Women's Community Activism:

A Qualitative Study of Old North End Residents

College Honors Proposal

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Abstract

Women's community activism has played an integral role in promoting the quality of life in many neighborhoods. This proposal outlines plans to study women's leadership in community organizations in the Old North End of Burlington. Specifically, by qualitatively assessing how women give meaning to their participation in Neighborhood Planning Assemblies and block associations, we can come to a better understanding of their motivations for involvement, how their participation is sustained and transformed, and how to promote productive and satisfying involvement.
Statement of the Problem

This study will qualitatively assess factors relating to the lives and work of female grassroots community leaders in the Old North End section of Burlington. The sample consists of community residents who are involved in either their Neighborhood Planning Assemblies or block associations. Female leaders of community organizations will be interviewed using a semi-structured format in order to assess their perceptions of: (a) factors that facilitate and restrict their leadership roles and the sustainment of such roles, (b) how activism transforms both women and their communities and (c) how their community work supports and/or creates tensions within their personal roles outside of their activism. Overall, I want to assess how women give meaning to their community work through the construction of their stories, as well how this work informs aspects of their personal lives. I hope to demonstrate the importance of the work that grassroots women perform at the community level for neighborhood residents.

Previous Literature

There is little research on women’s activism at the grassroots level in terms of both the quality and quantity of women’s community work. The “invisibility” (Abrahams, 1996) of women’s contributions reflects a gendered division of community work, with women occupying less prestigious non-administrative positions in community organizations and performing a larger amount of unpaid community work. Sandra Morgan and Ann Bookman (1988) highlight the ways in which women’s activism has been obscured by the manner in which politics are conceptionalized in our culture. They argue that working-class women’s community activism is political but is conducted
outside of the electoral arena, and furthermore, that many legislative reforms have emerged as a result of grassroots pressure from neighborhood women.

Recently, more attention has turned to the ways in which grassroots women perform their community work. Researchers have begun to note the gendered division of grassroots labor in unpaid community work as well as in more formalized community organizations (Gilkes, 1988; Kieffer, 1984). Women's community work has recently been noted in many different spheres outside of the formal political world; women engage in many forms of community activism. They make up the bulk of grassroots toxic waste activists (Brown & Ferguson, 1995) as well as a majority in the struggle for neighborhood improvement in issues such as adequate housing (Seagert, 1989) and education (Abrahams, 1996), local policy and planning issues (Marsten & Saint-Germain, 1991), health issues (Ramirez-Valles, 1999) and youth empowerment organizations (Abrahams, 1996). Women also contribute the bulk of informal community work such as caring for other women's children, helping non-English speaking women secure services and sharing resources, such as time, food and money (Naples, 1998).

The greater part of research has explored women's motivations for community involvement and activism. Frequently cited motivations emphasize concern for the quality of life in one's neighborhood, especially around issues affecting children. Hence, women's neighborhood work stems, in part, from traditional female roles such as motherhood (Gilkes, 1996). Patricia Hill Collins writes of the "othermother" tradition in which African American women collectively care for a community of children, rather than just one's own. The term "activist mothering" was coined by Nancy Naples to highlight the interaction between women's community activism, mothering and labor. In
her study of paid female community workers from the War On Poverty campaign she
highlights the important contributions made by Latina and African American females in
low-income city neighborhoods. Many of these women who were severely underpaid
stayed in their communities as workers even after being offered higher paying jobs
elsewhere. When funding for these programs was terminated, many women stayed as
unpaid community workers. Naples cites an intense dedication to improving one’s own
neighborhood as the impetus for such strong community commitment.

Less literature exists that examines the transformation and developmental changes
that accompany women’s community activism. In an exploratory study, Kieffer (1984)
looked at empowerment through the lens of grassroots community work as a normative
developmental process. His participants moved through a series of similar stages from a
sense of powerlessness to an “era of commitment” in which they achieved a sense of
place and intimacy with the political world. Many of the participants in the activist
mothering work felt a profound sense of change throughout their community
commitment. Many returned to school and worked towards advanced degrees, became
more comfortable in a politically active environment and retained a deep sense of
confidence and pride in their work. Brown and Ferguson (1995) examined women’s toxic
waste activism within the framework of Belenky et al.’s (1997) Women’s Ways of
Knowing, which traces an emerging sense of inner knowledge and voice of as women
move from a perspective of “received knowing”, in which they rely only on authority as a
source of knowledge to understanding the ways in which knowledge is subjective. These
women ultimately appreciate themselves as a source of knowledge. Community
involvement therefore is often mentioned as a source of "personal empowerment, an avenue for developing self-confidence and leadership skills" (Abrahams, 1996).

