relationships and social change from the bottom up” (Pg. 171). FOCIS aims to empower local women by helping them to create their own organizations, and it also encourages partnerships among community organizations (Appleby 1999). Like FOCIS, the Southern Appalachian Labor School, an organization that offers programs related to “housing, basic provisions, healthcare, child and family services, and job training,” has aimed to strengthen communities with the help of local women (Baker 2005: 328). The staff is composed mostly of women, who assist the organization with mobilizing “family and church networks” (Baker 2005:335). Baker (2005) also notes that the women themselves benefit by gaining leadership skills and social capital.

Another example of an organization that involves women in community service is the Greenville Hospitality Association in rural Iowa studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2005). Female volunteers, who worked in the tourist industry, viewed their work as “as having real value and making a contribution to the struggling community” (Petrzelka and Mannon 2006:244). In addition to being an opportunity for women to socialize and to express what they consider to be their “nurturing nature,” concern regarding economic development of the community is a major part of their involvement in volunteer work (Petrzelka and Mannon 2006:244).
When contrasted with earlier efforts to improve life for Appalachians, it can be seen that more contemporary organizations are different in several ways. Rather than being controlled by people from outside the region, current organizations include participation of local people (Baker 2005; Appleby 1999). And along with including indigenous Appalachians, they are also grassroots efforts rather than the federally funded programs such as VISTA that were created during the War on Poverty in the 1960s. Furthermore, the organizations are also distinct with respect to gender. Although settlement workers and local Appalachian clubwomen did receive personal benefits, such as more freedom or an enhanced social status, they did not significantly alter gender relations in Appalachia. By contrast, according to Seitz (1995), more recent grassroots organizing connects efforts to develop economic or social capital to efforts to achieve gender equality. Furthermore, research shows that women who have participated in community organizing to alleviate poverty report feeling empowered by their efforts (Petrzelka and Mannon 2006; Baker 2005; Seitz 1995).

Although early attempts to help Appalachians were not perfect, they did however represent a tradition of women taking an active role in community development in the region. It seems that from the 1880s to the present, women in the Appalachian region have been involved in efforts to alleviate poverty. While men also participated in attempts to develop Appalachia, especially during the War on Poverty, women seem to have been involved first and remain the leaders today.

Overall, studies on gender relations in the larger society, gender and volunteer work, and women’s involvement in community service in Appalachia suggest gender
shapes the experiences of female volunteers. In some contexts, such as a community that is struggling economically, women have experienced volunteering as empowering. However, in other contexts, such as male-dominated groups, women were not encouraged to participate. Furthermore, women are not a homogenous group, and different women experience volunteering in different ways. For example, women involved in volunteer work in Appalachia have frequently been from higher social classes, which may suggest that poorer women are excluded from or marginalized during volunteer work.

One way to evaluate the distinctive volunteer experiences of women in the Appalachian region and determine the impact of factors such as gender and social class on the experiences of these volunteers is to examine a volunteer group in this community that is active. In particular, this research examines the experiences of women who volunteer for a women-centered Habitat for Humanity group. Like Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), this study focuses on determining what women’s volunteer work means to them. In addition, it expands upon previous studies of gender and volunteer work by examining women’s volunteer experiences while doing construction work, a traditionally male-dominated activity. The next chapters explain the methodological considerations of the study, as well as detailed findings regarding the volunteers’ experiences and what their work means to them.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH SITE AND METHODOLOGY

The Richmond County Women Build group is located in rural Appalachia and is part of the Habitat for Humanity International organization. Unlike mixed-sex Habitat for Humanity groups in Richmond County, the group involves women building a house for a low-income family with minimal involvement of men. Members of the group participate in the construction work, do fundraising, and serve on the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity board of which the group is a part. The group has built four houses in Richmond County to date.

The Richmond County Women Build group was chosen to serve as a case study for examining what women’s volunteer work means to them in the context of participating in a traditionally male-dominated activity in the region of Appalachia. I became aware of the group in the Spring of 2007. I had no previous experience with the women’s group, and I began by learning about the group through its Web site and attending a fundraising flower sale to meet the members. Next, I spoke to a co-chair of the group about my research project and was given permission to observe the group and ask volunteers to participate in interviews.

Data Collection

To gather in-depth knowledge about the experiences of the volunteers in the group, participant observation was conducted between June 2007 and October 2007. Throughout my observations, I made a conscious effort to tell the volunteers with whom I was working that I was observing the group and regularly discussed the goal of my project. The participant observation consisted of participating in the group’s construction
of a house, as well as occasionally attending meetings or activities such as a volunteer recognition day. Observations were typically done in four-to-six hour blocks, one-to-two times per week. As a result of my full participation in the construction work, I rarely jotted notes while in the field. Immediately following each observation, complete field notes were typed or dictated into a recorder and then transcribed.

In my role as a volunteer and observer, I participated in the construction work and interacted with other volunteers during most phases of the construction project. However, I did not seek out leadership roles or administrative tasks within the group, and in most cases was not asked to do so. One exception involves being encouraged by the construction supervisor, Greg, to lead a crew of volunteers early in my participation with the group. I was uncomfortable with the possibility of being designated a leader by the male supervisor because I worried that it would conflict with my gaining rapport with the other volunteers. I negotiated the situation by downplaying my interest in leading crews of workers and by seeking input from other volunteers while doing tasks.

My relationships with volunteers progressed from my being a stranger to the rest of the group to nearly all participants on the construction site knowing me and being aware of my research project. As I got to know the volunteers, I learned about aspects of their lives such as their families, occupations, and hobbies and interests; in addition, I disclosed similar information about myself. Towards the end of the group’s project, I was invited to social gatherings outside the construction site, such as one held at a volunteer’s home.
The interview stage began about one month into the participant observation, and participant observation continued as the interviews were being conducted. As volunteers became acquainted with my research project, I began asking them to participate in an interview. Following the methodological protocol of Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), I used purposive sampling to recruit volunteers who were actively involved and would be knowledgeable about the group. For this study, I have conceptualized volunteers who are “actively involved” as volunteers who: have volunteered at the group’s most recent construction project more than once; or who have held leadership positions in the group regardless of their participation on the construction site during the most recent project. Along with my personal observations of attendance at the build, I sought input from members of the group for my recruitment of volunteers who have been active participants in the group.

The majority of the respondents were recruited on the build site. Several participants, however, were contacted on the telephone or through e-mail after members of the group or a contact at my university had referred them to me as being active participants in the group. Initial contacts with those respondents confirmed that they fit the selection criteria of having participated more than once during the current build or having held leadership positions within the group.

According to members’ estimates and personal observations, about 15 to 25 women represent a “core” group of volunteers who were most involved, and my interviews with 14 women represent a significant number of those volunteers. Although it is difficult to provide the exact number of volunteers who participated less frequently, it
seems that approximately 50 to 75 individuals occasionally took part in the group’s activities.

The majority of the respondents in this study were women from ages 45 to 65, and most respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree. All of the participants were white. Table 1 below provides age ranges for the respondents, and Table 2 shows the respondents by level of education.

Table 1: Respondents by Age Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Respondents by Level of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's Degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D./Doctoral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Half of the respondents had annual incomes of $50,000 and above, 21 percent had incomes from $20,000 to $29,999, and 14 percent had incomes from $30,000 to $39,999. Table 3 shows the respondents to this study by income level.
Table 3: Respondents by Income Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 or less</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000-$19,999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000-$29,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000-$39,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000-$49,999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 and above</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information collected at the time of the interview also revealed that respondents had varying lengths of involvement with the group. Half of the participants had been members of the group since its first building project in 2000, while others joined during the second build (22 percent), third build (14 percent) or fourth build (14 percent). Table 4 summarizes that involvement.

Table 4: Respondents by Length of Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long of Involvement</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since the first build</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the second build</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the third build</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the fourth build</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure that respondents were comfortable in the interview setting, tape-recorded interviews were conducted in locations selected by the respondents, including their homes or offices, as well as local restaurants. The interviews ranged in length from twenty minutes to one hour and fifteen minutes. Following the study by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), the interview questions were semi-structured, open-ended and included topics such as why the women joined the group, what their experiences with the group have been, why they continued to participate, and how they viewed their work as
affecting the community (Appendix A). Some demographic information about the volunteers was also collected at the beginning of the interview to allow for comparisons with regard to age, racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, and level of education (Appendix B). Participants were assured that their responses would be anonymous and that they would be referred to using pseudonyms in this report to maintain confidentiality (Appendix C).

After reaching the saturation point in the interview process, or the point at which the interviews no longer revealed new information, the data collection phase of the research ended. That occurred after fourteen interviews had been conducted. Subsequently, the taped interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Following the participation observation and interviews, the data was analyzed using an inductive coding procedure. Following the recommendations of Lofland et al. (2006), the first level of coding that was performed on the data was “initial coding,” which involves line-by-line analysis of the data to develop “numerous and varied” codes (Pg. 201). After that initial coding, I made a diagram with three major themes, as well as several subthemes, that were pertinent to my research question of what the volunteers’ work means to them. I used that diagram to begin “focused coding,” which is a “more selective and more conceptual” analysis of the data (Lofland et al. 2006:201, citing Charmaz 2001:344). In the process of focusing my data, I physically separated chunks of data into folders related to the themes and subthemes. The chunks of data related to each subtheme were examined and “memos” were written to compare and contrast the data
(Lofland et al. 2006:209, citing Charmaz 2001; Glaser 1978; Miles and Huberman 1994; Stauss and Corbin 1990). Finally, representative interview quotations and field note entries were extracted and included in the report of the findings, which is based upon analysis of quotations and memos.
CHAPTER 4: VOLUNTEERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

One of the main ways in which the women who participated in the study described their volunteering was in terms of the interpersonal relationships that had developed during their involvement with the Richmond County Women Build group. Three main types of relationships emerged: relationships among the volunteers, the relationship between the volunteers and leaders in the organization, and the relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners. Like the women studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), these women described their volunteering as providing an opportunity to meet people. However, relationships related to this group were not only about making friends and socializing; they were also working relationships that affected the way in which the women experienced their participation in construction tasks and the degree to which they took pride in their work. Furthermore, issues of class and gender hierarchy reverberated through the relationships.

Interpersonal Relationships Among Volunteers

An analysis of the interpersonal relationships that existed within the Richmond County Women Build group shows that much of the interaction can be characterized by the collaboration that occurs in the building process, as well as by the volunteers’ perceptions that the group was a comfortable environment with a sense of camaraderie. Although such positive descriptions of the interpersonal relationships were common, volunteers also suggested that interpersonal relationships in the group also involved isolated personality conflicts, cliques, and other forms of hierarchy. The following
sections analyze the volunteers’ relationships in terms of collaboration, camaraderie, and a comfortable environment, as well as issues related to cliques and social class.

**Collaboration**

The volunteers stressed that they collaborated with one another, or worked together. The way in which they reported doing so is similar to the “woman-centered model” of community organizing described by Stall and Stoecker (1998), which emphasizes cooperation over competition. Working in pairs was a common way that the women described their volunteering as collaborative. Kathy explained her experience on the construction site when she stated, “We worked in teams, worked in pairs all the time.” Along with working in pairs, the women also described collaboration in terms of relieving one other from jobs that were especially difficult, physically demanding, or that a volunteer did not prefer to do. Donna gave an example of how she did a task that another volunteer disliked to make her feel at ease:

> I don’t mind goin’ in the crawlspace. Phyllis hates goin’ in the crawlspace but I don’t mind.... So there’s a lot of that sort of trade-off, and people do what they feel- what they feel comfortable doin’.

Thus, this type of collaboration involved women helping one another to complete the necessary construction tasks, and it allowed women to participate in the tasks that they enjoyed.

Another way in which collaboration was viewed as beneficial during tasks on the construction site was that it encouraged women to talk to another. Phyllis explained being paired with other volunteers to do a task:

> A lot of times we’re partnered, and I love that stuff cause it’s fun, you get to know people, and- and you’re not by yourself just doing something.
Therefore, such collaboration made the work more fun and promoted socialization on the work site.

The collaborative interactions also extended beyond general construction tasks. Women who were involved with the group in capacities such as holding leadership positions or participating in fundraising also described collaboration. When explaining her experiences as a “day leader,” for the group, Laura described how she received assistance from another woman who had been a day leader.

You know if you’re there at the same time as somebody who’s already done it, you know you sort of just do a lot of stuff together, you know. And if … the day leader is busy in the house and doesn’t see somebody else’ll just say …‘oh make sure you go sign in, and here’s your nametag’.

Women said that such collaboration in leadership roles created less of a burden for individual women and made them more likely to volunteer for such positions.

Therefore, rather than competing with one another as male-dominated groups have been found to do (Stall and Stoecker 1998), the volunteers emphasized that they helped one another and were willing to take over if a woman was performing a difficult task. This collaboration characterized both daily construction tasks, as well as leadership duties within the group. In addition, volunteers described such collaboration in such a way that suggested that it not only helped to complete productive aspects of volunteering, but was also associated with their enjoyment of the volunteer work and helped to develop feelings of camaraderie, which is described in the next section.
Camaraderie

Along with the women’s emphasis on the ways in which they worked collaboratively in during their volunteer tasks, they also suggested that the group has a strong sense of camaraderie, or feeling of unity and companionship. This is consistent with previous studies on volunteer work that suggest that volunteering provides an avenue for women to socialize (Petzelka and Mannon 2006, Daniels 1985). Having the opportunity to work with other women was one of reasons many of the women joined the group, and most of their experiences on the construction site confirmed that working together with other women gave them a good feeling. As Phyllis explained:

I look forward to the women who come out. I really do. I like seein’ everybody who comes out on that site. It just- it just feels so good that we’re all working together.... I love that.

When volunteering with the group, women enjoyed meeting individuals on the worksite and talking to them about topics such as where they were from and what they did for a living. Several women noted that membership in the group provided a chance to meet people from the community that they might not otherwise have met. As Donna said,

It’s been an opportunity to meet a lot ... more people and a lot of different people that I probably wouldn’t have met under … other circumstances.

Others found that volunteering gives them the opportunity to reconnect with women they had met before but had not seen for a while. As Kathy stated:

What’s fun about the builds are reconnecting with people that you often don’t even see in between. Like...one of the people I worked with, I hadn’t seen her for a year and a half or so, and you know, she’s a lot of fun.
In general, members described one another as being pleasant to work with and having a good attitude. Karen described a conversation she had with another volunteer in the group, Mary, whom Karen admired for her positive outlook despite problems with the group’s former construction supervisor that were going on at the time:

And I said to her once ... ‘You know, Mary, I appreciate that you never get ruffled’...and uh she said... ‘I used to be an emergency room nurse, and people kept comin’ in tryin’ to die on me.’ ‘So,’ she said, ‘after that, it just kinda changes your [perspective] on what’s important.’ So it was- it was really nice to spend your day with someone like that.

Thus, women associated their volunteering with good feelings that came from working with other women.

Along with the women’s positive feelings about working with other women, the way in which they described everyday talk on the worksite suggested a sense of camaraderie. A significant amount of talk during the volunteering was related to the construction work itself and figuring out how to perform various tasks. Sarah described how she enjoyed giving suggestions to a woman on the worksite who was apprehensive about working on scaffolding:

One girl while we were doin’ siding didn’t want to get on the uh-scaffolding that didn’t have a back on it, and I told her if she’d lean in against the house, she’d be alright.

A sense of camaraderie was also suggested as Mandy noted that she enjoyed “being complimented on doing a good job” by others on the work site.

