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Individualism in Action: an Investigation into the Lived Experiences of Peace Corps Volunteers

Leith Lombas

University of Colorado at Boulder, llombas@gmail.com

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**INDIVIDUALISM IN ACTION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS**

by

LEITH L. LOMBAS

M.A., University of Central Florida, 2004
B.A., University of Louisiana-Lafayette, 1998

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Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:

**INDIVIDUALISM IN ACTION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS**

Written by Leith L. Lombas

has been approved for the Department of Sociology

Janet Jacobs, Ph.D. Chair, Dissertation Committee

Leslie Irvine, Ph.D. Member, Dissertation Committee

Sara Steen, Ph.D. Member, Dissertation Committee

Joyce Nielsen, Ph.D. Member, Dissertation Committee

Kira Hall, Ph.D. Member, Dissertation Committee

Date: _____

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Leith Lombas, Ph.D. Sociology

**INDIVIDUALISM IN ACTION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS**

Thesis directed by Professor Janet Jacobs

Over the last 50 years, the United States Peace Corps has remained a symbol of the democratic ideals and humanitarianism core to U.S. citizen's collective identity. Peace Corps volunteers offer the people of the United States and the larger world a vision of hope and justice. In this dissertation, I unpack these nationalistic and benevolent discourses through exploring returned volunteers' reflections on their service with the Peace Corps. I problematize the notion that altruism is central to their commitment to living and working among the poorest of the poor around the world. I call for an understanding of how Peace Corps volunteers' success in managing the cross-cultural experience and working to improve life in their respective communities necessitates an individualistic approach to their mission. I posit that this allows volunteers to have the requisite emotional distance from the organization to critically consider their unique position in the field of international development. Further, I describe what volunteers thought about the Peace Corps and its effectiveness as a means of addressing world poverty. Lastly, I contextualize volunteer insights about the Peace Corps with respect to the current global political climate.

For my families

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

A. The emergence of the Peace Corps

The world underwent significant changes during the 1950's. The impact of World War II politically destabilized several western European nations. The United States and the Soviet Union, allies during the war, were immersed in a Cold War and a struggle for world influence. Also, decolonization movements began at this time in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (Latham 2000). Decolonization heightened skepticism between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as each nation viewed the other as conspiring to assert power over the newly independent nations in covert ways. Amidst these conflicts, U.S. politicians began to sense that the international community viewed the U.S. as simply another occupier rather than the oasis of freedom and democracy that it projected itself to be (Latham 2000; Rice 1985; Windmiller 1970). The emergence of international development gave support to these new U.S. foreign policy goals and legitimacy to the development of the U.S. Peace Corps (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000).

1. The Cold War

The 1950s were a triumphant time for the United States. However, the war's devastation left countries in Europe and Asia reeling. Though the U.S. was minimally scathed, many U.S. citizens felt the Cold War tensions and the threat of Soviet communist expansion (Amin 1992, 1999; Carey 1970; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Latham 2000; Waldorf 2001; Windmiller 1970). In response to these uncertainties, President

Johnson focused on strengthening U.S. military resources. In addition, some U.S. politicians felt that an international volunteer agency promoting peace and development in the global South would facilitate U.S. Cold War interests.¹ Thus, the development of such an agency, the United States Peace Corps, was viewed as a key component in the United States' attempt to win the Cold War (Amin 1992, 1999; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fuchs 1967; Latham 2000; Redmon 1986; Schwartz 1991; Waldorf 2001; Windmiller 1970).

President John F. Kennedy was the most important political figure to marshal support for the Peace Corps to challenge Soviet influence and the spread of communism throughout the world. Kennedy felt it was imperative for a Cold War victory to have U.S. citizens, such as Peace Corps volunteers (PCV's), living in countries vulnerable to Soviet influence (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Hapgood and Bennett 1968; Latham 2000; Rice 1985; Waldorf 2001; Windmiller 1970). Soviet censure of radio programming and its adoption of anti-American propaganda became the major weapons of the Cold War. In response, Kennedy felt that a "person-to-person" program, one that involved U.S. citizens living and working among the poor abroad, would allow for the transfer of U.S. values of freedom and democracy and contain the spread of communism (Amin 1999; Carey 1970; Latham 2000; Schwartz 1991; Waldorf 2001).

2. Decolonization

Decolonization was a second factor contributing to the development of the Peace Corps. The events of World War II prompted the large-scale decolonization of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Escobar 1995; Fischer

¹ I use the term "global South" to refer to countries that measure as medium or low on the U.N.'s Human Development Index. The majority of these countries are located in the southern hemisphere (www.un.org).

1998). Many people of the newly independent countries felt that severing their relationship with the colonizing countries was a triumph, yet they remained economically and politically vulnerable. At the same time, World War II devastated European colonizers, who now needed U.S. economic support to rebuild. The U.S. viewed this as an opportunity to extend its international influence both among mending western European powers and the newly independent states. Thus, the U.S. put European countries in a position whereby the easiest route to securing U.S. assistance and revitalizing their own political and economic lives was to acquiesce to U.S. desires for them to decolonize (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Latham 2000).