Researchers have isolated many differences between men's and women's leadership styles. Using a woman-centered model, Stall and Stoecker illuminate the concept of "co-active power" - a power based on interdependence and the development of the group as a whole through collaborative practices. This contrasts with the normative concept of power within organizations based on a more hierarchal philosophy. Other researchers have also noted the collaborative nature of predominantly female organizations (Belenky, Bond & Weinstock, 1997; Naples, 1998), with women showing concern for community participation, empowerment of individuals, and consensus building (Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante & Steffy, 2000).

There is some literature that suggests that tensions arise from women's community activism. Frequent concerns mentioned by women include conflict with husbands or partners resulting from decreased time spent on domestic responsibilities (Ramirez-Valles, 1999) as well as conflicts arising from childcare (Abrahams, 1996) and time spent away from children (Naples, 1998, 1992).

In contrast to the above tensions, women also report that their community work complements other facets of their lives. Women's paid and unpaid community participation often results in unexpected outcomes. As noted above, community work has been seen as a way in which women build self-confidence. This self-confidence affects the ways in which women confront their world. Many women report that their self-assurance gained in the public sphere translates to the private. Women specifically mention exerting more independence in intimate relationships with boyfriends and
husbands, speaking their minds, and correcting issues they believe to be wrong (Ramirez-Valles, 1999). Many women also cite increased efficacy in their occupations (Naples, 1998) as well as more comfort speaking publicly (Abrahams, 1996). Most importantly, increased efficacy in both the public and private spheres is attributed to the sustainment of women’s community activism (Brown & Ferguson, 1995; Mele, 2000).

Research Problem. This study will look at one form of women’s community activism; women’s participation in neighborhood planning assemblies and block associations. Women’s roles in the above associations are of specific interest for many reasons. Neighborhood improvement associations are a community role available to a great majority of women throughout the United States and women make up the majority of participants. Neighborhood associations and planning assemblies serve as valuable resources for communities. Such organizations serve to improve neighborhoods in terms of safety, promoting accessibility to services and resources while effectively helping to increase communication between neighborhood residents and local governments and organizations. The focus of this study will examine how this form of community leadership transforms women’s roles both on an individual and communal level, how their leadership is created and sustained and how their individual roles outside of community work (e.g. familial and occupational) affect and are affected by their community work.

Significance

The work that women undertake to improve our communities affects the quality of life for the men, women and children who live in such neighborhoods. Furthermore, this work is in many ways invisible and hence, goes unrecognized and unappreciated by
many. I hope to illuminate the community work of Old North End women in order to have a better understanding of the processes by which women commit themselves to such work and are influenced by it. By increasing our understanding of women’s motivations for community participation in neighborhood associations and how such commitment is sustained through the development of individual and collective competency, local governments, community support organizations, and others can play a more effective role in supporting neighborhood organizations. Thus, local governments and organizations can indirectly improve the quality of life for its citizens at a minimal cost. An important component of this project is that it complements a growing body of literature that examines women’s grassroots activism. However, the previous literature is sparse and generally lacking in depth. Moreover, there is an absence of research highlighting women’s work in neighborhood planning assemblies and block associations, which are among the most prevalent and widely accessible community leadership roles for women.

Methodology

Participants. The research project will use a convenience sample of female leaders from Neighborhood Planning Assemblies and block associations located in the Old North End. Participants will be at least twenty-five years of age at the time of the interview, however, I expect that the age of participants will be significantly older. Ten women will be interviewed.