While much of the talk focused on worksite tasks, volunteers’ accounts and field observations showed that there was talk and the sharing of information on a variety of
subjects. Talk often involved light-hearted talk and humorous stories; Linda humorously recounted an example of such talk to me during an interview:

Oh my gosh some of the conversations. A lot of the women were going through menopause at the time so we’d hear about the hot flashes, and then the cold flashes, you know, and the kicking the husband out of bed and letting them come back into the bed.

Other topics of conversation the women noted were trips that women from the group had taken, sharing of recipes, discussion of social issues, talk about women’s careers, and talk about events going on in the area. Talk about one another’s families was also common. Some of the women suggested that many of the volunteers have known each other for years. However, others noted that some women only know each other on the build and may not know enough details of one another’s personal lives to ask about such topics. Other ways in which women suggested a feeling of camaraderie on the builds was through nonverbal interaction, such as line-dancing while putting up the trusses and sharing food at lunchtime.

The way in which many of the women described talk on the construction site underscores the perception that the members of the group cared about each other. Linda suggested that because the volunteers worked so closely doing difficult tasks on the work site, they developed close relationships:

A lot of those ladies are, you know, very near and dear to your heart because, you know, you’ve spent you’ve stood in the muddy trench with them digging, you know, for sewer pipes and stuff like that.

Similarly, Marie said that because they worked together so closely on the construction site, she felt as thought she could depend up on the other volunteers:
You know that if you need anything you ... call up those women and they’re gonna come help ya.

In addition, women noted that that they felt a sense of commitment to the build and the other volunteers. Kathy, a co-founder of the group, explained that despite problems on a previous build with a homeowner, women continued to participate because of their dedication to one another:

It was hard. But people didn’t back away, and part of the reason was- is because nobody was gonna leave the woman who was in charge in the lurch.

Therefore, the volunteers felt a strong sense of commitment to one another that transcended other challenges that occurred on the work site.

Women also referred to commitment and camaraderie as being important factors when describing the group’s success. When asked about the strength of the group, some women responded that the strength of the organization was the women themselves and how they worked together well to get the job done. As Kathy explained:

Most people [in] Habitat agree, we set the standard. We still do set the standard, as far as bein’ the most successful, as far as fundraising and PR and keeping people involved and enthusiasm.

In response to a question by the interviewer about why she thought it was such a successful coalition, Kathy further stated:

‘Cause we have fun. We really have fun. Yeah ... I think that’s a lot of it.

Similarly, Linda said,

I think that you know the ability to work together as a group and get the job done is pretty spectacular.
Therefore, the women viewed the group as being very successful and the relationships between the volunteers as being a key part of that success.

Although the volunteers’ responses and observations suggest that volunteers enjoyed socializing with one another on the worksite, a distinction should be made between previous studies examining sociability among female volunteers. This study, as well as Petzelka and Mannon’s (2006) analysis, suggest that camaraderie was only part of what women’s volunteering meant to them, and other factors, such as the impact on the community, were also involved. These findings can be viewed in contrast to Daniel’s (1985) study, which emphasizes the role of sociability in women’s volunteer work.

Instead, camaraderie among volunteers was only one part of the meaning that volunteer work had for the women in the Richmond County Women Build group. The next section builds upon the volunteers’ perceptions of cooperation and camaraderie to examine their view that the group is a comfortable environment in which to learn construction skills.

**Comfortable Environment**

The volunteers’ framing of relationships as cooperative and as involving camaraderie contributed to a sense that the group was a comfortable environment in which to participate in construction tasks. This section examines the responses of women who viewed the interaction between volunteers as creating a comfortable environment. However, such views were not unanimous and differing views regarding whether or not the group created a comfortable environment are described in subsequent sections on cliques and isolated personality conflicts.
Many of the volunteers indicated that they joined the group because they thought that working with other women would be less intimidating than working with men. As Judith explained:

I think what appealed to me in particular was that-I knew it would probably be a more relaxed atmosphere, a less judgmental atmosphere, that the fact that I hadn’t worked on something of this nature, that I had no knowledge of what I was gonna be doing... that I’d be a little bit less embarrassed about mistakes that I might make.

Similarly, Laura said that she preferred working with women because of the ways in which men and women work differently:

I think I’m-I’m more comfortable working with women. I think when you’re with men, sometimes they, I don’t know, they take over or they-they’re not as good at letting you do things and you don’t feel as empowered ... as you do when you’re just with women.

Along similar lines, Judith also noted that on “Sadie Hawkins” day, a day during which men were permitted to come participate in the build, she did not come because she did not think she would feel as comfortable working with men. Such descriptions suggested that volunteers viewed the group as an ideal environment for women to learn construction skills that they did not otherwise have the opportunity to learn. Furthermore, the volunteers indicated that working with men did not provide the same types of opportunities because men tended to take over or made the women feel uncomfortable because of their perceived lack of skill.

Some volunteers suggested that the caring relationships and the comfortable learning environment that characterized the group were a result of women’s nurturing nature. As Linda explained:
I mean it’s in our nature to organize, it’s in our nature you know to nurture each other ... it’s in our nature to work together as a group.

Similarly, Cindy said that the way in which women help each other on the work site was related to characteristics of women:

> Maybe I’m making assumptions about women based on myself, but I think, you know, women tend to see, ok ... she needs help, you know, or she needs somebody to hold that or something just to make life easier for somebody else. So ... I don’t hesitate to do that. I don’t have to be told to do that. Um I think that’s a woman thing.

Thus, the volunteers attributed positive aspects of the group, such as they way in which they work together collaboratively, in part to their gender and the idea that it is a characteristic of women to take care of one another. Such views supported common views of women as nurturers but also suggested that women’s nurturing role was being extended from caring for a family, for example, to caring for one another when learning tasks that have been traditionally male-dominated.

A further way in which women described a sense of a comfortable working environment was related to their perceptions of status and hierarchy within the group – or the lack thereof. Although some women did notice the existence of cliques within the group, many women indicated that they have never noticed cliques. And while some women knew one another when they came to the build because they were friends, co-workers, or relatives, the women said that the volunteers worked together well. As Donna explained:

> Everybody, you know, works very collaboratively and ... I’ve been out on different days, and it’s always different people, and everybody seems to work well together, doesn’t really matter who’s- who’s there.
Also, although there were varying levels of skill among the participants, Cindy said that “the women who are very skilled don’t seem to lord it over you” and they are “willing to help you.” In addition, many women emphasized that the group was welcoming to new people who joined the group. Phyllis, who worked as a day leader, said that she thought it was her responsibility to introduce people on the worksite and to ensure that everyone felt comfortable. She stated,

“It’s very important to integrate people. There’re new people, there’re old people, there’re old timers, and I think um I would hope that every single person who walked on the build felt welcome.

In addition to some volunteer’s perceptions that there were no distinctions in terms of cliques or skill level, the women also found that the group was a place where a diverse group of women could feel comfortable. Cindy explained that the women’s group was unique because of its diversity and acceptance of different demographics of women:

This is, you know, women from every walk of life and you know all sorts of people and sexual persuasions and, you know, education levels, and everything. I mean you know ... we have- we’ve had international people come help ... it’s very empowering to have women working with other women, and nobody’s, you know, you know nobody is really any better than anybody else.

Kathy went on to say that all age groups have felt comfortable participating in the group, from college students to grandmothers, and that she did not think there was any “socio-economic” distinction in terms of people’s experiences: “I mean, everybody is equal when they’re there.”

Thus, for many volunteers, the group provided a comfortable environment in which to perform construction tasks. Some volunteers attributed the comfortable atmosphere to the inherent nurturing qualities of women. However, it is important to note
that the context in which they viewed women as being nurturing was their work on a
construction site, which has not typically been an area in which women work. Some
volunteers also suggested that the comfortable environment in the group was shown by a
lack of hierarchy and status distinctions within the group. The following section
examines the extent to which the volunteers’ positive working relationships develop into
friendships, as well as isolated personality conflicts that occurred within the group.

**Friendships**

The interpersonal relationships developed through their involvement in the
group’s volunteer activities led to opportunities for socializing outside their volunteer
work. Many of the women, such as Audrey, reported that they enjoyed attending social
events with one another:

> We meet once a month at [local restaurant] for like social hour ... the first
Friday of the month, which will be next weekend. Next Friday. Yeah. Um
so you know we have the social aspect of it too that we try and get
together just to have an evening of rest and relaxation and chit-chat.

In contrast to the work on the build, Audrey described the social event at the restaurant as
being a chance to relax and socialize. Volunteers also mentioned that they enjoyed
attending other social events, such as having parties at women’s homes and attending
Christmas parties.

Many of the volunteers also said that women from the group have become more
than just coworkers but also their friends. This comment by Phyllis was representative of
other women’s remarks:

> I love the women ... and several of them are my personal friends outside of
that now. So I really feel um you know I’ve- I’ve met people. I’ve met
Additionally, some women said that their involvement has been a good networking opportunity. For example, Donna said she has met “people I can talk to at business after-hours.”

However, other women had more nuanced views of the ways in which the group fosters friendships. Mandy, a volunteer who was new to the group, noted that she was still developing relationships with women in the group:

I don’t know that I’m yet literally developing friendships, you know cause that’s kind of a different level of ... you know. To me, like the people that I know are kinda like co-workers.

Judith, a long-time member of the group, also expressed a sense that relationships may be limited to the volunteers’ working together on the construction site:

I consider many of the other women to be friends, though that has a very isolated definition to it. We see each other on the build, and other than that, our paths do not really cross.

Thus, while nearly all of the women reported that they had met new people and developed friendships, the intensity of the friendships varied among the women. It is important to note that such socializing was only part of what the volunteers’ work meant to them and that factors such as helping the community and doing construction work were also involved.

While most volunteers emphasized that overall that members of the group got along well and that friendships developed, some women acknowledged that “hen pecking,” or personality conflicts, occurred from time-to-time. When asked about her worst experience with the group, Cindy described an encounter with another volunteer:
The worst I guess may have been that one day when- when that woman ... kept yelling at- and uh second-guessing, and not trusting me, you know. Cause I mean ... I asked Greg [the construction supervisor], and he would sort of like confirm what I was talkin’ about. It wasn’t pleasant.

Thus, Cindy felt as though one of the women in the group was criticizing her and that she felt the need to appeal to the male supervisor to defend herself against the other woman’s comments. Other women, such as Marie, also described isolated incidents in which they felt as thought they might have been “snubbed” by other women in the group. Even among women who described those types of experiences, it was suggested that those were exceptions to the way in which the women interact, rather than the norm and that most of the time the women were fun to work with and were good friends. However, the next section describes types of social interaction that was of more concern to the women than personality conflicts, which involved cliques and distinctions among the volunteers in terms of social class.

**Cliques and Social Class**

While many of the women said that they had never seen any cliques in the group, others thought that there were cliques, or as Linda put it, “women thinking they’re better than other women because of their life status.” Sarah noted that she thought it was a “function of women” to form cliques and that they were counterproductive. But although Barbara said that she has noticed cliques, she said that the group was not as “clique-y” as other volunteer organizations that seemed to be more conscious of status.

Some volunteers’ descriptions of the composition of the group and common topics of conversation suggested elements of hierarchy. First, Karen noted that most of the women in the group were “white-collar” or “professional class” workers such as
teachers, social workers, and professors and that only a few women were “blue-collar”
workers. She suggested the possibility of working-class women not feeling as
comfortable with the group. Similarly, Linda noted that some of the talk on the build
could exclude poorer women:

Like the women talking about their vacations and everything and I’m like
you know some of the women that were working on the build were like
me, just had a part-time job at the time, didn’t have all this money. We
don’t take fabulous vacations and everything and the family [for whom the
house is being built] of course doesn’t.

Thus, Linda suggests that such topics of conversation reinforced the distinction between
some volunteers and others, as well as the distinction between the volunteers and the
family that was receiving the house.

Also related to perceptions of cliques and hierarchy in the group was the idea that
the membership in the group had changed over time. Although most women described
the Richmond County Women Build as a diverse group of women, some women, such as
Linda and Marie, thought that the group was not as diverse as it had been during previous
builds. As Linda explained:

Your poorer women didn’t show up the second and third time around like
they did. It seemed to become like a country club, ’hi I’m in Habitat,’ you
know, ‘aren’t I wonderful?’ kind of thing whereas the real down-to-earth
people weren’t doing it for that reason. And I think there’s less of those
now than there was before.

Some of the reasons the women attributed to the change in membership were that
previous participants were too busy, word of the group’s activities did not get out to
diverse groups, or that some of the volunteers stopped coming because of cliques. As
Barbara said regarding cliques in the group: “I think we’ve probably lost some good volunteers because of it.”

Comments by the women regarding cliques and ways in which the group differentiated between women in terms of their socio-economic status contradicted assertions that everyone in the group was equal. While the women suggested that the group lessened gender inequality by creating a comfortable environment in an all-women group, other forms of inequality existed within the group of women in its everyday interaction. When volunteers discussed vacations or formed cliques, those were examples of how they “do difference” in their volunteer work (West and Fenstermaker 1995, Pg. 9). Furthermore, those behaviors are consistent with Kendall’s (2002) argument that elite women’s volunteering can reproduce class-based inequality by excluding poorer women.

On one hand, interpersonal relationships seemed to promote an atmosphere characterized by cooperation, camaraderie, and a comfortable work environment. Some women’s comments suggested that the group’s interaction occurred in those ways because women worked differently than men. Therefore, it seemed that the all-women’s group might have minimized some aspects the hierarchy within the group or bad feelings among volunteers. But on the other hand, some volunteers’ descriptions of cliques and class differentiation within the group suggested that as Zinn and Dill (1996) have found, it is not appropriate to assume that a group of women are homogenous individuals in which no inequality exists. Thus, although the group might have been a place for many of its members to feel comfortable, to cooperate with one another, and to make friends at some level, it also reproduced social inequality, particularly in terms of social class. The
next section examines the working relationship between the volunteers and the supervisors. While volunteers did have positive relationships with the supervisors that mirrored their experiences within their own group, at times relationships with supervisors were fraught with conflict. In addition, like their relationships with one another, the volunteers’ experiences with supervisors also involved subtle elements of hierarchy.

**Interpersonal Relationships between Volunteers and Supervisors**

Along with interaction among volunteers, interaction the volunteers had with supervisors was also an important part of how they framed their experiences. Most of the volunteers said whether they viewed the interaction with the supervisor in a positive or negative way was related to the supervisor’s behavior and attitude towards them. Specifically, the women framed their interaction with the supervisor in terms of whether the supervisor was patient and willing to teach or impatient and condescending toward the women. However, some volunteers found that the quality of interaction of the supervisor was related to the supervisor’s gender, especially when the supervisor was female. As Holstein and Gubrium (2000) have found, when people construct narratives, “cultural categories” such as race and gender “are not invoked in any automatic fashion” but instead were related to factors such as the context of the situation and the larger social discourse (Pg. 108). The following section examines the responses of the women regarding their experiences with three supervisors. It also analyzes the ways in which volunteers invoked gender in some instances but not in others to explain how they felt about the supervisors.
**Greg: A Patient and Skilled Construction Leader**

Volunteers described their relationship with the current supervisor Greg as being overwhelmingly positive. The volunteer’s comments suggested that they appreciated that Greg had a background in construction work and that he ensured that things were done correctly during the project. As Audrey explained, “He knows what he’s doing. He’s very precise about things.” In addition, volunteers emphasized his patient personality and ability to teach as being important. For example, Laura described the way in which Greg interacted with the women as being ideal for the group:

> He’s patient, he takes his time and teaches you how to do stuff. He doesn’t take over and say, ‘Oh lemme do that, I can get it done five times faster.’