U.S. politicians were keenly aware that other nations were skeptical of the benevolent veneer of the Peace Corps, especially given that the Soviet Union and Guatemala exposed covert CIA operations in their respective lands in the 1950's (Rice 1985). President Kennedy and other Peace Corps supporters countered these charges by framing the Peace Corps as a multinational effort to foster the independence of decolonizing nations. The development of the U.S. Peace Corps began alongside other international volunteer organizations in Australia (Australian Volunteer Organization), Britain (Voluntary Service Overseas), France (Volunteers for Peace), and Canada (Canadian University Students Overseas) (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000). In this way, the U.S. hoped that volunteerism would promote more friendly relations between the former colonizers and former colonies, ease the transition to full nationhood, and promote alliances with the West². These moves made the U.S. appear less arrogant,

² The terms "West" and "Western" are used in this paper to refer to North American and western European nations and ideologies.

acknowledging that all nations could contribute to supporting the newly decolonized nations (Rice 1981).

The inclusion of other Western nations also gave the U.S. financial relief from the international development burden. However, the multilateral nature of the international development movement slowed the establishment of the U.S. Peace Corps, as the U.S. also desired to deploy volunteers quickly in order to defeat Soviet efforts at expansion. Nevertheless, U.S. politicians resisted the urge to speed up the process and distinguish the Peace Corps from other international volunteer organizations knowing that a multinational appearance would make Soviet complaints about U.S. expansionism seem unrealistic and paranoid (Amin 1999; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Latham 2000).

3. The discovery of world poverty

The field of international development emerged amidst these vast changes in the global political landscape. For the first time (Western) development scholars and activists began to understand world poverty in new, more politicized ways. Following World War II this “war on poverty” began, as poverty became the privileged lens through which the global South was viewed. By this, development scholars meant that this construction of poverty made the global South visible in a new way: the Western world defined world poverty in ways amenable to Western, modernist solutions and facilitative of their political interests (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995, 1999, 2000; Ferguson 1990; Haney 2000; Kothari 2001; Mosse and Lewis 2006; Kriemild 2002; Willis 2005). Media and scholarly representations of the global South, including Peace Corps’ media guides and volunteer packets, evoked a sense of urgency about the need to intervene in the lives of people in the global South. According to the media and early

Peace Corps proponents, the destinies of rich and poor countries were enmeshed, as poverty anywhere was viewed as a threat to political stability everywhere (Escobar 1995; Latham 2000). Western notions of poverty defined poverty based on economic indicators, such as the G.N.P., and thus solutions focused on economic growth and the development of capitalism, both of which the Peace Corps promoted itself as capable of providing expertise. According to Escobar, “the essential trait of the third-world was its poverty and the solution of economic growth and development became self-evident, necessary, and universal truths” (1995: 382).

4. The United States’ call to liberate the poor

A major part of the U.S.’s role in decolonizing and international development included reminding the world that the U.S. had much to offer the poor. The combination of the U.S. view of itself as superior to developing nations and empathetic to these nations’ plights for liberation gave U.S. citizens the belief that the U.S. needed to play a significant role in de-colonization and development movements (Amin 1999; Carey 1970; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fischer 1998; Latham 2000; Lowther and Lucas 1978; Schwartz 1991; Windmiller 1970). This included defining the U.S. as the epitome of democracy, modernity, and freedom in opposition to the developing world as susceptible to communist threat, “traditional,” living as though still colonized, and fragmented (Latham 2000). Latham (2000) argues that much popular and political sentiment saw how “the Peace Corps reflected a cultural consensus that the U.S. was called to drive other societies toward a modernity most clearly embodied in America itself” (111).

The focus on exporting American values abroad also served to remind U.S. citizens of their national identity as a bastion of freedom, individualism, and democracy

(Latham 2000; Windmiller 1970). Much public sentiment suggested that U.S. prosperity had given way to complacency after World War II; gone were the heroism, volunteerism, and determination that characterized the war years (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fuchs 1967). This deeply troubled many U.S. citizens. In addition, U.S. diplomats wanted to disabuse the international world of the idea that U.S. citizens living abroad were pampered, privileged aristocrats who, though living overseas, knew very little about the local peoples and culture (Carey 1970; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fischer 1998; Fuchs 1967). Lederer and Burdick's (1958) novel *The Ugly American* (which spent 76 weeks on the New York Times best-seller list) epitomized national sentiment by describing U.S. citizens working abroad as arrogant, demeaning, ignorant of local culture, and ineffective in providing aid to those in need.