Instruments. Women’s community involvement will be assessed using a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A). Feminists have advocated for the use of qualitative research methods as an appropriate means to study marginalized groups such a women, minorities and persons of low socioeconomic status. Qualitative methods
provide such groups with the ability to create personal narratives, allowing participants to construct meaning of their experiences without the words dominant groups being imposed upon them (See Bond, Belenky, & Weinstock, 2000; Rappaport, 1995 for a more complete discussion). Qualitative methods are also becoming more commonplace in the psychological tradition. Banyard and Miller (1998, p.347) contend “reality is best understood by studying the ways in which people perceive, experience, and make sense of, the events in their lives.” Thus, qualitative methods are the most appropriate means by which to study this sample of women because they document women’s personal insight regarding their experiences, and do so at a depth that could not be provided by the use of standard quantitative measures.

The interview is semi-structured and open-ended, allowing the participants flexibility in their responses. The interviews will last approximately 45-75 minutes depending on the length and depth of the participant’s answers; interviewees will be probed for further detail when necessary. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for the purposes of data analysis.

The interviews will address four main themes: (a) women’s work in the community, including their general history of community involvement, motivations for becoming involved, as well as what sustains unpaid work in their neighborhoods; (b) personal growth and development both on an individual and communal level, including their visions for the future, again focusing on the individual’s development and their work in the community; (c) community leadership including how women see themselves as leaders and how they think they are viewed by others; (d) how community work affects and is affected by women’s activities outside of neighborhood participation.
including how women's roles as family members and professionals complement and/or create tensions with their community work. Overall, I want to assess how women give meaning to their community work through the construction of their narratives as well as to examine the commonalities and differences among these narratives.

**Procedure.** Potential participants will be identified with the help of Burlington’s Community Economic Development Office (CEDO) that maintains a list of names and contact information for leaders of neighborhood block associations and Neighborhood Planning Assemblies in Burlington. Participants will be contacted by telephone and asked if they would participate in a study looking at various aspects of their community

The information in the lay summary (see Appendix B) will be read to them at this

If the woman agrees to an interview, this interview will be scheduled and the participant will read and sign the advised consent form (see Appendix C), and receive one copy of this form to keep, before the interview begins. Interviews will be conducted at a location of the participant's choice, preferably in the setting in which they feel most comfortable (e.g. the participant’s home or occupational setting). According to the standards of informed consent participants will be aware of their rights to terminate the interview and to refrain from answering any questions if they wish to do so. Participants will also be informed of their rights to confidentiality. Specifically, participants’ names will not be associated with anything that they say in any written or oral presentation or discussions of this research. Audiotapes will be destroyed at the termination of the project.

For the purpose of data analysis, audiotapes will be transcribed verbatim, and subsequently subjected to content analysis in which the data will be coded for prevalent
themes and patterns. Further analysis will proceed inductively; themes, patterns and concepts will proceed from the data itself, rather than be identified a priori by the researcher (Patton, 1990). As the data allows patterns and themes will emerge from the words of the women. Data analysis will be assisted by computer software (NVivo™) that allows the researcher to construct and assign multiple thematic codes throughout the text. This permits the researcher to work simultaneously with all participants' narratives while constructing common as well as distinct themes and subthemes. The goal of data analysis is to highlight common experiences in women's narratives as well as each story's uniqueness.
References


Appendix A

Interview for Grassroots Women Community Leaders and Participants

- **Family background and current family situation**
- **Educational history**
- **Employment history and current situation**
- **Community Work:**

  I’m interested in learning about the history of your community involvement. (General summary from childhood-different forms of involvement)

  What first got you motivated to be involved in community activity?

  What was the nature of your earliest involvement and how has that changed over time?

  What led to those changes?

  Has your motivation for community involvement changed over time in any ways? How so? What led to those changes? (Probe rewards & their change over time)

  Have your priorities regarding involvement changed over time? How so?

  What sorts of obstacles to community involvement have you experienced over time?

  Have they changed with your increasing experience and involvement?

  Has your way of dealing with them changed over time?
• **Personal Growth and Development:**

  Looking back on yourself, what were you like as a person before you became involved in community activity?

  How have you changed since the beginning of your community engagement?

  What have been some important factors leading to that change or development? (Probe extensively trying to get specific relationships between particular aspects of community work and dimensions of change)

  What aspects of change are you most pleased with?