Laura’s comment suggested that although Greg might have been able to do things faster than the female volunteers, he taught the women and then let them do the tasks themselves. Similarly, Cindy gave an example of how Greg took the time to teach her about the electrical work they were doing one day:

> I said, like, ‘How did you know this was a three-way switch?’ And he took the time, you know, I mean it only took him a-a minute to explain or less. But he took the time to explain it and tell me exactly what he saw, and I thought it was really neat.

Being skilled in construction skills and being a patient teacher were two of the main ways in which volunteers described Greg. Another way in which they described their positive relationship with him was related to him being a good leader for the group. As Donna said, “We had such a strong supervisor in Greg.” Marie, a member of the group since the first construction project, explained that it was good to have a leader like Greg, who took care of a variety of responsibilities on the worksite, such as ordering
supplies and coordinating the construction work to be done. My observations and the
comments of volunteers also suggested that Greg took on the responsibility of planning
what would be done each day and would assign volunteers to projects. Although some
volunteers said they chose their own tasks, Donna’s comment was representative of many
of the volunteers’ perceptions of how tasks were assigned: “I just do (laughs) whatever
Greg needs to have done that day.” Many volunteers, such as Phyllis, said that they
appreciated Greg’s work as leader on the construction site: “I respect the time and effort
he’s put in. I really do.”

To understand the role of Greg as construction supervisor, it is necessary to
compare his responsibilities with the “day leader” at the construction site, which was a
position held by women from the group. Donna, a woman who has served as a day
leader, summarized the responsibilities of the position:

Being the day leader is pretty much a matter of um getting there early,
help Greg [the supervisor] open up and get set up, and um signing people
in, making sure people have nametags on um if there’re new volunteers,
and making sure they’ve filled out a-a release uh safety thing and a um
liability release. Um and then greeting people when they show up on the
site, making sure they sign in and sign out and then sort of directing them
to Greg for an assignment.

Therefore, the tasks of a day leader were related to administrative tasks, assisting the
supervisor, and welcoming and coordinating volunteers.

In addition, several women suggested that day leaders did not have to be very
skilled in construction work. For example, Karen noted that day leaders did not need
extensive construction skills: “When they were trying to talk me into doing it this year,
(laughs) they said, ‘Oh no, you don’t have to know that much.’” Some volunteers also
expressed doubt about the value of the female day leader position. Mandy, a member of the group who recently joined, said:

It hasn’t seemed necessary for the day leader to be a very strong, important, necessary position. It’s almost like we could function without the day leader because Greg is such the leader.

Although several women described the system of having a construction supervisor and a day leader as being a good way to coordinate volunteers, such comments suggested that volunteers’ perceptions of the roles and abilities of the construction leader and day leader were quite different.

While the women did not frame the differences between the duties of Greg and the day leader in terms of gender, their descriptions suggested a division of labor that was similar to what Acker (1990) has found in paid work. According to Acker (1990) men’s work tends of be related to production of material goods, while women’s work tends to be related to reproduction. That can be seen as Greg’s role in the group was more related to controlling the construction of the house itself, and the female leader’s work was related to taking care of other volunteers. Furthermore, most volunteers described Greg as a strong leader whom they respect, but some described the day leaders as not as skilled in construction or as not very important to the project. Such perceptions are also similar to Acker’s (1990) analysis of paid work, which has found that that women’s work is often associated with lower-prestige jobs than men’s work.

But while volunteers did not state that there was a gendered division of labor in terms of leadership tasks, some said that having a male supervisor did have some subtle effects on the group’s everyday interaction. For example, Phyllis said that while Greg
was respectful of the women and a “pleasure” to work with, he affected the kinds of things she talked about:

I know that I am um watching what I say sometimes and I think I- I would maybe be a little um less careful of the things I say, believe it or not (laughs) if um if there were all women.

Therefore, while in previous sections the volunteers reported that the worksite was a comfortable environment characterized by camaraderie, the presence of a male supervisor could cause women to be less open than they would be if working with all women.

Similarly, some women talked about their volunteer work in ways that did not explicitly discuss the effect of Greg’s gender but implied that it could affect their experiences. One example was a conversation with Barbara during an interview:

Interviewer: What has been your best experience as a member of this group?
Barbara: Donna and I putting up a piece of siding across an entire wall all by ourselves on this build (laughs). Without Greg there (laughs) Interviewer: (laughs) Is there anything in particular that made that...
Barbara: Just the fact that- the accomplishment part of it.

Her comment suggested that although the volunteers appreciated the leadership and teaching skills of Greg, they took pride in accomplishing tasks with other women and without his assistance.

However, while some women implicitly or explicitly noted that having a male supervisor had a slight effect on their experiences, they also said that because of the way in which Greg interacted with the volunteers, he was more feminine than masculine. For example, as Barbara explained:

Greg is as female as you can get in my mind (laughs) because he’s ... so patient and and can really help get the work done through us.
Similarly, Betsy said, “Greg’s wonderful. Greg’s one of us,” and Cindy said that Greg did not seem to look at the volunteers as women, but instead as “worker bees.” Therefore, by associating Greg with themselves because of their positive working relationship, the women minimized the gender differences between themselves and him. That blurring of gender roles could be interpreted as an effort among the volunteers to subvert the notion that there are “categorically binary genders” (Lorber 2005: 259). However, it could also result in volunteers overlooking ways in which their interaction with Greg did reflect the traditional gendered division of labor in which men take on productive tasks and women do reproductive tasks. The next section examines the volunteers’ experiences with another male supervisor, with whom the volunteers had a very different relationship than they did with Greg.

Ron: A Leader with Poor Construction and Interactional Skills

While the women were largely satisfied with the interaction with Greg, their experiences with another construction supervisor, Ron, were mostly negative. The volunteers described a variety of problems that occurred with Ron as the supervisor, and they attributed those problems to his skill level and the way in which he interacted with the women.

In contrast to Greg, whom the women described as patient, volunteers described Ron as “gruff” and “short-tempered.” Karen recounted an experience she had while working with Ron to nail up a heavy board across the front of the porch:

I was on a ladder, leaned against a pole, holding the other end, and I was supposed to nail it above my head, you know, on a ladder- you’re up there like this- into treated lumber. And I couldn’t. I was holding this sixteen-foot post on my thumb, well … you couldn’t- I couldn’t hold it and hold
the nail. And it kept slipping, and Mary was the only other person there, and there was no place for her to stand to hold it, cause we were out on the edge of this porch. And Ron was yellin’ at me. And I-I’ve told this story before ‘cause I said, … I’ve never been yelled at, besides, you know, my husband maybe, we might yell at each other. Adults don’t yell at me, I don’t yell at other adults. And it was- he yelled at me, and I yelled back. And I said something like- he was yelling at me to ‘hurry up, hurry up.’ And- and (laughs) I said, ‘If I could do this, I would.’ I mean it wasn’t like I called him a [lowers voice] fucking idiot or anything (laughs), which is what I was thinking. ‘You know,’ I said, ‘I’ve gotta take it down, I’ve gotta set the nail, I’ve gotta put a nail to set it on. There’s no way I can physically do this.’

Karen’s story highlighted the way in which the women perceived Ron as being impatient and as not respecting the volunteers. However, Karen also described the experience in a way that indicated that she did not passively accept his treatment of her.

The volunteers also found that Ron was not a good teacher or a good communicator. Judith described an experience she had on the build when she and another volunteer received instructions from Ron.

Um after he walked away, the two of us turned to each other and it was, ‘did you understand?’ ‘No, I hoped you would.’ And then it was guessing time ... rather than saying, I’m sorry, we didn’t understand, please come back, you know, explain to us again. We were just, ok, let’s see if we can figure this out now and do it. And part of that was just it- there was a different dynamic there in feeling like you could admit that you didn’t understand that we’ve got with Greg.

Overall, the volunteers believed that Ron’s instructions were not clear, and they did not feel comfortable asking him questions. Judith’s comment also underscored the women’s perceptions that Ron did not have the same level of respect for the volunteers as did Greg, nor did he interact in similar ways.

In addition to not interacting with the volunteers in the ways that they would have liked, the volunteers also described Ron as not having adequate construction skills. As
Donna explained: “He didn’t have particularly good building skills at all.” Many volunteers stated that because of Ron’s lack of skills, the volunteers often had to redo tasks on the worksite.

Volunteers suggested that a supervisor who was inept in terms of construction and interpersonal skills could have a negative impact on the overall volunteer experience. For example, women stated that having Ron as a leader led to low morale and that a number of women stopped participating in the build. As Karen explained, “Many women quit and would not come back.” Interestingly, women believed that the home build under Ron’s supervision was of lower quality, which made them feel bad because they took pride in constructing high-quality homes. As Donna explained:

The whole quality of the build suffered because of his lack of building skills, and that made the women feel very badly because there’s- there’s quite a bit of pride in the other houses that the women have built. They’re really good houses, and well constructed. Um and there’s not that sense with the third- for the third build. That it’s just not up to the quality of the other builds the women have done.

Therefore, most volunteers described their interpersonal relationship with Ron in terms of his poor construction skills and his lack of patience and teaching ability, rather than his gender. The next section will show that when the group had a female supervisor, they were more likely to frame their relationship with her in terms of gender.

Anna: The Benefits and Drawbacks of a Female Supervisor

During the group’s first two construction projects, the construction supervisor was female. While the volunteers’ descriptions of their relationship with the male supervisors emphasized that gender had subtle – if any – effect, volunteers described interaction with a female supervisor, Anna, largely in terms of her gender.
Having a female supervisor can affect the interaction between the volunteers and the supervisor in both positive and negative ways. Linda summarized the comments of others when she said:

At times it was beneficial, and at other times it was like when you get a bunch of women around and they don’t get along and it was mess.

Thus, because of the way in which women work, having a female supervisor could be either helpful or a problem for group dynamics.

In terms of the positive aspects of having a female supervisor, there was a sense among the volunteers that Anna was not only a supervisor, but also a full participant in the women’s group. As Kathy explained:

When Anna built, she was one of us. You know, she was part of the team she was one of us. You know ... and I don’t know if you get that so much with Greg. I think Greg has been great, and he’s a good teacher, and he gets along with the women, but he’s not one of us.

It is interesting to note that when describing Greg in contrast to Anna, Kathy said that Greg was “not one of us.” However, in the previous section, volunteers described Greg as “one of us” and suggested that he was feminine because he worked well with the women. It seems that having a “female” supervisor – whether or not the individual was biologically female – was a desirable situation for many members of the group.

But volunteers also found that having a female supervisor affected the interaction between the supervisors and the volunteers in negative ways. For example, Sarah said that working with Anna was “miserable” because she was a poor leader:

Women aren’t taught leadership skills, and she had no leadership skills whatsoever.
Thus, Sarah suggested that the way in which gender socialization occurs was related to shortcomings in terms of a woman holding a supervisory position. And like Linda’s comment above, she associated interactional problems with the supervisor’s gender.

The way in which the volunteers discussed the female supervisor makes an interesting point about their perceptions of gender. As Kimmel (1993) argued, because men have more power in the society, masculinity is less often scrutinized than femininity. And in this section, oftentimes the volunteers described the male supervisors in ways that downplay their gender. When describing the female supervisor, however, volunteers attributed both her positive and negative characteristics to her gender. Therefore, it seems that gender was more salient to volunteers when discussing a woman, while men were judged upon seemingly genderless characteristics, such as their construction and teaching skills.

It is also important to note that the volunteers were not blind to the ways in which gender shaped their experiences when participating in construction work. Chapter Five, which focuses on volunteers’ perceptions of doing construction work, will examine volunteers’ observations of being put-down or brushed aside by men on the construction site. However, these findings suggest that the way in which the gender of the supervisor affected the women’s experiences was subtler than was the case for their interactions with other men.

And along with the way in which the volunteers perceived the gender of their supervisor, these findings also highlighted the qualities that the volunteers viewed as being important in their interaction with a supervisor. They included patience and
willingness to teach, leadership skills, and skills in construction. Although the supervisor who embodied those qualities was male, the group’s experiences varied widely in terms of their relationships with male supervisors and the extent to which they possessed those qualities. The next section examines the volunteers’ similarly dynamic relationships between themselves and the families for whom they were constructing a house.

**Interpersonal Relationships between Volunteers and the Homeowners**

The relationship between the volunteers and the family that the volunteer group was building a home for, or the “homeowners,” was another important interpersonal relationship described by the women. As will be shown in this section, the women emphasized that the relationship with the homeowners has varied over the years, and many women expressed ambivalence toward the homeowners. Although the volunteers enjoyed having the opportunity to help the homeowners, they also described feeling irritated when the homeowners did not seem to live up to the volunteers’ expectations. In addition, some women expressed concern that the relationship between the homeowners and the volunteers was strained at times.

Some women mentioned that they enjoyed working with the family to help them obtain a home of their own. As Linda explains, her favorite part of her involvement in the group was seeing how happy the homeowners were to be getting a house:

> There was one time when we put in the windows and our house sat up on a hill, and we saw the couple looking out the window at their view for the first time. You know, it was just roughly framed in and ... that was, you know, the wall had gone up and there was a window to look out, and that was- that was really neat to see.
Similarly, Betsy said that the best experience she had with the group was during the dedication when they turned the house over to the family. She said, “It’s just so overwhelming, it’s so heartwarming.” Volunteers noted that their group provides a special opportunity by making homeownership possible for families that would not otherwise be able to obtain a mortgage. Therefore, the women described helping a family as an important part of their involvement in the group and also find that it gave them personal benefits in terms of feeling good about what they were doing.

Some of the women, particularly those who had worked on the first build, described a positive relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners. As Sarah explained, volunteers developed a close working relationship with the homeowners from the first build:

If I see the people who we built the first house for at Kroger’s, they always- they still remember me, the kids remember me, and it’s been eight years, and they always say hi.

In addition, volunteers said that some homeowners, particularly the women, were thrilled to have their home built by a women’s group.

Other volunteers described activities that suggest a sense of camaraderie between the volunteers and the homeowners. As Linda explained,

We signed the studs. Every woman that participated put their name before the drywall went up and the year and a message to the family or a message to the future.

She also described other rituals that volunteers did in honor of the homeowners, such as replicating gifts that were given in the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*:

When they move into the house, they give them salt you know so their um life always has flavor, and then you know bread so their family
never goes hungry, and I can’t remember what the wine is, but we substituted grape juice. So we started that tradition where you present that to the [homeowners].

In addition, volunteers noted that homeowners had a “family partner” from Habitat for Humanity who communicated with them regarding any issues they had as they went through the process of obtaining a home through the group.

However, whether or not women reported having a positive relationship with the homeowners was related to expectations regarding the behaviors and attitudes of the family.

One of the main expectations that the volunteers had of the homeowners was that they be onsite working alongside the volunteers. Although the group builds with minimal involvement of men, homeowners who were either male or female were permitted to participate in the construction projects. Several volunteers emphasized that the homeowners should complete their “sweat equity” hours, which consisted of 250 hours of work that they were required by the organization, in a timely manner. Donna explained this by giving an example of a family that did not meet that expectation:

The family wasn’t putting in their part because the families are required to do what’s called sweat equity, which is a certain number of hours to qualify for the house. And this family didn’t get to move into their house until their- when the house was done, their sweat equity was not, and they couldn’t move in until they had finished their [hours].

In addition, some volunteers expected the homeowners to continue participating even after they completed their “sweat equity” hours. As Judith said regarding the homeowner of the most recent project:

If we continue to see her through- through the process, then I think that will be the kind of relationship that the volunteers want to have.
Related to the volunteers’ perception that the homeowners should complete their hours in a timely manner and participate after their hours are finished was their view that homeowners should show appreciation of the work of the volunteers. As Mandy explained:

You want people to help ... if people in the group think that this family is not helping or is not contributing properly or is not thankful, then they’re going to be miffed about that.