Instead, the Lederer and Burdick urge U.S. citizens abroad to experience life in these communities as it is lived by the people. The novel's protagonist, Homer Atkins, captured the American imagination and exemplified the figure of what was to become the Peace Corps volunteer. Atkins embodies the U.S. culture of ingenuity and determination as he helps the local community in the country of Sarkhan (a fictional southeast Asian country) to ward off communism and solve problems that have hindered their economic development. His rationality, decisiveness, and practicality overcome "traditional" ways of life and set Sarkhan on course for freedom and democracy. U.S. citizens embraced this novel, including presidential candidate John F. Kennedy (Rice 1985). *The Ugly American* seemed to foreshadow the emergence of the Peace Corps--and at the very least, showed that a Peace Corps could provide another image through which people of the global South could learn about *real* U.S. citizens (Fuchs 1967; Rice 1981, 1985).

5. President Kennedy

President John F. Kennedy also sensed the growing lethargy and complacency in the U.S. during the late 1950's. Upon returning from a trip to Asia, he hoped to plant a seed of urgency among U.S. citizens concerning the potential spread of communism to the politically and economically vulnerable nations of southeast Asia (Rice 1985). He argued that the peoples of the world were calling upon the U.S. for support to defend them from imperialism and communism. Kennedy implored U.S. citizens that the spread of Western imperialism, e.g., the French war in Algeria and Soviet Communism, were threats to U.S. and international security (Latham 2000; Windmiller 1970). Kennedy sought to stifle imperialism and win the Cold War in non-militaristic ways. He had genuine concern for the development of newly independent countries, so much so that it was a significant part of his presidential agenda (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000).

On October 14th, 1960, democratic presidential candidate Kennedy seized the opportunity to marshal national support for the Peace Corps. At 2:00 a.m. on the University of Michigan campus, just hours after his final debate with President Nixon, members of his campaign told Kennedy that 10,000 students were awaiting his appearance. Though exhausted from a grueling campaign, Kennedy agreed to meet them. He began his speech by urging this crowd, most of whom were college students, to see themselves as vital to the U.S. winning the Cold War. Kennedy challenged them, asserting that to simply get their degrees and do good works in the United States were noble goals, but that they were capable of much more than that. He insisted that they demand more of themselves, going beyond the middle-class lives that they had planned, and consider being of service to the international world. Kennedy asserted that such

service to the world was commensurate with dedication to the United States. Kennedy described how ambassadors and other U.S. representatives abroad were being outdone by the Soviets because U.S. diplomats chose to live posh lives ignorant of local language and culture, and that changes must be made to secure the U.S. as a world power and stop the spread of communism. This ignited fervor among the students. Within just a few days, Kennedy received signatures from over 800 students who vowed to join the Peace Corps (Ashabranner 1971; Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fischer 1998; Lowther and Lucas 1978; Rice 1985; Schwartz 1991).

Kennedy quickly made establishing the Peace Corps his first priority upon his election to the presidency. On March 1, 1961, Kennedy used \$1.5 million from his discretionary funds to establish the Peace Corps by executive order. Kennedy's Peace Corps Act included the three goals of the Peace Corps: 1) providing the training and resources necessary for the people of the host community to have the skills to meet their basic needs; 2) promoting a better understanding of U.S. citizens among people of the host community; 3) promoting a better understanding of the host community among U.S. citizens (Ashabranner 1971; Carey 1970; Fischer 1998). Kennedy hired his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to be the first director of the Peace Corps in 1961. Shriver went through the developing world convincing nations of the need and importance of placing Peace Corps volunteers in their countries, including the recently independent Ghana, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Kennedy and Shriver believed that only a massive deployment of Peace Corps volunteers would successfully impact U.S. sentiment and international relations (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Latham 2000). Shortly after the executive order, Congress supported the Peace Corps as a permanent government institution. The Peace

Corps Act was passed, formalizing the permanency of this organization with a \$40 million dollar budget (Redmon 1986). Kennedy saw the Peace Corps as a means through which the U.S. could win the Cold War, halt the spread of Soviet communism to the newly independent nations, aid the poor across the world, and revitalize waning support for the U.S. abroad (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000).

6. Dissent

Despite much promise and national support for the Peace Corps, it was not without its skeptics. Some public sentiment was dismissive of sending young, inexperienced U.S. citizens abroad with the goal of alleviating the suffering and poverty of the global South (Albertson 1961; Hapgood and Bennett 1968; Fischer 1998; Lowther and Lucas 1978; Rice 1985; Windmiller 1970). Both the public and politicians were skeptical of what Peace Corps volunteers, often referred to disparagingly as “Kennedy’s Kiddie Korps,” could do to improve a world ravaged by colonization, communism, and war (Hapgood and Bennett 1968). Many felt that the Peace Corps was simply a means of ingraining U.S. foreign policy abroad under the guise of humanitarian aid. Still others felt that young U.S. citizens’ passion and enthusiasm to save the world from poverty was exactly what was needed.