  What aspects of change are you most displeased with?

  How has your community changed since you first became engaged in community activity? What do you believe led to this change?

  How have your contributions to your community or your influences/role in your community changed over time?

• **Community Leadership:**

  - In what ways might you describe yourself as a community leader? What sorts of roles do you play (or what sorts of roles do others believe you play?)?

  What do you feel are the characteristics of an effective community leader?

  What are the advantages and disadvantages of being seen as a community leader?

• **Community Work and Life Activities:**
How has your community work fit with your other life activities (include family, job and other commitments) and responsibilities?

How has that changed over time? (Probe for major tensions and complementarities)

How are the skills and activities similar and different?

Does one support and/or inform in the other in any ways?

How do you negotiate between the demands of both?

- **Vision for the future:**

  For engagement in the community?

  For personal development?

- Adapted from Grassroots Women Community Leaders/Participants Interview

  Lynne Bond, Professor of Psychology, University of Vermont (2000)
Appendix B

Lay Summary

You are invited to participate in the Women's Community Leaders Project, sponsored by the UVM/Burlington COPC (Community Outreach Partnership Center), under the directorship of Lynne Bond, Professor of Psychology, UVM. The project will study the experiences of female community leaders in Vermont in order to highlight: (1) the ways in which women become involved in non-paid community work, (2) the experiences that support or interfere with that involvement, and (3) ways in which this community work influences and is influenced by other parts of their daily lives (for example, their families, friends and jobs).

In order to learn about and support women's community work, we believe it is essential to gather and share women's own stories about their experiences. Therefore, we would like to interview you to discuss these issues at a time and place you find convenient. The interview will probably require about 45-75 minutes; you are free to choose not to discuss particular issues or to end the interview at any point you wish. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed; we will send you a copy of the transcription to review and keep. After removing interviewees' names from the transcriptions, we will examine the transcriptions to identify common as well as unique themes and perspectives. The results will be summarized in a written report that we will send to you.

Your participation will be strictly confidential and your interview anonymous. Your name will not be associated with the study in any way unless you request that it be. You will not receive monetary or other compensation for participating in this project. We do not believe that participation will expose you to any risks or discomforts except to the degree to which you choose to speak about experiences that bring up uncomfortable memories. We do believe that your participation may have both personal and societal benefits. On a personal level, we find that conversations about community action and leadership often remind us of our growth and success in supporting others and getting things done. On a societal level, we believe that the experiences you share with us will help community people, organizations, and governments to be more responsive to and supportive of grassroots community participants.

If at any time before, during or after participation you have any questions about your involvement or about the study in general, you are free to contact Lynne Bond, Department of Psychology, UVM (656-1341; email: lynne.bond@uvm.edu) or Lynne Babchuck (865-6051; email: josie7452@email.com). If you wish to speak to a UVM official about this study, please contact Nancy Stalnaker, UVM Institutional Review Board (656-4067).
Appendix C

STATEMENT OF CONSENT (TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY A LAY SUMMARY)

Women’s Community Leadership Project

I have been given and have read or have had read to me a summary of this research study. It has been explained to my full satisfaction. Should I have any further questions about the research, I realize I am free to contact the person conducting the study at the address and telephone number given below.

I understand the procedures I will undergo, including any potential benefits, risks or discomforts.

I acknowledge that my participation is voluntary and am aware that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice to my present and/or future care.

I realize that the results of this study may eventually be published, but that the confidentiality of all research data associated with this study will be maintained to the maximum extent allowable by law.

I understand that it is not the policy of the University of Vermont to provide payment or free medical treatment in the event of an injury resulting from the research. I understand that I may contact Nancy Stalnaker, the Institutional Review Board Administrator at the University of Vermont (231 Rowell Building, 656-4067) should I have any questions about my rights as a participant in a research project or for more information on how to proceed should I believe that I have been injured as a result of these research procedures.

I agree to participate in this study and I understand that I will receive a copy of this signed form.

Signature of Subject Date

Signature of Investigator Date

Project Director: Lynne A. Bond, Professor of Psychology
University of Vermont, Burlington VT
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