Similarly, Judith described the type of commitment she liked to see from the homeowners:

Where you feel like we are with you, this is your home, you’re taking as much pride in this, and you know every rafter, you know every nail that’s being put in.

Although some women did not specify what they thought was an indication of the homeowners’ being thankful or taking pride, some volunteers, such as Judith, implied that the main way in which the homeowners could show their appreciation and commitment to the project was by participating regularly.

Along with the expectation that the homeowners show their dedication to the build through participation, some volunteers also hoped that the homeowners would gain skills and social capital from their involvement. For example, Donna noted that the female homeowner from the first build increased her skills in construction work:

The growth that we saw in this woman, who you know when we first started, you know, was never gonna touch a power tool ... um and ended up being able to ... use a saw and do all those things that she had never thought she would be able to do, was a really positive experience.
According to Donna, the group was a state winner for “Make A Difference Day” and the female homeowner went to the state capital to accept an award from the governor’s wife. Donna explained that this opportunity allowed the woman to have new experiences: “The thing was at the Hilton and she had never been in a hotel before.” Similarly, Kathy said that at the start of the build, the female homeowner “wouldn’t even speak,” but by the end, “any decisions that were made, she was right in the middle.” She also noted that the homeowner’s daughters benefited from working with the women in the group:

The girls just, you know, absorbed all of this attention and all these women and, you know, because we have everything from janitors to Ph.Ds.

Therefore, the volunteers hoped that homeowners would grow in terms of their social networks and experiences, as well as develop new skills. Furthermore, the benefits to the homeowners described above suggested that homeowners did gain important social capital and construction skills through their participation with the women’s group.

Such expectations affected the way in which volunteers described their experiences with homeowners over the course of the four builds that the group has done. The volunteers overwhelmingly perceived the relationship with the homeowners of the first build as positive, and many of their expectations for how volunteers and homeowners should interact were based on that relationship. As volunteers that had been involved since the first build explained, the family completed their “sweat equity” hours early in the build and continued to help. In addition, the women described feeling good about the way the first homeowner gained skills and confidence, as was described above.
However, the volunteers found the relationships with homeowners from subsequent builds to be problematic in several ways.

For example, the volunteers indicated their volunteering was not as worthwhile when homeowners’ participation did not meet their expectations. As Donna explained:

The second family, there were some problems with. They um- were not as ... they didn’t wanna participate. The would not- they would say they were coming and not show up to work on that house. That was very frustrating for women, who are giving up all their weekends for six or nine months, to not have the family care enough to show up and work on their own house.

Donna went on to explain that volunteers perceived a sense of entitlement from the homeowners that made the work seem less satisfying. She stated:

From our perspective, there was some sense that they felt that they were entitled to this house somehow. And they just you know thought ‘oh we’re gonna get this free house and we don’t have to do much for it.’

Volunteers explained that their relationship with the homeowners on the third build, as well as with the homeowners on the most recent build, were similar in that they did not perceive that the homeowners were contributing their share to the project.

However, women also expressed frustration with the homeowners when they did come to the worksite. Judith described a situation during a previous build in which the volunteers did not necessarily view the homeowner as making a contribution to the project:

The woman would come out on the build, but she was afraid of ladders and almost anything she did, you had to go back and redo it.
Similarly, Cindy said that although there seemed to be a good working relationship with
the male homeowner on the most recent project, there were problems on the worksite
with the female homeowner, Bonnie:

I remember there were day leaders who were very upset because um
Bonnie would show up and would just sit around and wouldn’t do
anything, sit around and smoke.

Those comments suggested that volunteers tended to view homeowners on the more
recent builds as not making as much of a contribution to the build as the volunteers; in
fact, at times, the homeowners were viewed as being detrimental to the progress of the
build.

And as the above comments indicated, volunteers occasionally voiced disapproval
of the lifestyle and behaviors of the homeowners. Karen explained:

They’ve been families who have made different choices about lifestyle,
whether it’s smoking or you know having three different children with
three different husbands, or you know, that uh- probably the majority of us
who are the builders- the- the brownie-nose do-gooders don’t really like.

When describing lifestyle choices of the homeowners, the volunteers noted that
they should try not to judge the homeowners or tell them what to do, but they did express
frustration regarding the choices. As Mandy explained:

Well it’s the idea of are they appreciating me enough? Is this family that’s
doing all these things that I don’t approve of, you know, do they- do they
um- do they need us to build them a house because they’re spending their
money on plasma televisions- so we wouldn’t- you know, a person
wouldn’t approve of that.

Mandy’s statement suggests that because the family was getting a house through Habitat
for Humanity, they should be expected to spend their money in certain ways. She also
noted that because she was a volunteer, she had the option of discontinuing her work if the homeowners’ decisions did not seem to reflect appreciation of her work.

These comments are corroborated by field observations of volunteers discussing such topics on the work site. For instance:

In the morning, we were trying to figure out where to put the cable hookup for the TV. Greg had said that they [the homeowners] wanted to put it in a certain location so they could put up a big-screen TV, and he rolled his eyes. Other volunteers made faces or sighed. A college student who was volunteering for the first time said, ‘That’s disgusting.’ Someone also said that they [the homeowners] couldn’t afford to buy their daughter glasses, but they have a big-screen TV.

The ambivalence that characterizes the relationship between the volunteers and homeowners can be compared to the relationships between settlement workers and the Appalachian people of the early twentieth century. As Duff (1999) noted, settlement workers had both benevolent intentions of helping Appalachian people by providing an educational resources, as well as a desire to change their lifestyles. Similarly, the volunteers with the Richmond County Women Build group enjoyed helping to provide a house for a family, but became upset when they did not think that the homeowners were behaving in appropriate ways.

Although the volunteers at times criticized the homeowners for their choices and behaviors, they were not free from criticism from themselves. As Kathy explained, the women volunteers experienced some criticism from a male homeowner on the second build:

Our second build, we had a husband who was horrible to deal with. I mean, he would scream at the women.
Volunteers also noted that at a meeting with the family at the Habitat for Humanity office, the male homeowner was “judgmental” and said that he could have done the work better himself. In addition, Judith said that a lot of “hard feelings” developed during the build because the women were giving up their time to help and were then criticized by the homeowner. Volunteers attributed his behavior to him being “mentally ill,” as well as being related to some “bruises to the ego” that were occurring because women were building his home.

Therefore, both the volunteers and the homeowners were at times critical of one another. The volunteers’ issues with the homeowners were related to a perceived lack of participation, lack of appreciation, and unwise personal decisions, which suggest that the volunteers expected that the homeowners should conform to their behavioral standards. However, volunteers attributed the homeowner’s criticism to his idea that women were incompetent at building a home, as well as their perception that he was mentally ill. Although no volunteers mentioned it explicitly, it seems that a power struggle existed between the male homeowner and the volunteers regarding the project. And while volunteers attributed the problems in part to their perception of homeowner having a mental illness, it is clear that gender and issues of social class were also related to the conflict.

Some women voiced concern about the relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners. They mentioned that other volunteers made derogatory comments about the female homeowner during the most recent build. Phyllis’s explanation below
summarized that concern and provided some examples of the kinds of derogatory comments that were made:

Sometimes when people come on the site, they don’t believe that the homeowner has done enough work. Or, and I’ve heard this countless times, ‘Why are they going to put their television in the bedroom closet? Why do they want their dishwasher and uh their dryer in the kitchen?’ Uh just side comments have been made about the homeowner’s weight and- and people at the last build didn’t approve of the homeowner’s color choices for the walls. And I don’t think that’s appropriate, and I don’t think it’s any of our business, and I don’t think anyone needs to make any kind of judgment.

Thus, Phyllis said she has heard women criticize the female homeowner based upon her involvement, her choices regarding the home, and her appearance. She also indicated that she did not think that criticizing the homeowner was appropriate behavior. Similarly, Linda noticed such behavior and suggested that volunteers from all builds except for the first build “looked down on” the homeowners.

Volunteers also expressed a sense that there was a division between the female homeowner and the volunteers during the most recent build. Laura said that she did not think the female homeowner felt as though she was on “her turf” when she was on the worksite. Phyllis, who was often a day leader, said there were differences in the tasks that were assigned to the homeowner compared to the volunteers:

I don’t know that I was savvy enough to get her involved and I- and so we gave her jobs like sorting nails and things like that, while the rest of us were, you know, we were workin’.

Thus, Phyllis suggested that the volunteers were “workin,” but did not describe what the homeowner was doing as “work.” Casual conversations with the homeowner during field
observation suggested that she might have preferred to be involved in tasks that are more challenging than the tasks she was given.

Interestingly, there were not only differences in terms of the division of labor on the worksite, but volunteers perceived a difference in terms of social class or status. As Phyllis explained,

Right away, we- we have a distance because they’re unfortunate, and we aren’t. They’ve had a life that’s been filled with struggles, and we haven’t.

Phyllis also described the difference between the homeowners and the volunteers as a “class thing” that is “almost inevitable.” Similarly, Cindy described an unavoidable difference between the volunteers and the homeowner: “Um our lifestyles are different and they always will be.” Therefore, while many women voiced concerns about the way in which there might be divisions between the homeowners and the volunteers, they described such differences as inevitable. Although the women view themselves as helping the family to obtain a home, which suggests a lessening of class distinctions, their comments suggested that socio-economic differences between the volunteers and the homeowners remained intact.

Despite some volunteers’ view that differences between themselves and volunteers were unavoidable, several women provided suggestions for how relationships between the homeowners and the volunteers could be improved. Some women, such as Cindy, suggested that the homeowners should be given more meaningful tasks that would encourage them to come and work. In addition, Phyllis said she wanted to talk to the director of the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity about encouraging the volunteer to “increase one’s awareness and compassion that- that they in fact, the homeowners, are
giving us the opportunity to come out on that job site.” Thus, she pointed to a need for volunteers to not only view their work as helping homeowners, but also an opportunity for the volunteers themselves to gain something because of the homeowners.

Another significant recommendation came from Linda, who suggested that Habitat for Humanity should have an advocate for the family on the construction site:

They need to have like a buddy or a friend, and I think that’s where Habitat could improve. I don’t think in just the women’s build I think in all of the builds. I mean I know they have advocates, but those people don’t seem to show up and- and work with the family.

Thus, although some women from the group looked down upon the homeowners, Linda viewed problems with the relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners as not being specific to the women’s group. To solve the problem, she suggested a change in policy for the larger Habitat for Humanity organization regarding the role of advocates for the family called “family partners.”

The group’s perceptions of the relationship between themselves and the homeowners were characterized largely by ambivalence. The volunteers found that helping a family obtain a home was a heartwarming experience, but it was also frustrating to them when homeowners did not live up to volunteers’ expectations. Furthermore, some volunteers made disparaging comments about the homeowners, while others expressed concern about such comments and wanted to find ways to improve the relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners. Finally, it is important to note that although the volunteers were helping a low-income family to obtain a home, which seems to suggest an alleviation of class inequality, they also drew distinctions between themselves and the homeowners in terms of social class.
Summary

Volunteers framed their interpersonal relationships in terms of their interactions with one another, with their supervisors, and with the homeowners for whom they were building the house. For each type of relationship, volunteers described both positive and negative experiences. While interaction among volunteers provided a way to feel comfortable doing construction tasks, make friends, and work in a cooperative way, some volunteers described isolated personality conflicts and hierarchy such as cliques. Volunteers also indicated that some supervisors who have participated in the group were more patient, willing to teach, and skilled in construction work than others. And although their interaction with homeowners was sometimes a touching experience, it was also a source of frustration for the volunteers when homeowners did not participate in the way volunteers expected or made life choices that they did not agree with.

Gender and class issues were pervasive within these relationships. Volunteers acknowledged that working with women was more empowering when doing construction work, a traditionally male-dominated activity; they also invoked notions of women as nurturers to explain why the group was a comfortable environment for women. In addition, volunteers attributed feminine characteristics to a male supervisor whom they enjoyed working with, which suggests a rejection of dichotomous views of gender; however, they also relied up common assumptions of women to explain both things they liked and did not like about a female supervisor. In terms of their relationship with the homeowners, they suggested that conflict with a male homeowner may have been related
his resentment over women building his house. Thus, gender was clearly salient to the
volunteers’ experiences.

This analysis also highlights the hierarchy, particularly in terms of social class,
that exists both within the group and in relation to the homeowners who were receiving
the house. Although some volunteers claimed that all women were equal while they were
volunteering with the group, others found that there were cliques within the group and
volunteers from lower social classes did not feel as comfortable participating. In addition,
some volunteers’ disapproval of the lifestyle of the homeowners, as well as their assertion
that there were unavoidable differences between themselves and the homeowners in
terms of social class, suggest hierarchy between the volunteers and the homeowners. Like
the settlement workers who came to Appalachia in the early twentieth, the volunteers felt
it was their duty to help the poor, but also had an underlying desire to impart their
middle-class values upon those they helped. Thus, while the group seems to have
subverted some types of inequality by forming a women’s construction group that
provided homes for a low-income families, both gender and class inequality persisted
within the group.
CHAPTER 5: VOLUNTEERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF CONSTRUCTION WORK

Along with the interpersonal relationships that the volunteers developed in their involvement with the Richmond County Women Build, being involved in a construction project was also a major way in which they framed their experiences. Although many of the volunteers did not have construction experience when they joined the group, they enjoyed participating in construction work upon joining the group. And while the volunteers’ assessments of their own skills varied, they took pride in learning to do construction tasks.

There are no known studies on women’s experiences in volunteer work that involving traditionally male activities. However, scholarship related to paid work (Acker 1990; Martin 2003; Lorber 2005) and volunteer work (Petzelka and Mannon 2006; Rotolo and Wilson 2007) can be used to examine how the volunteers’ construction experiences were shaped by expectations of what has traditionally constituted women’s work. This chapter examines the volunteers’ perceptions of their experiences doing construction work and situates their responses within scholarship on gender inequality within paid and volunteer work. It will be shown that in many cases, the volunteers’ interest in construction and pride in building houses was related to challenging traditional ideas of what women’s work should include. But ironically, the volunteers also framed their participation in construction work as part of women’s nurturing natures. Although the salience of gender varied by the woman and the context she was describing, ideas of what constitutes women’s work was pervasive in the volunteers’ descriptions of participating in construction work.
An Initial Interest in Construction Work

Many volunteers indicated that they joined the group because they were interested in participating in construction tasks. Along with a general interest in construction work, they also described specific reasons that construction work appealed to them, which involved a desire to work with tools, their perceived aptitude for construction work, or a lack of previous opportunities to do construction work.

For some women, having a chance to work with power tools caught their attention. As Cindy explained:

They were having an information meeting …at the Episcopal Church. And I showed up, ‘cause … they said we’ll teach you how to use power tools, I was like ‘yes! yes!’

Other volunteers said that they joined the group because they wanted to learn building skills so they could take care of their own homes. For instance, Judith said, “I wanted to know more about uh just home repair for my own home.”

And although most women noted that they did not have any experience with construction work, some described an ongoing interest in doing construction tasks. As Marie said,

My dad was a carpenter, not by trade, but as a side line and my brother and you know I was always followin’ them around, and I’ve got a- my mind kinda works (laughs) that way. I can see things. You know, try to put ‘em together in some (laughs) way.

Therefore, Marie found that she was cognitively inclined to do construction work and developed an interest in it as she was growing up by observing her male relatives doing construction work. Similarly, Karen said that she joined the group because she wanted to
do roofing work. Although she did not have construction experience, she said she has always enjoyed going up in high places and was interested in doing tasks on the roof.