One of the most vocal American critics of the Peace Corps was Marshall Windmiller. Windmiller, a political scientist and former Peace Corps’ staff member, wrote of his disenchantment with the organization in his book, *The Peace Corps and Pax Americana* (1970). He contends that the structure of the Peace Corps helped to maintain U.S. supremacy abroad, facilitated U.S. expansion to countries of the global South, and kept developing nations dependent upon the U.S. for survival. He argued that, to better

understand the role of the Peace Corps, we needed to gain a better understanding of American middle-class determination and interventionism that foster the desire to volunteer abroad. Also he believed that we needed to learn about what types of employment Peace Corps volunteers take upon returning from service (Windmiller 1970).

The Peace Corps as an expansionist program was another major source of dissent among U.S. citizens (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fischer 1998; Latham 2000; Rice 1985; Schwartz 1991; Windmiller 1970). Schwartz (1991) discusses how, while many countries enthusiastically requested Peace Corps volunteers to facilitate development, other countries' foreign aid packages were contingent upon them agreeing to host Peace Corps volunteers (Cobbs-Hoffman 2000; Fischer 1998). Western modernization experts conceded that such contingencies attached to foreign aid packages could take jobs from some indigenous people and displace others. Aware that these possibilities would to some extent destroy and disrupt life in the global South, development proponents asserted that these changes were necessary for the poor to receive the successes and benefits of modernization (Escobar 1995, 2004).

Factions of the American public were skeptical about the "politically neutral" interventions necessary to address world poverty (Latham 2000). Much of the history of the Peace Corps involves the U.S. government representing the organization as distinct from U.S. agendas abroad. In the U.S., most citizens did not see the connections between U.S. support of European colonization and the imperialism directed towards nations of the global South. Kennedy himself viewed the Peace Corps as a challenge to imperialism. The combination of U.S. views of itself as superior to developing nations

and empathetic to these nations' plights for liberation gave U.S. citizens the belief that U.S. foreign aid efforts were antithetical to imperialism (Latham 2000).

Despite much dissent and criticism, enthusiasm for the Peace Corps grew over the years and particularly over the last decade. Former President G.W. Bush (for example, during his 2002 State of the Union address), proclaimed his plans to double the number of Peace Corps volunteers abroad to reduce the terrorist threat to the United States. Following his speech, volunteer applications increased by more than one-third (*New York Times*, February 21, 2002). More recently, presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama vowed to increase the Peace Corps presence abroad if elected (Cavaliere, September 12, 2008). Though the number of volunteers abroad has not increased to the extent expected by Presidents Bush and Obama, the swell of political and societal support for the Peace Corps is undeniable. Under current director and President Obama appointee Aaron S. Williams, the Peace Corps maintains a \$400 million budget to support over 8,000 volunteers abroad (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/>).

B. Research on Peace Corps volunteers

In spite of the fact that the Peace Corps has become emblematic of core U.S. values and a fixture in the international development world, little research has been done to understand the lived experiences of Peace Corps volunteers. Academic research on Peace Corps volunteers has focused mainly on volunteer experiences in collaboration with teachers in the United States (Bombaugh 1995; Carano 2009; Miller 2001; Teichert 2009), psychological research on traits characteristic of Peace Corps volunteers (Becker and Eagley 2004; Chang 2001; Mansling et al. 1974; Menninger 1988), and medical research on the physical health of volunteers in-country (Herwaldt et al. 2000; Jung and

Banks 2008; Korhonen et al. 2007). The sociological research on Peace Corps volunteers has focused on the impact of race and ethnicity on volunteers' work with the Peace Corps (Amin 1999; Sia-Maat 2005), quantitative studies of interactions between Peace Corps volunteers and indigenous populations (Cohn and Wood 1982), and studies attempting to understand factors leading to a successful volunteer experience (Guthrie and Zekteck 1967; Hare 1966; Harris 1969). To fill the gap in the sociological literature, this dissertation describes and analyzes the Peace Corps volunteers' lived experiences during their time in the Peace Corps to provide a fuller description of life in the Peace Corps and its impact on volunteers.

C. Theoretical frameworks

1. Critical development studies

The international development field has fostered a burgeoning interest in exporting Western values and modernization abroad to address world poverty. As stated previously, wealthy countries such as the United States looked at their own economic success as evidence of their duty to intervene in the lives of the world's poor through modernization. The modernization project included economic changes (Latham 2000). Western leaders thought that industrialization, urbanization, and cultural change were the only forces that could challenge the vicious cycle of world poverty, and they had the capital and human resources to lend to the cause. The World Bank, I.M.F., national planning agencies, and other technical agencies were in place to provide the infrastructure, capital, industrial and agricultural development, commerce and trade, and modernization culture to poor nations. The institutionalization of development created conditions privileging Western voices, needs, and interests, rendering mute the needs and

desires of the people of the global South (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Latham 2000).

In the 1980's, a small contingency of development scholars argued that forty years of development had in fact increased world poverty, environmental degradation, and inequality (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Mosse and Lewis 2006). Critical development studies (CDS) began at this time as an academic niche that took a critical look at international development by considering the possibility that modernization resulted in further underdevelopment when transferred to the non-West (Parpart 1995). After early research confirmed their suspicions, these scholars began to investigate the consequences for development among recipients *and* providers. In colonial studies terms, they wanted to discover how colonial relations had been reinscribed through the development discourse (Kothari 2001).

Many CDS scholars argue that colonial relations were reconstituted through what they term the development discourse in several ways. The development discourse refers to the ways in which the study of poverty conditions and Western solutions became understood as true reflections of what was occurring in the global South and what needed to be done to save the "developing world." The Western proclamation that modernization was the solution to world poverty was central to the development discourse. Within the framework of international development, Western science became understood as apolitically neutral, unquestioned way of defining and treating problems of the global South. CDS scholars critiqued this and other holdovers of Enlightenment thinking, such as the conviction that Western rationality and scientific analysis embodied apolitical solutions that could be applied universally in developing cultures, and stripped this paradigm of its neutral veneer. Ethnographers of development scrutinized the export of

Western capitalism and the unfettered support of progress, individualism, and rationality (Escobar 1995; Saunders 2002). For many of these scholars, it was clear that the West, through the development apparatus, acted to re-colonize newly independent nations. This occurred in part by creating a relationship of dependency that became defined within the development discourse as the West rescuing the non-West from poverty (Kothari 2001).

2. Post-development studies and the U.S. Peace Corps

More recently, other CDS scholars have been critical of the colonization metaphor that has become a popular analytic tool of CDS scholarship. These researchers, referred to as post-development scholars, attempt to problematize the use of the colonization metaphor. They think that this notion of development situates people working in development and people of the global South as objects acted-upon by the development project, and thus reinscribe racist and sexist representations of the colonial period. Further, post-development scholars argue that this situates development workers as automatons fulfilling the will of the international state, while indigenous peoples are viewed as passive, traditional, and underdeveloped. In addition, the colonization metaphor simplifies, through the colonizer/colonized binary, what is really a very complicated development discourse that includes the international state, the World Bank, I.M.F, non-governmental organizations, global capitalist networks, transnational corporations, development practitioners, and a diversity of indigenous people impacted by and impacting development (Haney 2000; Mohanty 2004; Pieterse 1998).

While post-development scholars acknowledge the cultural and structural violence of development (see Galtung 1999), they also attend to development successes that may surface in connection with development violence, e.g., life expectancies

throughout the global South have increased. They take what appears to be a nuanced view of development, arguing that all knowledge created through development should be subject to critique: academic knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and hybrid knowledges emerging from multiple development spaces. Lastly, post-development scholars problematize development, but also seek to discover how people engaged in the development discourse--scholars, practitioners, and development recipients--both reaffirm development and actively engage in discursive spaces that resist development (Bhavnani, Foran, Kurian 2003; Crewe and Harrison 1998; Klenck 2004; Marchand and Parpart 1995; Rossi 2006; Sylvester 1995).

I've applied the principles of CDS, post-development studies in particular, to my project in several ways. This study augments a growing social science literature that considers the benefits *and* problematic consequences of international development programs. It brings empirical scholarship to a post-colonial studies field that has been chided for being empirically and contextually limited, and thus weakened in its potential to address global inequalities (Crush 1995; Darby 1998; Sylvester 1999). It also provides theoretical depth to a development studies field that has been critiqued for lacking in epistemological reflection and failing to acknowledge the limits of Enlightenment thinking in addressing the problems of world poverty (Arce and Long 1993; Bhavnani, Foran, and Kurian 2003; Crew and Harrison 1998; Kothari 2001; McFarlane 2006; Saunders 2002; Sylvester 1999). This study also benefits gender scholars who seek a broader understanding of how gendered subjectivities--how Peace Corps volunteers understand their gendered selves--are prescribed and resisted at both local levels and at state and international levels.

Within this framework of looking at international development, there are two constructions of the Peace Corps volunteer. One, that of the "colonizer," whereby the volunteer facilitates the continued impoverishment of the local community through his/her work with the Peace Corps. The second view considers how Peace Corps volunteers live and work in ways that challenge, and at times overcome, international developments' failures to meet the needs of local communities. In bringing these two perspectives together, the accounts of Peace Corps volunteers' lived experiences provides a unique way of understanding the impacts of development. Through this project, I learned (and continue to learn) how Peace Corps volunteers construct themselves and their experiences. Do they see themselves as part of a colonial project? Do they see themselves as enhancing the quality of life in their local communities through utilizing or resisting international development powers? What inspired them to heed the call to join the Peace Corps? Do they remember their time in the Peace Corps as more complicated, perhaps as a time during which they felt that they both resisted and affirmed the international development project? These are key questions that guided my analysis of life in the Peace Corps.