For many volunteers, their interest in joining the group was also related to a lack of previous opportunities to participate in construction work. As Kathy explained:

Women wanna learn how to build. When I was in high school, we weren’t even allowed to take shop class, you know, so there’s a lot of women who grew up who wanted to learn those skills and were not even allowed. So this is their opportunity.

Therefore, many women’s interest in volunteering with the group went beyond a personal interest in, or aptitude for, doing construction work and was also related to a more systematic lack of opportunity to learn such tasks prior to joining the group. As Lorber (2005) noted, men and women have been socialized differently in institutions such as the educational system. The volunteers’ lack of opportunity to take shop class reflected a way in which women were socialized differently from men, and their joining the group represented a desire to learn skills that were typically only taught to men.

Another reason some volunteers wanted to learn construction tasks was related to a desire to subvert the inequality they experienced during previous experiences on Habitat for Humanity projects. After having been marginalized on mixed-sex Habitat for Humanity projects, some volunteers wanted to join a women’s group so they could become more actively involved in the construction work. As Linda explained:

I had been to one of the male um Habitat builds, and it really was just sort of ‘you fetch the nails, bring me that board.’ They never really wanted you to work.

In that account, Linda describes other Habitat builds as “male,” which suggests that men dominate such builds. Furthermore, she was asked to fetch materials, which is consistent
with women’s roles as being related to support rather than the actual “work” of constructing the house (Acker 1990). In addition, Phyllis described an experience working on a Habitat for Humanity work site during which volunteers were clearing trees and brush. “They [the men] were just goin’ vroom vroom, and all these trees were fallin. And I was just pickin’ up sticks, and that wasn’t as much fun,” Phyllis said. When she asked a man if she could use his chainsaw, he refused. She then asked another man, who let her use the chainsaw. She said using a chainsaw was a lot more fun than picking up sticks.

Like Linda’s perception of mixed-sex Habitat for Humanity builds, Phyllis’s story suggested that women tended to be marginalized on the construction site and also that she had a desire to become involved in more productive tasks on the construction site. Furthermore, the volunteers’ everyday experiences with volunteering in mixed-sex groups were similar to those of the female executives studied by Martin (2003), who were treated as if they were different from men in subtle ways as they worked in a traditionally male-dominated occupation.

Interestingly, volunteers who had not worked with Habitat for Humanity prior to joining the group also suggested that women would be marginalized when doing construction tasks with men. Sarah explained why a women’s group appealed to her:

If there were guys around, the women …are not allowed to participate in the actual building. They just— they’re just runnin’ around gettin’ stuff, whereas this— this way the women have to do the actual work… and I wanted to be able to do the actual work.
Thus, volunteers viewed a women’s only build as representing an opportunity to do the “actual” construction work that they presume they would not have had in a mixed-sex project.

In terms of their initial interest in doing construction work, volunteers described wanting to learn to use tools or to work on their home, as well as an ongoing interest in or aptitude for construction work. However, much of the reason the volunteers were interested in doing construction work was related to a previous lack of opportunity because of their gender. That lack of opportunity was attributed to the way in which men and women are socialized differently in schools, women’s everyday experiences on previous Habitat for Humanity projects, as well as an assumption that women would be marginalized on mixed-sex construction projects. The volunteers also framed their joining the all women’s group as a way of making up for that previous lack of opportunity. The next section will examine the volunteers’ experiences doing construction work in the Richmond County Women Build group.

**The Construction Experience**

As Acker (1990) noted, women’s work has traditionally been related to emotional labor. Similarly, Rotolo and Wilson (2007) found that sex segregation is prevalent in many types of volunteer work, with women being “more likely to prepare and serve food or clothing, raise money, and ‘help out’ at events” (Pg. 559). In fact many of the women in the group had previously done other types of volunteer work that is consistent with sex-segregated types of work, such as serving on boards or caring for children.
However, the volunteers’ involvement in a construction project was in stark contrast to such work because it was very physical and participatory. As Judith explained,

“It’s very different with the Women Build group in the sense that— that it’s all about getting out there and doing the building…just being very active with that building.”

The volunteers said that because of the participatory nature of the group’s volunteer work, they preferred it to other types of volunteering. For example, when asked to compare previous volunteer work to work with the women’s group, Linda said, “I like the Habitat better, I like building.” Furthermore, most volunteers suggested that although others might enjoy roles related to fundraising, board membership, or other aspects of the Richmond County Women Build group, they preferred participating in the construction aspect of the group. As Marie said, “I wanna be there with [a] hammer.”

The next sections examine volunteers’ construction experience in terms of physical challenges and successes, the physical product that resulted from the group’s work, as well as the amount of pride that the volunteers took in doing construction work.

**Physical Challenges and Successes**

The way in which the volunteers described their construction experiences emphasized the physical nature of their work. Although they noted a number of challenges that accompany the physical nature of construction work, the volunteers said that they were able to overcome such challenges, which made them feel good about themselves.
Field observation and interviews produced numerous accounts of physical tasks performed on the construction site. For example, Phyllis explained the tasks that she did the last time she volunteered:

I carried the base of the shed, the wooden base of the shed out to the uh place in the yard where it’s going to be. I helped people…determine where the piers, the concrete piers, would go and how um- to get them level so that the… floor thing could be set on those piers. I ran wire from…light switches to some ceiling um lights… I swept a lot. And I drilled. I drilled holes through the studs to run the wires. I made a header…we’d forgotten to put a header in the uh living room closet so I did that. A friend helped me with that.

Phyllis’s description included a variety of tasks regularly performed on the worksite, such as moving materials, measuring, and using tools such as drills. And as many women noted, the tasks and level of physical difficulty varied depending upon what needed to be done on any given day; sometimes the work was more physically demanding and other times it involved less strenuous activities such as sweeping the floor or picking up nails.

Although the volunteers expressed a willingness to do whatever physical tasks needed to be done, some noted that they preferred some tasks over others. As Judith explained:

If we’re on the roof, that’s where I wanna be…and if I’ve arrived and I’m not on the roof, then something is wrong with life as we know it. I want to get on the roof, and I don’t know why.

By contrast, Judith said that when she did tasks such as sweeping the floor or painting, they were not as much fun as more physical tasks because they were things she could have done in her own home or that she had done before. While it was not explicitly mentioned, it seems that women such as Judith were less interested in doing activities that were part of women’s traditional housekeeping activities, such as cleaning the house,
than they were in more productive activities. This underscores the volunteers’ interest in challenging the traditional gendered division of labor by participating in activities traditionally done by men.

Furthermore, volunteers’ preference for more productive tasks can be contrasted with their earlier descriptions of the female homeowner doing more menial tasks such as picking up nails, which suggests hierarchy between volunteers and the homeowners in terms of the division of labor. In fact, it seemed that while the volunteers were able to transcend traditional views of what constitutes women’s work, the female homeowner did not have that opportunity. As scholars such as Zinn and Dill (1996) argued, women of different class positions have not had equal opportunities in society, and it did not seem if they had equal opportunities within this group.

The volunteers themselves emphasized that in general, they felt satisfied as they did construction tasks. As Betsy noted, “I feel good while I’m working.” Similarly, Sarah explained:

Well I feel real good about ... any task I do because I do everything a hundred percent. So I just...try not to leave ... any loose ends... like the way I work is just real thorough and complete.

Along with showing satisfaction with the tasks she did on the worksite, Sarah also underscored a sense of pride the women felt while doing construction tasks.

However, the volunteers’ feelings about construction tasks depended upon various factors, such as the weather, the time of day, and the difficulty of the task they are doing. And while some women’s comments, such as Sarah’s comment above, suggested that
they felt good about the quality of the work, others said that they are sometimes unsure about whether they are doing the tasks correctly. For example, Phyllis said,

I have felt astoundingly frustrated at times because I don’t think I’m doing a good enough job or it’s taking me too long. But that’s fleeting.

In addition, as was explained in the section on volunteers’ relationships with supervisors, how volunteers felt about their work was related to the quality of interaction they had with the supervisor.

Many volunteers described their experiences on the construction site in terms of physical challenges that they had experienced. However, they did not describe the physical challenges in terms of insurmountable barriers, but instead framed them as challenges to be overcome. For example, Mandy gave an account of overcoming a fear of being up high on a ladder to participate in a construction task:

There was one time I was up on a ladder really high and holding up a board while they were nailing it from the other side, and it was really high at the top, like the peak of the house and that was up really high. So that’d probably only be negative. But then there was also a certain amount of...pride in that because I did do as much of it as I could. I did stay up as long as I could, and you know even though my knees were shaking a little bit and I was nervous, I still- there’s a certain amount of accomplishment too.

Mandy told this story in response to a question about her “worst experience” with the group, and emphasized that she was not comfortable with being up high on a ladder. However, she also noted that despite her fear of heights, she did as much of the task as she could, and she took pride in participating in a task that made her nervous.

The volunteers also described physical challenges in terms of the weather. For example, Phyllis described the last build when it was “brutally hot,” and Linda mentioned
“being in a trench in the rain ... with lots of mosquitoes.” In addition, the construction tasks themselves were also physical challenges. As Audrey explained, hammering can cause a sore arm and using a drill makes one’s whole body shake.

However, the volunteers also emphasized that as long as people do not get seriously injured, the construction work is fun in spite of – and in some cases because of – such physical challenges and discomfort. Mandy said that although she complained about working in the crawlspace because it was uncomfortable, she was not “literally complaining” because she enjoyed the activity anyway:

It can be painful … your muscles can ache, you can get blisters, you can get bruises, you can cut yourself. But as long as you don’t like chop off a finger, it’s all enjoyable pain, enjoyable activity.

Donna also found that she liked the physical challenges of doing construction work. She said, “It’s so nice to come home just totally exhausted...you know, exhausted and dirty from what you’ve been doing all day.” She also noted that she liked that aspect because it was different from her “regular job,” which involved a lot of “sitting down and thinking and writing.” Therefore, physical labor was enjoyable for the volunteers, and for some, it represented a welcome alternative to their paid work.

A sense of pride was also related to the volunteers’ physical challenges. For example, Phyllis described some difficult tasks that made her feel good:

Six of us on Sunday lifted this very, very heavy um flooring for the shed. Or when we do that scaffolding, and it just looks like there’s no way any of us can do it, and all of us together can get it done.

Phyllis’s examples highlight her perception that the group can complete tasks on the worksite that seem physically difficult – if not impossible – by working together.
Other women described a sense of pride and satisfaction related to their participation in physically demanding tasks. Cindy said that although she had jobs that involved physical activity when she was younger, she had not done such work recently until joining the group:

I was a teacher, and you know working in offices, and uh- everything sort of got flabby, and it’s nice to be able to sort of you know become strong again.

Such comments indicated that doing work involving physical activity helped some volunteers to feel good about their bodies. However, Acker (1990) noted that women were often barred from jobs that involve physical activity, such as “skilled blue-collar work.” Therefore, it seems that subverting traditional notions of what constitutes appropriate work for women could lead to women participating in physical activity that in turn could help them to feel good about their bodies.

Despite the volunteers’ many positive experiences doing construction work, they also dealt with more negative experiences. For example, at one point the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity organization suggested that the women’s group participate only in fundraising. Such a policy would have aligned the volunteers’ work with tasks typically done by women as described by Acker (1990) and Rotolo and Wilson (2007). However, the volunteers did not accept being excluded from the construction aspect of Habitat for Humanity. Sarah highlighted the agency exercised by women in the group in that situation:

The core people of our group were like no we’re not doin’ that. We’re raisin’ the money, we’re gonna build the house.
The volunteers’ response showed the power of the women’s group to advocate for themselves in the larger Habitat for Humanity organization, as well as their insistence in participating in construction rather than doing work more commonly associated with women, such as fundraising. While the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity organization may have attempted to relegate female volunteers to traditionally feminine activities, or put them “in their place” as Kaminer (1984) stated, they were not successful. (Pg.1).

Therefore, the volunteers’ work was more physical than other types of volunteer work typically done by women. Although they preferred some tasks over others and found some of the work to be uncomfortable or physically exhausting, in general they enjoyed doing construction work. In fact, they described challenges as sometimes being enjoyable and as adding to the pride that the volunteers take in their work. And while the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity organization attempted to relegate the group to activities that were more consistent with traditional views of women’s work, the volunteers resisted those efforts. The next section examines the physical product of the volunteers’ work and how it added to the pride that volunteers took in their work.

The Physical Product

Along with the physical aspects of everyday construction work, the volunteers emphasized that physical product that resulted from their labor was also important to them. For example, when asked what aspect of her volunteer work she was proudest of, Karen said:

Just buildin’ a house. It’s big…having a big finished product…you know it’s nice to have a physical thing you do.
Several volunteers also described events during the course of the build that were memorable to them because of the magnitude of what they had produced. As Phyllis explained:

I love when we put the…studs up you know we put the walls up. I love that because it’s a huge thing and it’s all goin’ up and I keep thinkin’ it’s gonna fall over and it doesn’t, and then we all hammer … and we can see that’s a real visual thing.

Similar to the way in which volunteers emphasized the manner in which the physical aspect of their work with the group was different from other types of work they had done, they said that the physical product also made the work unique. As Judith explained:

It was that kind of accomplishment that…you’ve done something. A lot of things that you do, personal/professional life, you vacuum the floor today, you gotta vacuum the floor again tomorrow.

Judith also added, “Here is something where it’s done. It’s finished.” For women such as Judith, participating in construction tasks was more satisfying than other types of work in her life because of the finished product. Similarly, Linda described why she liked volunteering with the Richmond County Women Build group better than volunteer work related to childcare:

Teach a kid to tie his shoe, yeah, [you] get, you know, the result of instant gratification but you know you don’t get to see them tie their shoe the rest of their life, whereas you can drive by that house.

Therefore, participating in construction tasks was more fulfilling than other types of work because of the final, visible product. It seems likely that their preference for volunteer work that involved a physical product was related to the notion that work done by
women, such as house work and childcare, was not as valuable because it did not result in a tangible product (Acker 1990). But as was shown above, most volunteers framed their preferences for work that involved a physical product in seemingly gender-neutral ways.

However, one member explicitly connected the work of the group to society’s expectations of what constitutes women’s work. Kathy, who was a co-founder of the group, explained the women’s participation in construction work by extending the definition of a “homemaker” beyond taking care of a home to constructing a home:

Women have always been homemakers…quote unquote. This is a different way of being a homemaker.

Her comment suggested that the group’s involvement in the construction work aimed to transform notions of women’s work to include more productive tasks. Therefore, rather than seeking to abolish traditional gender roles, she was suggesting that the group was transforming and expanding them.

Thus, the women preferred volunteer work that had a physical product to other types of volunteer work or paid work in which the result was intangible or temporary. Although most volunteers did not mention that explicitly, one volunteer suggested that the group was attempting to transcend traditional views of what constitutes women’s work by constructing a house. Overall, the women clearly appreciate the house the physical project, but that was only one fact of the build. The next section examines the pride that the volunteer felt as a result of doing construction work.

**Pride**

The theme of the volunteers’ taking pride in their work was underscored throughout their descriptions of physical challenges and accomplishments, as well as the
finished product they created. The volunteers also expressed pride in doing construction work in more general ways. For some volunteers, their sense of pride was related to participating in a male-dominated task, but others had mixed feelings about how gender affected the pride they took in their work. The ways volunteers framed the sense of pride they felt because of their participation in construction work is explained below.

Some volunteers described pride as a general sense of confidence in themselves as a result of learning new skills. For example, Judith explained that she took pride in not having to consult manuals to do construction tasks:

I’ve never suffered from lack of confidence in my ability to do things if I can read a manual…but I don’t have patience with reading manuals, and now many of them I wouldn’t have to read anymore (laughs)…just go out and do it…so it’s-it’s always nice to have those kinds of confidence boosts.