CHAPTER II:
FEMINIST METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND THE STUDY
POPULATION

A. Feminist methodology and critical development studies

In this study, I used feminist methodology to inform my application of qualitative methods to study the lives of Peace Corps volunteers. Post-modern feminist approaches to social science research emerged in response to Enlightenment assumptions concerning universal truth and the positivist means of understanding social life in the hope of creating a just world. Feminist scholars have adopted Enlightenment notions of creating a more just world, yet they have been critical both of an Enlightenment paradigm that renders women's experiences invisible and, as with critical development studies, the idea that the positivist acquisition of knowledge is an apolitical endeavor (Haraway 1988; Hawkesworth 2006; Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002).

Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) argue that feminist research, including the work of post-colonial feminists, continued to scrutinize Enlightenment thought as feminist scholarship began to establish itself in the academy (Mohanty 2004). Feminist scholars have questioned the idea of "man" as the universal human subject and thus sought to illuminate and politicize the experiences of women in the hope that women would gain more political visibility. Women have increased their visibility, as feminist scholars complemented (and challenged) a burgeoning feminist movement in the United States and western Europe. Later, feminist emphases on reflexivity fostered a further evolution, as factions of feminist scholars and activists began to critique the category of "woman," with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Butler 1990; hooks 1981;

Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002; Riley 1989). These scholars argued that any essential definition of “woman” necessarily leaves out interests and experiences of people who are “more-or-less female,” e.g., transgendered people and women of the global South (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 15). Thus, feminist scholars have reinterpreted Enlightenment notions of universal truth by focusing on the multiple truths emanating from the lived experiences of all people.

In choosing a feminist approach to qualitative methods, I utilized feminist challenges to Enlightenment thought in several ways. I undertook a feminist post-colonial approach to this study, which refers to the branch of feminist thought that is critical of (white) Western feminism’s ignorance of its complicity in the colonial endeavor that marginalized non-white women. In addition, feminist post-colonial studies remains critical of Western feminism’s universalizing of women’s experiences, and thus ignoring women’s lives lived at the margins. Instead, feminist post-colonial studies complicates the notion of the universal woman, arguing instead for a less essentializing notion of women, one that includes the stories and experiences of women as told by women themselves (hooks 1981, Mohanty 2004, Narayan 1997). Following these tenets of post-colonial feminist studies, I included gender as a key feature of the analysis but also considered how gender scholarship must include other subject positions such as race, class, ethnicity, disability, nationality, sexuality, etc.

This multi-positioned approach was useful both in constructing the interview questions and assessing my own subject position as a researcher. During the research process, I was especially attentive to my gender as an interviewer. Because over half of the participants were women, I made significant efforts to critique my privilege as a man

interviewing women, in addition to my academic privilege in interviewing non-academics. In spite of my efforts to challenge gender and other inequalities during the interviews, I am very aware that being a man had an influence on the recruitment, interviewing, notetaking, and ultimate understanding of the participants' reflections. For instance, I noticed during interviews that the women interviewed were more likely to follow my lead, give specific answers to my questions, and not interrupt me. The men I interviewed did not follow this pattern—they more often critiqued a question and/or interrupted me during the questioning. I continue to hope that my awareness of these issues left room for their narratives to be heard in ways that affirmed their experiences (Skeggs 2001).

My role as a graduate student, one with academic and scientific privilege, allowed me to make demands of my participants and engage in an exercise of power, as an expert, during the meaning-making process that may have gone unquestioned during the interviews (Heyl 2001). For instance, during a conversation several years ago with some friends from the Peace Corps, I remember hearing their parts of the conversation and thinking about how imperialistic some of our work felt to me. At the same time, I also thought about how my experience as a graduate student gave me the privilege to access this insight into and understanding of our conversation, a standpoint my friends were perhaps unable to grasp without my intervention. I remember my struggle: Do I remind them of my academic background and talk about the imperialism of Peace Corps, potentially rendering their stories mute? Does my position as an academic have that much power, and am I willing to risk potentially silencing them by speaking as an academic? Do they feel the same about our work and think that such a critique would be

unwelcomed in our conversation? I did not know and (unfortunately) I did not ask. I considered this because, according to Goffman (1959), the performance enacted by the participant is based in many ways on what I as a questioner demand to be performed. My hope is that I resisted this as an interviewer through Bourdieu's notion of "active listening," which consists of "the display of total attention to the person questioned, submission to the singularity of her own life history" (1996: 17).

Finally, I also chose feminist methodology because of its complementary relationship to critical development studies with respect to critiques of Enlightenment thought. Critical development studies (CDS) scholars have adopted feminist critiques of Enlightenment thought, including the notion that Western "man" has the solutions to issues of global poverty. These scholars have also uncovered how development projects can create further gender inequalities by recruiting local men to take part in development projects, such as small business development, while local women are forced to take on more work responsibilities at home--for no pay--while men learn new skills that will potentially lead to greater pay (Mohanty 2004).

Critical development studies scholars have also supported feminist challenges to positivist biases. Namely, they critique techniques used by the IMF and the World Bank to measure poverty, arguing that these measures lend themselves to particular solutions and ways of representing the global South that strengthen the legitimacy of these development fixtures. According to Escobar, development is utilized "as a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach that treats people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures, to be moved up and down in the charts of 'progress'" (1995: 384). Instead, CDS scholars seek to understand the world as understood by people who

have been disenfranchised by the process of international development.

B. Project development, qualitative research methods, and the recruitment of participants

In 2006, I formally began my research by attending Peace Corps' fundraisers, reunions, recruitment events, and speaking engagements as a way of reconnecting with the Peace Corps and thinking through how I wanted to delve into this research. While attending these events inspired me to consider the ways in which Peace Corps impacts life in public settings, I realized that using qualitative research methods to study Peace Corps volunteers would be the most fruitful method of learning more about how Peace Corps volunteers understood themselves and their experiences abroad.

I chose qualitative interviewing for several other reasons. First, I felt confident that my own experience as a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) would be a way of providing entry into this selective population, thus engaging in what Riemer (1977) refers to as "opportunistic research." Shortly after returning from the Peace Corps, I noticed that many former volunteers talked routinely about how they had a difficult time discussing their experiences with people who had not been in the Peace Corps. To some extent I, too, shared in this sentiment. Although it has been argued elsewhere that no person's experience is translatable to another person without distortions and fragmentations (see Lather 2001; Povinelli 2001; Ricoeur 2006), our shared subject positions as Peace Corps volunteers allowed for a belief in the possibility of shared understandings. Thus, I thought that my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer would help the participants to identify with me, and allow for the necessary access and rapport that I desired (Adler and Adler 1987). Also, semi-structured interviewing provided the time, context, and physical

space to ask questions that may have seemed inappropriate in a public setting such as a Peace Corps fundraiser or recruitment event (Lofland et al. 2006).

I began recruiting by talking with people I knew from my own Peace Corps experience. I discussed my research in my own social network and with other graduate students and professors, and I was fortunate to be in contact with several RPCVs through these avenues. I wanted to place research recruitment fliers at the Peace Corps regional recruitment office located in downtown Denver, but this office closed due to budget cuts shortly after I began this project. I recruited at local Peace Corps reunions and public events. I gave my name and contact information to the people I met through these channels and requested that they talk with other former Peace Corps volunteers who they thought might be interested in participating in this study. In the end, purposive and snowball sampling proved to be especially useful in recruiting research participants (Lofland et. al. 2006).

Upon establishing contact with RPCVs, I scheduled a time and setting for the interviews in collaboration with them. I asked the participants to suggest a place and time for the interview, and then I tried to meet at the proposed time and place to the extent that it fit my own schedule. I think that sharing in this decision helped to promote trust and a sense of agency among the participants. Because snowball sampling involves the word-of-mouth recruitment of participants, I earned some level of trust before my initial contact with former Peace Corps volunteers RPCVs (Lofland et al. 2006). Also, I think referrals from friends and my disclosure of my own work as a Peace Corps volunteer facilitated high levels of trust.

The critical perspectives to which I was exposed in graduate school gave me the

opportunity to question the Peace Corps' benevolent ethos and inquire about the range of experiences lived by my participants. Though all of the interviews felt very collaborative, I learned early in the process of doing interviews that some of my questions challenged and disrupted how some people wished to remember and discuss their Peace Corps years. These interviews were sometimes difficult for me and the participant. A few participants did not want to discuss losses, traumas, and injustices that threatened how they remembered the Peace Corps. And, I never asked directly about these issues. I learned that, at times, any question that appeared to be inviting a critique of the Peace Corps could redirect the course of the interview. As will be discussed in the data chapters, I think this was a result of pressure to remember the Peace Corps in a positive light and the need to remember and recount the good times that occurred during their two years of very difficult work. Other interviewees, especially those who had difficulties in the Peace Corps and those with the privilege of graduate educations, were more critical of the Peace Corps and welcomed my invitation to discuss a range of issues.

Almost all of my participants commented on how my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer allowed them to establish some comfort with me knowing that on some level we shared a mutual understanding: we had both "been there." However, my own work in the Peace Corps was marked by its own difficulties, including threats to my safety and health issues to the extent that my service ended one year into my two-year commitment. I chose not to disclose this information during the interviews because the interviews were to be about their reflections and I did not want my experience to impact how the participants proceeded with the interview. Interestingly, my refusal to disclose this information did not impede many participants from talking about their own difficulties

and traumas. One participant, Ava, stated during an interview that “it feels strange telling you about this (trauma), but you seem to welcome it.”³ Her comment and others like it gave me the sense that my questioning and body language encouraged enough trust that people were willing to tell me things that they might otherwise hesitate to discuss. In addition, some participants may have only been seeking the opportunity, and thus were already inclined to be open to discuss these issues during the interview process.