Although Judith suggested that she had confidence in her abilities before participating in the group, she noted that her confidence had increased, and she was no longer dependent upon reading manuals. Similarly, Cindy said that learning about “tools and understanding construction stuff” had been “empowering.” Therefore, participating in the group had helped volunteers increase their confidence in their construction abilities.

Some volunteers explicitly stated that gender was related to the sense of pride in their work. For example, Marie noted that she was proud that women were doing construction work: “Women taking on the responsibility of building homes…I just think that is great.” She noted that it was fairly uncommon for women to do construction work, as she said “You just don’t find that everywhere.” Therefore, as Acker (1990) and Rotolo and Wilson (2007) have noted, women did not typically participate in such activities, and it made volunteers feel good to do so.
However, a younger respondent in this study had a different view of the relationship between gender and her level of pride. When asked how she feels about her volunteer work, Mandy said that although she felt “empowered,” she was not sure whether it was because she was a woman participating in a male-dominated task:

Um and so I’m still trying to kinda figure out the word empowerment to me, and-and if I, you know, want it to mean just I helped create something, you know… or if it is just a- I don’t want to be that negative, oh poor female, can’t hammer or pick up a heavy board, or, you know. I’m not really-I’m-I’m confused about that aspect of it. So I guess for me it’s certainly not a let me prove myself as a woman type-type empowerment. I think for me it is more of a- I’ve created something and helped build something and um I dunno. I’m not really sure what I think about that.

Therefore, Mandy’s source of pride was related to the physical product rather than proving that women could do construction work. She also suggested that viewing the group’s work as women proving themselves reflects “negative” assumptions about women and their abilities. However, her answer reflected considerable ambivalence in terms of how participation in the group was related to women’s ability to do male-dominated tasks.

Therefore, all of the volunteers expressed pride in their participation in a construction project to some degree. Some volunteers emphasized that they were proud of the things they had learned and the work they had done in general, and others framed their pride in terms of women participating in a traditionally male-dominated task. In addition, a younger respondent was reluctant to suggest that women should have to prove that they could do construction tasks. While the women took pride in their work, more specific discussions about their abilities revealed a more nuanced view of how they felt
about their competence in construction work. Women’s perceptions of their abilities are described in the next section.

**Women’s Construction Abilities**

To understand what the volunteers’ participation in construction work meant to them, it was also important to examine their assessments of their construction skills. Volunteers described themselves as initially having few skills but also suggested that there was a process by which they learned construction skills and became more comfortable doing them. Interestingly, the volunteers’ assessment of their construction abilities following their initial lack of experience involved two conflicting views: on one hand, they suggested that they did better quality work than men because they were more precise and detail-oriented; on the other hand, many women were reluctant to say that they possessed construction skills – regardless of how much experience they had gained while participating in the group. The women’s perceptions of their construction skills are examined below.

**Women as Lacking Experience**

In terms of the group’s first building project, volunteers said that many of the women did not have any previous experience with construction work. As Donna noted,

> When we first started, we didn’t have tools, we don’t know, you know, [a] pair of pliers from a wrench.

Along with a lack of construction experience among members when the group was first formed, many of the women said they did not have construction experience when they joined the group. For example, when asked about whether she had experience with construction work, Judith said, “No. No, absolutely not.” Therefore, the volunteers
described a significant lack of experience, both in terms of the entire group and the
individual participants. That initial lack of skill was related to a sense that the women’s
group needed a great deal of instruction, which will be examined below. However, it is
important to note, as was described in the section on the women’s initial interest in
construction work, that a smaller subgroup of women said that they had done
construction work with family members prior to joining the group.

Along with the volunteers’ descriptions of their initial lack of skill, delegation of
tasks on the work site also reflected an assumption that women lacked experience in
construction work. Regarding the way in which tasks were delegated, some volunteers
noted that a women’s group was different from other Habitat for Humanity groups
because the volunteers were not as skilled. For example, Donna said:

“It’s different from a regular build where ... if they’re a supervisor, um
they’re gonna tell people what to do, and they have some sense that these
people know how to just go ahead and do it.”

Therefore, the volunteers viewed the group as being different from “regular,” or mixed-
sex, builds in which supervisors could assume that the volunteers were skilled and could
perform construction tasks independently.

Volunteers’ descriptions of day-to-day challenges on the construction site
suggested that they depended upon Greg, the supervisor, to complete their tasks. Judith
described a situation in which several groups of volunteers needed Greg’s assistance at
once:

He’s [Greg] tryin’ to help with the electrical in the crawlspace, and you’re
at a critical moment where you need to know it is ok if we do X, is this
good enough. And somebody else has just come on the site and says, ...
‘what’s a job I can do,’ and so you’ve got three, four, five different groups
that are suddenly calling, each one at a crisis moment of-of how do we do this. And … it’s difficult to negotiate those moments … I think we’re getting a little bit better. I-I remember us commenting on the last build about that-that gaining knowledge of when is close enough ok and when do you need to be right on…And a little bit better judgment about those moments when we need to pause, even if it means we’re just standing. We need to pause until Greg can come over, versus oh close enough is good enough. Put the nail in.

Judith mentioned several important points regarding the management of tasks on the worksite. First, she highlighted the many responsibilities Greg had while on the worksite, such as delegating tasks, helping with tasks, and answering questions volunteers had as they were working. In addition, she noted that after volunteers were assigned a task, they were sometimes unsure of how to proceed without additional assistance. Finally, she noted that volunteers were often unsure of whether or not their work was correct and that they needed to wait for the assistance of the supervisor rather than making the judgment themselves.

That description of the volunteers’ dependence upon Greg mirrors a field note entry that suggested that volunteers were often uncertain of proceeding with a task without the assistance of Greg. It involved my working with Jill, who was new to the group, to set up some scaffolding next to the house:

Greg [the construction supervisor] told us to level off the ground to create a space for the scaffolding. He told me to look for some small pieces of wood to stack up as a base for the scaffolding, and Phyllis [the day leader] pointed out some places on the worksite where there were some pieces of wood. While I gathered the wood blocks, Jill used a tape measure to determine where we would place them. After gathering a lot of wood blocks, we began to stack them to make a base for the scaffolding. Jill often measured to make sure we were stacking them in the right place and that they would be level. After we got the wood blocks stacked up, she said maybe we should go find out what comes next.
That entry exemplified the way in which Greg would delegate tasks and the day leader would provide additional support. It also suggested that instructions were given in small increments – we were told only to stack up blocks of wood in a certain location rather than to complete the process of putting up the scaffold.

The scaffolding example also suggested that volunteers might not have taken initiative to do things that they were not specifically told to do by the supervisor. The next step after creating a level area for the scaffolding to go using the wood blocks was to put up the scaffolding, which involved four sets of metal bars sitting nearby. However, Jill did not seem to consider what needed to be done next and instead suggested that we go ask Greg. Similarly, in an interview, Cindy said, “I wouldn’t presume to do something I didn’t know.” Those examples suggested that the women were conscientious and sought input from the construction leader to ensure that they were building the home in a correct and safe manner. However, while the volunteers did not mention it directly, their experiences also suggested that women tended to defer to the male leader on the construction site.

However, other women noted that while Greg often delegated and supervised tasks, they found things for themselves to do in a more proactive way. As Laura said:

I don’t just stand around and wait for him to tell me what to do. I usually take the initiative to find something to do. Or I’ll go up to him and say you know... ‘what needs to be done?’

And while Cindy said that she wouldn’t presume to do something she didn’t know how to do, she also said she did things that she knew how to do without Greg telling her. Therefore, although the volunteers often sought assistance from Greg, they did not
always passively wait for his help and sometimes found ways to take initiative on the
collection site.

The everyday interaction on the worksite as recorded in field notes, as well as the
comments of the women, suggested that because it was a women’s group, participants
felt that they needed very detailed instructions from a supervisor and sometimes did not
presume to do a task without consulting the supervisor. However, some women did take
initiative to find tasks to do. Therefore, although women deferring to men (Martin 2003)
and lacking experiences in productive tasks (Acker 1990) seemed consistent with
traditional views of women, volunteers’ interaction did not always follow such patterns.
The next section explains similar nuances the volunteers’ views of their abilities
throughout the course of their involvement in the group.

*Learning Skills and Gaining Confidence – But with Limits*

Despite many of the women’s lack of initial experience and their need for detailed
instruction on the work site, the volunteers indicated that over the course of their
involvement, they had developed construction skills and experienced increased
confidence. However, comments indicating such feelings of empowerment were
tempered by some women expressing doubt about the skills they had learned, as well as
instances in which they were reminded that women were not typically skilled in
construction work. This section examines the degree to which volunteers perceived they
had learned skills and gained confidence in doing construction work.
The volunteers’ descriptions of learning skills and gaining confidence represented a continuum. On one end of the continuum, volunteers learned basic skills at the start of their involvement with the group. As Cindy explained:

It’s all knowledge— it’s all empowering, I think. Even if ... people get the first day that they show up, you know... see what- what tools look like and... the difference between a framing hammer, I mean that’s... useful.

Similarly, when describing rewarding experiences she has had during her involvement in the group, Linda said that she enjoyed watching women learn basic skills:

Seeing other women that didn’t think they could do something but wanted to do something, kind of shy, you know, and letting them pick up a hammer for the first time.

Those comments suggested that the process of learning and gaining confidence began as volunteers completed their first tasks. The women also pointed to volunteers as initially not having construction skills or confidence but as building these cognitive and emotional qualities as they physically constructed a house.

Volunteers described gaining skills and confidence as an ongoing process. As Linda explained:

You learn something new every time you go out there, you know. Even if you’re doing the same thing you did the year before or two years before, still learn a new way to do it.

Furthermore, except for mistakes made under the instruction of the previous male supervisor Ron, which the women viewed as resulting in a lower quality of work, volunteers tended to view mistakes as an acceptable part of the learning experience. As Linda said regarding a mistake during the first build, “It was learning, you know, we’ve never done it before.” Therefore, their involvement in the group was a learning process
similar to the women’s centered model of community development, which involved “building skills through repetitive cycles of action and reflection that evoke new skills and understandings” (Stall and Stoecker 1998:741).

Volunteers also linked the process of learning skills to the process of gaining confidence. As Mandy said,

I think that I’m certainly more confident with my abilities than the first day I started. But that— that just comes naturally as— as you learn more. If you don’t know how to do something, then you can’t feel confident that you know how to do it. So once you learn how to do it, then you just obviously become more confident that you can do it.

Thus, members of the group since the beginning, such as Linda, as well as the newer members, such as Mandy, viewed their skills as progressing throughout involvement in the group.

Such comments suggested that as the volunteers continued to participate, they developed construction skills and confidence to perform construction tasks. At this end of the continuum of skill development, there was a core group of volunteers who were skilled in construction work. As Audrey explained:

I think we just have a— a good core group of women that are very knowledgeable. And because this is the fourth build, um we’ve got a lot of the same women that have been doin’ it since the first build, so they’re very knowledgeable.

Similarly, Marie, a member of the group since the beginning, noted that she felt confident in her skill level: “I feel like I have some good skills.” In addition, Betsy observed that she has developed skills that would benefit her outside of her volunteer work as well: “I’ve learned some skills that I can take home and use.” Thus, some volunteers perceived
that the group’s competency in construction work had increased as its members became more experienced.

However, other comments made by some women suggested that there were limits to their development of skills and confidence in their abilities. Some volunteers said that it was difficult to retain the skills they had learned previously on the build. Cindy, a new volunteer, noted “I’m sure I’m gonna forget a lot of this stuff.” And Karen, a volunteer who has participated on multiple projects, explained, “When you don’t do it for two years, you kinda have to re-learn it.” Similarly, Judith said that although she had worked on the roofing for three builds, changes in the procedures and the products used made it difficult for her to use her previous experience: “I want to be able to build on my knowledge somehow.” In addition, while Mandy noted that she had learned some new skills, she said, “I don’t feel like I’ve mastered anything as a result...of doing this um I think I’ve just learned little bits.” Those comments indicated that the learning process has some areas of weakness in terms of the volunteers’ gaining in-depth knowledge that they could build upon during subsequent projects.

And although some volunteers said that they and others in the group had good skills, others seemed reluctant to describe themselves as being skilled. When describing how tasks are assigned, Cindy, who was new to the group, explained:

Well I don’t feel confident enough in myself to, you know...figure out ...on my own. I’m sure that there are some people who have, you know done a lot of builds and they know exactly what needs to be done.

Similarly, Karen, who has participated in several builds, said:
Some of them who um have done a lot of building and are really knowledgeable, and then there are people like me, who don’t know anything.

In addition, Phyllis said, “I’m not real adept at many things” and Barbara offered similar a sentiment when she said, “I’m not as comfortable [as other volunteers] with the construction skills.” These comments suggested that some volunteers – who have varying levels of experience with the group – either did not believe they were skilled or downplayed construction skills.

The volunteers did not frame their lack of skill as being related to an assumption that construction is “men’s work,” not “women’s work.” But through their encounters with men, the volunteers were sometimes reminded that women were not typically skilled in construction work. Similar to Martin’s (2003) findings within paid work, some men interacted with the female volunteers in ways that upheld traditional views of the gendered division of labor. For example, Judith explained that the interaction between volunteers was different when men were invited to participate in the group’s work. She said,

I still see when we do Sadie Hawkins Day and other things of that nature, that dynamic of ‘let me do this for you, little lady,’ um and there are things that I want to do. I want to be on the roof. um (laughs) I don’t mind getting out my cordless circular saw and cutting that board or- or whatever it happens to be.

Therefore, although Judith’s response represented confidence in her ability to do construction work, such as using power tools and working on the roof, she has observed that men on the work site limited women’s opportunities to participate in more
challenging tasks. In addition, her comment also highlighted the rather condescending way in which men treated women when doing construction work.

Other women also had interactions with men that reflected assumptions about women’s ability to do construction work. For instance, Cindy described two encounters she had with men; the first was with a man working on the roof during Sadie Hawkins Day, and the second was with a male manager at a retail store:

Cindy: The guy...on the roof when we were putting up the roof. And he was really [skilled], I mean he was running all over those eaves and stuff, and he told me...showed me his hammer that had those kind of rough edge on the end...And I told him... ‘I was gonna buy one of those at Lowe’s and the manager talked me out of it.’ He said, ‘Well he did you a disservice because this is exactly what you wanna use’ ... and I didn’t know that. I had gone to Lowe’s and I held one of those things up... I asked the manager, I said, ‘Is this a good framing hammer?’ He goes, ‘Well... you’re gonna get tired.’ And so he talked me out of it. I got another hammer, and I love it, it was a great hammer, but ... I had to go buy another one too. So I didn’t get that one at Lowe’s, I got it at tractor supply, yeah, without asking anybody, just...by myself. (laughs)

Interviewer: Do you think that manager had some like assumption that...

Cindy: Yeah, that I was too weak or a woman and yeah. He said, ‘You’re gonna get awful tired.’ I’m like, you know, I got tired ...when I was huffing a little teeny hammer that I borrowed from my husband.

Therefore, both the man at the construction site and the man at Lowe’s offered Cindy advice about purchasing a hammer. Cindy explicitly stated that the advice from the man at Lowe’s reflected his assumption that she was “too weak” and “a woman” and could not hold a larger hammer. In addition, although Cindy did not say that the advice of the man at the construction site reflected any type of gender bias, she suggested that advice from both men was unwanted as she said she bought her next hammer “without asking
anybody.” Thus, Cindy’s interactions with men reinforced the notion that women lacked knowledge of construction work and needed special instruction.

Along with offering advice, men also complimented the women for their high-quality work. However, the volunteers viewed such comments with ambivalence. For example, Kathy described one man’s reaction to the group’s construction project:

This guy pulls up in a pickup truck with his wife and kids and he started saying, ‘I just had to come by and see this, I read it in the newspaper, I couldn’t believe bunch of women could actually build a house.’ And he got out and he was walking around and he came back... [He] said, ‘You women can really build a house. This is goin’ well. How do I sign up?’

Although the man’s comments could be viewed as complimenting and validating the group’s work, Kathy went on to explain that his comment reflected the extent to which “people are skeptics” about women performing construction tasks. Similarly, when describing people who “marvel” about a woman from the group working on her own home, Judith said, “Get over it. I’m not incompetent.” These comments indicate that although men seemed impressed with the women’s work, the women themselves were aware that such praise was related to men’s assumptions that women lacked construction skills.

Therefore, the volunteers described a process by which initially unskilled volunteers become competent and confident in construction work. But their responses also suggested that they sometimes had doubts about their own skill levels. Furthermore, interactions on and off the construction site reminded the volunteers in subtle ways that women were not expected to be skilled in construction work. Ironically, while assumptions about what was appropriate work for women were related to the women
viewing themselves as lacking skills, the volunteers also relied upon assumptions of what constitutes women’s work to suggest that they were better at construction work than men in some respects. The next section explores how the women also framed their construction abilities as being superior to men’s work.

**Women as Doing Better Quality Work than Men**

Despite some volunteers’ ambivalence regarding their skill level and reminders by men that construction work was a male-dominated field, many of the volunteers also indicated that the quality of work done by women was better than work done by men. As Sarah explained:

> I think everybody’s real particular and careful and wants to do every task correctly and... a lot of times you don’t see that in men. Men just, ‘get it up, it’ll be fine’... we make sure that everything’s right.

Similarly, Marie said that women are “more organized” and Barbara stated that women “do better quality than men” because they were “pickier.” Therefore, while many volunteers had not had opportunities to learn construction tasks before joining the group, some members of the group suggested that there were qualities inherent to women that led to them doing better work.

Tasks that the volunteers thought women were better at than men at often involved intricate or precise work. For example, Linda described the way in which the women did the trim of the house:

> If you go into some houses you’ll notice the trim isn’t, you know, perfectly mitered [or cut at the exact angle needed]. We perfectly mitered, you know. There’s a lot of pride and a lot of detail that goes into I think the woman’s house that the other houses do not get.

In addition, Cindy described feeling good about doing precise work on siding:
That made me feel good ‘cause that was, where we had to plot, you know, a quarter of an inch from certain edges, and …we had to … mark and cut everything so… the siding would fit um over windows, under doors, and everywhere…and overlap at the other end. And doing those measurements and cutting ’em and having it work really made me feel good. But again that goes back to quilting.

Interestingly, Linda said that doing precise work made the women’s house unique, and Cindy attributed her ability to cut difficult pieces of siding to her hobby of quilting, which is a hobby more commonly done by women. Thus, although they were participating in a traditionally male-dominated activity, they did not emphasize tasks typically associated with men, such as doing heavy lifting or dangerous labor. Instead, they seemed to be suggesting that traditionally feminine attributes need not be subverted to allow for the successful completion of construction tasks.

Along the same lines, some volunteers said that women added emotional and nurturing aspects to the construction of a house: As Kathy explained:

We knew it was important for Lisa [a female homeowner] to get her drapes up when she first started. I mean, she had her drapes in her window… soon as we had the glass in, you know…We worked with her to make it a home. I think women are more interested in a home as opposed to a building.

That comment emphasized that while men might have focused on the physical construction of the home, women paid attention to emotional labor connected to the project. That can be seen in Kathy’s distinction between men creating a “building” and women creating a “home.” Ironically, such comments evoked the idea that women’s volunteer work was related to nurturing, which was similar to the way in which volunteers studied by Petzelka and Mannon (2006) framed their volunteer work in the rural tourism industry. However, such comments should be viewed as somewhat different
because the women in the current study were not only providing emotional support for the homeowners but also completing the physical labor. It seems that while volunteers did not “question the stability and the necessity of the whole gendered social order” as some feminists have, they did seek to expand what is considered to be women’s work (Lorber 2005:195).

But some volunteers did suggest that subverting the traditional gendered division of labor was salient to them and contributed to the pride that they took in their work. As Cindy said, “We’re doing what is...considered sort of a male job...at least as well as—if not better than men.” Similarly, Phyllis said, “I probably worked more on a house than most men have, who aren’t in construction... it’s empowering.” Those comments indicated some “gender rebellion” or a desire to go beyond traditional assumptions regarding gender (Lorber 2005).

In addition, some volunteers connected the ability of the women to successfully do construction work to power within the larger organization. As Linda said,

The women have proven that we can succeed at building a house. They should let us have, you know, a little bit more say in things.

Linda was referring to problems in the past with the women’s group and the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity organization of which it was a part. An analysis of the relationship between the women’s group and the larger organization is beyond the scope of this report, but Linda spoke to a sense that women’s group was worthy of respect from the county-level leadership for proving that they can do a task traditionally done by men. In fact, many respondents suggested that the women’s group has been successful in gaining power within the larger organization.
Thus, while invoking traditional notions of what constitutes women’s work, the volunteers argued that their construction was of better quality than men’s work. However, they also suggested that they were breaking down barriers of what should be considered women’s work, and they highlighted the way in which their success in a male-dominated field has led to increased power within the larger Habitat for Humanity organization.

**Summary**

The volunteers’ perceptions of their involvement in construction work reflected their desire to participate in construction tasks, their enjoyment of the physical aspect of the tasks, and the pride that they took in the finished product. Most volunteers noted that they had few previous opportunities to learn construction tasks because of the way in which men and women were socialized or because of previous volunteer experiences, and they viewed participation in the group as a way to learn those skills. They also described a process of learning skills that involved overcoming physical challenges and gaining experience with construction work. However, some women were reluctant to say that they were skilled in construction work, and some women also questioned how much they had really retained in terms of construction knowledge.

Although assumptions regarding women’s ability to do construction work might have been part of their perception of having few skills, assumptions related to traditional gender roles also led to the volunteers’ asserting that they did better quality work than men. Furthermore, some volunteers took pride in their work because it involved a traditionally male-dominated field.
It is interesting to note that scholarship on paid work and volunteer work suggests that women are more likely to do tasks that are related to reproduction than production (Lorber 2005; Acker 1990; Martin 2005; Rotolo and Wilson 2007; Petrzelka and Mannon 2006). In that context, it seems as though the group has rebelled against traditional assumptions of what constitutes women’s work. However, this chapter has shown that as the group has participated in construction work, they have constructed a gender ideology that at times went contrary to traditional distinctions, at times seemed to redefine or extend them, and at other times seemed to conform to them.
CHAPTER 6: VOLUNTEERING AS COMMUNITY SERVICE

As Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) found in their study of female volunteers in rural America, it is important to examine how volunteers view their work as affecting the community. This chapter will go beyond the interpersonal relationships and experiences on the construction site to examine how the members of the Richmond County Women Build conceptualized their volunteer work as a service to the community. The term “community service” will be used as a broad term to refer to any benefits that result from the volunteers’ work. Ways in which volunteers described their work as helping the “community” varied widely, from benefiting the volunteers themselves, to helping the families that received a house, to having a positive impact on a larger type of community, such as the county or region. First, volunteers’ personal philosophies emphasizing the importance of community service will be described. Second, I will explain the different ways in which volunteers viewed their work as benefiting the community. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of the way in which the women took pride in their volunteer work as community service.

A Philosophy of Community Service

When describing why they participated in the group, many volunteers suggested that their volunteer work fit in with their personal philosophies. As Karen said, “I think it’s... part of the ethic of my family that you... just do what you can do to help other people.” In addition, volunteers said that the way in which Habitat for Humanity aimed to help the community by providing affordable housing was consistent with their own
beliefs. Kathy’s comments were representative of many women’s views the relationship between their beliefs and their volunteer work:

I believe that every person deserves a safe decent home period. And I also believe that you don’t give things away, that part of what you- and it’s not a matter of being deserving, not deserving, but I think that working alongside the families is a good approach and teaching them at the same time the skills they’re gonna need to maintain a home.

Thus, she emphasized that volunteering with Habitat for Humanity fit in with her belief that no family should be without a home. She also argued that it was not appropriate to simply give homes away, but that the families should work alongside the volunteers they way they did in the Habitat for Humanity organization. Therefore, the women found that their work with the group fit with their personal views regarding the importance of community service. The next sections examine the various ways in which the volunteers perceived their service as benefiting the community.

**Helping Families**

When asked how their volunteer work affected “the community,” volunteers emphasized the way in which it helped families to obtain affordable housing. This section examines volunteers’ perceptions that their work helps individual families, rather than a larger type of community such as a city, county, or region.

The most common way that the group helped the homeowner was the material benefit of a home. As Marie explained,

You’re providing housing, decent housing uh for individuals who you know probably haven’t lived in decent housing…I think that’s- that’s a positive.
Her comment made two important points regarding the volunteers’ perceptions of how their work affects the community. First, she suggested that the object of their work was to provide a house for individuals who previously lacked decent housing. She also suggested that the impact on the family was positive.

Other volunteers also suggested that their assisting the families to obtain a home was an important contribution to their lives. As Betsy explained to me:

You’re not at a point yet where you’re gonna know how happy you are to have your own home. But when you reach that point, then you’ll understand how special it is.

In addition, Judith noted that their work helped to get people out of “terrible housing,” and Karen said, “It certainly is a service to the families, you know, to provide them this great house.” Thus, providing a home was a major way in which volunteers described the impact of their work on individual families.

Along with the material benefit of obtaining a home, volunteers also described ways in which they helped the families to obtain social capital, such as by serving as role models for the families’ children and helping the family to learn construction skills. Those benefits were discussed in the section on the relationship between the volunteers and the homeowners.

An additional benefit was the emotional reward of being involved with the build. In terms emotional benefits to the homeowners, volunteers such as Linda mentioned “the pride that they [the homeowners] have on that final day.” However, when discussing emotional benefits connected with helping families to obtain a home, many volunteers discussed the emotional benefits that the volunteers themselves received. As Audrey said,
“I find enjoyment in helping families” and Judith described a “sense of pride” that she got from knowing that she from providing housing for a family. Furthermore, Marie, a woman who retired after working in social services for more than 35 years, said that volunteering with the group allowed her to feel as though she was still helping people: “It’s given me a sense of still bein’ part of [the] social aspect of helping individuals.”

Thus, when discussing the impact of the group’s work on the family, the volunteers emphasized the material benefit of providing a house, as well as social and emotional benefits. However, many volunteers found it was not only families who received emotional benefits, but the volunteers themselves did as well. The next section will examine benefits to the community beyond the families and volunteers involved with the build.

**Helping the Larger Community**

Along with helping individual families, the volunteers also discussed ways in which their volunteer work affected a larger community. When discussing the community-wide impact of their group, volunteers defined “community” in a variety of ways, such as the county or the region in which their work was done. This section examines the various ways in which volunteers said that their work helped those types of communities– as well as their perceptions of the ways in which the impact on the community was limited.

Some volunteers suggested that as the group has built houses for families, they have helped an entire community. As Kathy said,

Any time you have a community where you have people who are outcasts or living in the substandard, I think…you weaken [the] whole community.
So I think any time you strengthen individuals in a community, you strengthen the community.

Thus, by helping families to obtain a home, the group has helped to connect low-income families to the rest of the community. Furthermore, when people were brought into the community instead of excluded, it made the whole community a better place. Such comments suggested that for some volunteers, the project was a way to alleviate social exclusion related to poverty (Sen 1999).

Several women also suggested that their volunteerism set a good example for others in the community. As Linda said:

The community sees that something good is going on and it might spur somebody else to do something good as well, whether it be giving the money, participating in the event that raises the money, or actually going out there and helping build and work on you know with one of the affiliates here in Richmond County.

That comment reflected a sense that by volunteering with the group, the women inspired community members in Richmond County to help others in a variety of ways.

Another way in which the group set a good example for the community was related to women doing construction work. As Phyllis explained,

I think it’s a good thing for men and women and boys and girls to see women working um in something that’s traditionally not a woman’s field.

That suggested that many volunteers were seeking to change notions of what constitutes women’s work by setting an example for the larger community regarding women’s competency in construction work.

Along with setting good examples in terms of doing community service and expanding gender roles, volunteers made a connection between their efforts and issues of
social inequality that affected their community. As Audrey noted, there were many people in the Appalachian region who lived in poverty and did not have adequate housing:

We certainly have a lot of families in this community, in this county, that should have a home. And you can drive you know, five minutes out of town and see what some of these people live in. And you know they say across this country, we’re probably one of the highest in the Appalachian area for poor people.

Similarly, Barbara, who served in the Peace Corps, said that some people in the community lived in “worse conditions than I was seeing in Africa.” Those volunteers suggested that by constructing homes, they were helping to alleviate Appalachian poverty. Their comments were similar to the way in which the volunteers studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) framed their work boosting the troubled economy in rural Iowa. In addition, the Richmond County Women build group’s mission was similar to those of women’s groups that have aimed to alleviate poverty in Appalachia for over a century (Duff 1999; Appleby 1999; Baker 2005).

However, while some volunteers connected their efforts to widespread poverty in their community, several of them seemed to doubt the impact their work had on social problems such as poverty. For example, when asked about how the group’s work affects the community, Sarah said:

I mean, I think it’s nice, but I don’t think it really…as far as building houses, there’s so many…people in substandard housing that we can’t possibly build enough houses to make a difference…it’s kinda just like a drop in the bucket. I think it’s actually better for…us, people building the house, than for them, ‘cause I think the women have learned a lot.
Therefore, it seemed that for some volunteers, the benefits of the group were more towards the individual level by providing a house for a small number of individuals and helping volunteers learn construction skills. That could suggest that some volunteers downplayed the impact of their work; however, it is also possible that in the context of an area with high poverty rates, volunteers such as Sarah were simply being realistic about limits of the material benefits that the Richmond County Women Build group was able to provide.

Like the volunteers studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) the volunteers in this study also described their impact on the larger community in positive ways. They emphasized that providing homes for individuals not only helped the families themselves but also strengthened the entire community. They also said that their work sets a good example for others in the community by encouraging volunteerism and showing people that women can participate successfully in a male-dominated activity. And although volunteers recognized that Appalachian poverty was a widespread issue that could not be alleviated with the group’s efforts alone, they viewed their work as making a contribution to poverty in the region. The next section will examine in greater detail the earlier comments suggesting that the volunteers themselves benefited a great deal from their volunteer work.

**Helping One Another**

Along with helping families and the larger community, volunteers emphasized that the members of their group also received benefits. As Mandy said, “The community that’s being benefited is the workers.” While benefits to the volunteers were discussed in
the chapters on volunteers’ perceptions of interpersonal relationships and construction work, it is important to examine benefits to volunteers here because the women viewed those benefits as a vital way in which the group impacted the community. The women described three main benefits that they received: an opportunity to socialize, a chance to learn construction skills, and a way to feel good about helping others. Betsy’s explanation of the benefits to the volunteers was representative of many women’s comments:

Well, number one it benefited me because I’ve learned some skills that I can take home and use. And number two is it’s benefited me in knowing some of the people that I got to know. And number three is it’s benefited me in being able to do something for someone else.

Some of the women argued that the volunteers have received more benefits than those whom the group aimed to help. As Betsy explained, “When you do something for someone else, you get it back tenfold.” Similarly, Phyllis said that volunteering with the group “feels like a gift that’s been given to me.” That view corroborated Kendall’s (2002) study that suggested that women’s volunteer work helped them obtain benefits and power within a community. However, other volunteers described the benefits of their work in a way that suggested more reciprocity. As Laura said, “I get something out of it and I give something back and so it’s…sort of mutual.” Therefore, some volunteers viewed themselves as being the primary beneficiaries of their work, while others suggested that it was more of an even trade in terms of benefits.

Overall, the volunteers found that they received benefits from their participation in the group, which included getting social benefits, learning construction skills, and feeling good about helping the community. Additionally, some of the women said that
volunteers themselves benefit more than the families who receive the house, while others viewed the benefits of their work as being reciprocal.

When compared to the female volunteers in rural Iowa studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), it might seem as though the volunteers in this study do not place as much value on their work because they emphasized the ways in which it benefits themselves as well – or sometimes to a greater degree – than the larger community. However, it is important to understand that the goals of the two groups were different: one of the purposes of The Richmond County Women Build group was to help women learn construction skills; but Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) found that volunteers were doing tasks traditionally done by women to boost their local economy. Therefore, while volunteers in this study emphasized how their volunteering benefited them personally, it did not necessarily mean that they did not think their work was valuable.

**Pride in Community Service**

Volunteers described a sense of pride, not only in participating in construction tasks, but also in the accomplishments of the group and its impact on the community. As Kathy, a co-founder of the group explained:

Most people [in] Habitat agree, we set the standard. We still do set the standard, as far as bein’ the most successful, as far as fundraising and PR and keeping people involved and enthusiasm.

Overall, volunteers viewed their group as being the most successful in the county and as being a well-run organization.

For some volunteers, however, pride in the group’s accomplishments was related to their being involved in an all-women’s group. When asked about how other Habitat for
Humanity groups compared to the Richmond County Women Build group, Betsy explained,

I don’t think you have the numbers of people who are truly committed like we do, like the women’s group is. I think we’re far more organized ... bragging (laughter)

Subsequently, when asked whether she thought the success of the group was due to it being a women’s group or other factors, Betsy responded:

Mhmm, yeah in a way, yeah. Yeah. Because when women latch onto something, they latch onto it 100 percent.

Such responses suggested that the fact that gender was salient to the volunteers in terms of their perceptions of the group’s success. Similarly, when asked to describe the strengths of the group, Kathy said,

The women… there’s no other way to say it. It’s the women. You know, they come out week after week, you know, they’ve been coming out week after week for four builds and it’s their dedication and belief.

Thus, volunteers viewed themselves as a committed group of women who have been very successful as an organization.

In addition, while a previous study (Daniels 1985) found that female volunteers tended to downplay their work, several volunteers said that they tried to spread the word about the group in the community. As Phyllis explained,

There aren’t very many mealy-mouthed women on that site. So uh their voices are…strong and clear, and I think they are proud of what they do.

Similarly, Mandy suggested that she was an advocate of the group in the community:

I’m just proud that I’m doing it. I mean I tell all kinds of people, oh my gosh I have this opportunity to go and-and help build this house, and it’s all women, and I’m learning a lot … I mean I brag on it all the time.
Therefore, volunteers took pride in their work and aimed to raise awareness about their efforts in the larger community.

Overall, the volunteers viewed their group as the most successful of its kind in their area. Furthermore, they attributed the success of the group to the commitment of the group’s members and the fact that it was an all-women’s group. And rather than downplaying the impact of their work, they took pride in their work and told others about the work they were doing.

**Summary**

Serving the community and helping others were a vital part of the way in which volunteers from the Richmond County Women Build group viewed their work. While volunteers believed that their work helped families and the larger community, they also emphasized that they benefited as well by meeting people, learning construction skills, and feeling good about helping others.

Like the volunteers studied by Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), the women in the Richmond County Women Build group took pride in their work and viewed it as having a positive impact on the community. However, similar to the predominately middle-class settlement workers that aimed to help the poor in Appalachia (Barney 1999) the volunteers in the current study also received benefits from their work, such as being able to feel good about helping others and developing their own skills. In fact, it is possible that although the group was meant to eliminate poor housing conditions, it could result in reproducing class inequality. As Kendall (2002) argued, because of the benefits volunteers from higher social classes receive, as well as the limited impact their work
tends to have on structural inequality, female volunteers may reproduce more inequality than they alleviate. However, the group in the current study was somewhat different from the volunteers studied by Kendall (2002) because the group also seemed to represent an attempt to alleviate gender inequality in their community by helping women to learn skills in a male-dominated field.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This study has shown that participants in the Richmond County Women Build group framed their volunteer work in three main ways. Chapter Four explained that the interpersonal relationships were an important part of the experience for volunteers and that the all-women’s group provided a comfortable environment in which volunteers could work in a cooperative way. However, the interpersonal relationships also involved cliques and hierarchy, and their relationships with construction supervisors and homeowners were not always positive. In Chapter Five, it was shown that the volunteers’ meaning of their work went beyond interpersonal relationships and involved challenging physical labor that resulted in a finished product of which the volunteers were proud. But although the volunteer described a process by which they learned construction skills that women do not typically have an opportunity to learn, they also suggested that there are limits to the extent to which members felt confident in their skills and ability to retain their knowledge. In Chapter Six, it was shown that the volunteers viewed their work as having important impacts in terms of helping families, helping the entire community, and helping one another.

Throughout the volunteers’ perceptions of interpersonal relationships, construction work, and community service, issues related to gender were present. However, despite some women’s comments that they were trying to learn a male-dominated task, it would not be entirely accurate to describe the volunteers’ stance as “gender rebellion” in which volunteers completely reject traditional notions of what constitutes women’s work (Lorber 2005: 195). Instead, volunteers sometimes referred to
themselves in terms of traits that they viewed as inherently feminine, such as nurturing one another and providing a home for a family. Furthermore, at other times the volunteers attempted to refine such notions to include additional types of work: for example, they mentioned extending the term “homemaker” to include the physical construction of a home. Therefore, as studies of gender in everyday interaction have suggested, it is important to recognize that the way in which people do gender is dependent upon the specific context in which it occurs rather than being a fixed set of ideas or behaviors (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Furthermore, while the group seeks to alleviate gender inequality in the form of women being marginalized on Habitat for Humanity construction projects, it seems that it was not entirely possible for the group to do so. Volunteers said they gained confidence in doing construction work and that working with other women was empowering, but they also noted that having a male supervisor affected the dynamics on the construction site. In addition, the women continued to experience disbelief from men they encountered that women could be skilled in construction work. Therefore, while the group created a space for women to do work traditionally done by men, some subtler forms of gender inequality persisted.

Class issues were also prevalent in the volunteers’ framing of their experiences. This research has found that although the group seeks to provide a home for a low-income family, hierarchy related to social class was present within the volunteers group, as well as between the volunteers and the homeowners. It seems that Kendall’s (2002) findings regarding volunteer work reproducing social class and West and Fenstermaker’s
(1995) concept of “doing difference” are applicable in explaining how the volunteers in
this study interacted on the construction site in ways that made distinctions between
individuals on the basis of social class. While the goal of helping a family that may not
otherwise be able to obtain a mortgage is laudable, the group seems to reproduce one
aspect of class inequality as they try to alleviate another. However, volunteers’
reflectivity of their actions and suggestions of ways to address the inequality, such as by
having an on-site advocate for the family, indicate that the group could address such
forms of inequality in the future.

This research has important implications for the growing body of research on
gender and volunteer work. In the context of rural Appalachia, this study suggests that
volunteers view their work as having important impacts on the community rather than
downplaying their efforts, which confirms the findings of Petrzelka and Mannon (2006).
However, this study also suggests an expansion of Petrzelka and Mannon’s (2006)
conclusions because the volunteers in the Richmond County Women Build group also
emphasized the benefits they received rather than only benefits to the larger community.
In addition, the findings regarding the Richmond County Women Build group confirm
Petrzelka and Mannon’s (2006) finding that sociability is only part of the way in which
female volunteers frame their experiences. Perhaps surprisingly in light of their
involvement in a traditionally male-dominated task, the volunteers in the Richmond
County Women Build group were also similar to the volunteers studied by Petrzelka and
Mannon (2006) because they referred to women’s nurturing natures to explain the value
of their work.
A point of departure of this study from Petrzelka and Mannon’s (2006) findings involves other ways that volunteers framed their work in terms of gender, which included their desire to subvert or to transform traditional notions of what constitutes women’s work. Therefore, in the context of volunteer work related to a traditionally male-dominated activity, this research project refines Petrzelka and Mannon’s (2006) theory of how women frame their volunteer experiences by suggesting that volunteers refer to traditional notions of women’s work as well as attempt to subvert those ideas.

Along with expanding the findings of Petrzelka and Mannon (2006), this research could also serve as a qualitative supplement to quantitative studies related to gender inequality in volunteer work. For example, this research suggests that women perceive mixed-sex Habitat for Humanity projects as involving a gendered division of labor that is similar to the sex segregation found by Rotolo and Wilson (2007). In addition, even though the Richmond County Women Build group attempted to minimize the effects of gender by forming an all-women group, this study suggests that a gendered division of labor persisted when there is a male construction supervisor or other men volunteering with the group. Like Rotolo and Wilson (2007), this research provides more support for “spillover theory” than it does for volunteer work being different from paid work in terms of gender inequality (Pg. 559).

Although this study aims to further the research of Petrzelka and Mannon (2006) and Rotolo and Wilson (2007), it is limited because it is a single case study that examines only volunteers’ experiences in a Women Build group located in rural Appalachia. It is likely that in other regions of the United States or within urban areas, women’s volunteer
experiences with Habitat for Humanity are different. Furthermore, women’s volunteer
groups outside the Habitat for Humanity organization that involve work traditionally
done by men might differ significantly from this group. Thus, further research is needed
to examine how female volunteers frame their experiences in various contexts.

This study was also limited because it focused largely on the volunteers’
construction experiences rather than other aspects of the group. For example, volunteers’
comments sometimes suggested that the organizational structure of the group and the
group’s relationship with the Richmond County Habitat for Humanity affiliate involved
gender issues that affected how they framed their experiences. However, those issues
were not addressed in an in-depth way in this report. In the future, a thorough analysis of
the group’s organizational structure would add to an understanding of the group’s gender
dynamics. Furthermore, the group’s volunteer and social activities off the construction
site represent areas that could be examined more extensively in future research.

Along with sociological considerations, this project also has implications for the
Richmond County Women Build, as well as the larger Habitat for Humanity International
organization. In terms of the group itself, women’s enjoyment of working with other
volunteers and participating in construction work represent two its main strengths. This
study also identified areas in which volunteers viewed as weaknesses or areas in which
improvement was needed, which included: the relationship with the homeowners and the
existence of cliques within the group. In terms of the larger Habitat for Humanity
organization, the perceptions of the volunteers point to the all-women’s group as an
innovative way to help women get involved in aspects of Habitat for Humanity. Although
some forms of subtle gender inequality seem to persist, the volunteers seemed to greatly prefer the women’s group to the idea of mixed-sex projects.
REFERENCES


Petrzelka, Peggy and Susan E. Mannon. 2006. “Keepin’ This Little Town Going: Gender and Volunteerism in Rural America.” *Gender and Society* 2:236-258.


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did you decide to join [redacted]? Why did an all-women’s group appeal to you? (What effect, if any, do you think having a male supervisor has on the women’s group?)

2. What tasks do you do as a volunteer? (Describe tasks that you did the last time you volunteered in as much detail as you can remember.)

3. In general, how do you feel about the tasks you do? (Do you usually choose your own tasks or are you assigned a task?)

4. What do people usually talk about on the worksite?

5. Is there a structure to the group? (How is it decided who does what, and who the leaders are?)

6. How is volunteering with [redacted] similar to or different from other types of volunteer work, if any, that you have done?

7. How would you say volunteering fits in with the rest of your life? What other commitments do you have?

8. In your experience, have there been any cliques within the group?

9. What is your best experience as a member of the group? What is your worst experience? What aspect of your volunteer work are you the proudest of?

10. What, if anything, are the strengths of [redacted] as an organization?

11. What, if anything, do you think [redacted] could improve? What, if anything could be improved about the everyday volunteer experience?

12. What trends or changes have you noticed during your participation in the group?

13. Aside from being an all-women’s group, how do you think this group is similar to or different from other Habitat for Humanity groups?

14. What is the relationship between the women’s group and the rest of the [redacted] County Habitat for Humanity? The [redacted] community? The relationship between the group and the homeowner?
15. How has your involvement in [insert organization name] affected you, either positively or negatively? What, if any, benefits do you think you get from volunteering with [insert organization name]?

16. Why do you continue to participate in [insert organization name]?

17. How do you think your volunteer work affects the community? (Do you think the community is aware of the contribution the group makes?)
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

Demographic Information

1. How long have you lived in the community?
   A. Less that one year          D. 10 to 19 years
   B. One to four years          E. 20 years and above
   C. Five to nine years

2. What is your gender?
   A. Female                       C. Other _________
   B. Male

3. How old are you?
   A. 18 to 24                      D. 45 to 54
   B. 25 to 34                      E. 55 to 64
   C. 35 to 44

4. What is your race? (select only one)
   A. White/Caucasian                E. Native American/Alaskan Native
   B. Black/African American         F. Pacific Islander
   C. Hispanic/Latino                G. Other _________
   D. Asian/Asian American

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   A. Less than High School          E. Bachelor’s Degree
   B. High School/GED                F. Master’s Degree
   C. Some College                   G. Ph.D /Doctoral
   D. Associate’s Degree

6. What is your income?
   A. Under $10,000                  D. $30,000 to $39,999
   B. $10,000 to $19,999             E. $40,000 to $49,999
   C. $20,000 to $29,999             F. $50,000 and above

7. How do you describe your sexual orientation?
   A. Straight                      C. Bisexual
   B. Gay/Lesbian                   D. Other _________

8. About how many hours per week do you volunteer with when the organization is building a house?
   A. Four or less                  C. 10 to 20
   B. Five to Nine                  D. More than 20
9. About how many hours per week do you volunteer with [redacted] when the organization is not building a house?
   A. Four or less  
   B. Five to Nine  
   C. 10 to 20  
   D. More than 20
Informed Consent
Title of Research: Gender and Volunteerism in Appalachian Ohio
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Ann Deaton
Department: Sociology

Federal and university regulations require signed consent for participation in research involving human subjects. After reading the statements below, please indicate your consent by signing this form.

This interview is part of the research for my master’s thesis for the Department of Sociology. The goal of the research is to learn about female volunteers and what their volunteer work means to them. The interview will take approximately one hour and will be tape recorded. You may end the interview or ask to stop the tape recorder at any time. In addition, you may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer while continuing to participate in the research.

Participation in this research will provide an opportunity to reflect upon volunteer experiences and to be a part of an important study on gender and volunteer work. You will receive no compensation or other material benefits from participating in this research. There are no known risks or discomforts. All information provided during this interview will remain confidential and anonymous, and your name will not be attached to your responses. The tapes will be destroyed following the completion of the research project.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me: Elizabeth Ann Deaton, (937) 533-5168, ed313001@ohio.edu
Or my thesis advisor, Debra Henderson, (740) 593-1382, henderd2@ohio.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

I certify that I understand this consent form and agree to participate as a subject in the research described. I agree that known risks to me have been explained to my satisfaction and I understand that no compensation
is available from Ohio University and its employees for any injury resulting from my participation in this research. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. My participation in this research is given voluntarily. I understand that I may discontinue participation at any time. I certify that I have been given a copy of this consent form to take with me.

Signature________________________________________ Date________

Printed Name______________