Altogether, I completed 40 interviews of RCPVs for this study (25 women and 15 men). I worked hard to diversify my sample within this mostly white, middle-class population. I did so by including other means of differentiating this (demographically) homogenous population. I included people who volunteered during Peace Corps’ inception in 1961 and those who volunteered within the last year. I also included people who have volunteered for a short time, perhaps a few weeks or months, and those who have volunteered for up to three years. Almost all Peace Corps assignments require a two-year commitment, but some volunteers extend their service for additional periods of time, up to one year. Peace Corps volunteers who return before the two-year contract is completed often do so because of health or medical issues, political turmoil, dissatisfaction with their placement, or simply a desire to do something else with their lives. Because I wanted to focus solely on the people who have worked as volunteers abroad, I did not interview Peace Corps staff members, administrators, volunteer family and friends, nor indigenous peoples who worked with volunteers.

Most of the interviews took place in person. I did interviews in homes, coffee shops, restaurants, bars, libraries, and parks. I did telephone and computer interviews (using Skype) with RCPVs in other cities to further expand and diversify my sample

³ All names have been changed to maintain the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.

population. Because the Peace Corps gives preference to RPCVs seeking jobs with the federal government, a high number of former Peace Corps volunteers choose to live and work in the Washington, D.C., area after their service. Also, large numbers of Peace Corps volunteers choose to remain in the field of international development after their stints with the Peace Corps. These jobs are more plentiful in cities like New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, and so interviews with people in these areas provided a greater sample of people with whom I could conduct interviews.

All of the study participants were generous with their time and energy; all seemed fully engaged during the interviews. Almost all of my participants offered to put me in touch with other RPCVs for interviews without my asking. However, I had difficulties scheduling and keeping interviews with some of the men. Some said that they did not have time and others were simply not interested in doing an interview. I think that the formal nature of academic interviews may have dissuaded some men from interviewing; stories of the Peace Corps are often told in bars with beers, eventually leading to outrageous tales about experiences abroad. The academic interview and presence of a digital recorder did not fully support this type of storytelling. My most effective recruitment techniques (especially with men) included recruiting people with whom I worked and asking participants about their friends who might be willing to do an interview.

The interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours. I digitally recorded each of the interviews and had most of them professionally transcribed. I transcribed the remaining interviews myself. I did not ask explicitly about criminal activities, illicit drug use, or activities involving host-country governments. When I sensed that I stumbled upon a

memory that evoked discomfort or pain, I reminded the participant that she/he can skip any question, take a break, or talk about something else. As an interviewer I was aware that I “started the game and set the rules,” concerning how the interviews unfolded, but I also hope that I created conditions that maximized participants’ sense of agency during the interviews (Heyl 2001: 378). I tried to be reflexive so as to maintain an openness and nonjudgmental attitude so that the participants “became my teacher and helped me understand” their experiences in the Peace Corps (Lofland et al. 2006: 34).

Although I did not expect confidentiality to be a concern of my participants, in part because I am not doing research involving illegal activities nor non-normative acts, I took serious steps towards protecting their privacy. I stored all interview artifacts, including the digitally recorded files, the transcribed interviews, and all computer disks containing interview data in a locked file cabinet in my home. Any personal information, as well as the master code sheet linking numbered interviews to participants, was kept in a separate locked cabinet. In my writing of this research, I used pseudonyms to disguise participants’ identities, change specific descriptors when prudent, and I did not identify the specific location of the interview. All of this was done to secure participant anonymity. Upon completion of the study, all of the research materials, including digital files, transcripts, computer disks, and the master code sheet will be destroyed after I’ve sent out copies of the dissertation to my participants.

C. Data collection and “managing” the research process

In addition to the interview data, I maintained a database of written documents throughout the last 4 years (Plummer 2001). These include newspaper articles and editorials, as well as other journalistic accounts related to the Peace Corps. I took photos

of Peace Corps fliers and other types of Peace Corps advertising that I had noticed at the university, on public buses, and other public spaces such as libraries, coffee house community bulletin boards, and on the internet. Friends, professors, and graduate students have assisted in collecting documents related to the Peace Corps since learning about my research interests. These documents helped me to think about my research as it related to the methods and rationale informing the recruitment of returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs), and gave me a broader understanding of how the Peace Corps is interpreted and understood in the larger culture. Collecting documents also fostered a greater awareness of my positionality as a researcher in the sense that they and the interviews helped me to situate myself with respect to this research project and the larger world.

Interviewing, attending public events, and collecting documents at times overwhelmed me as I attempted to manage this research project (Lofland et al. 2006). I journaled as a means of recording my thoughts and ideas related to the research project and methods (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Lofland et al. 2006). This practice assisted me in feeling that the data were manageable. Journaling encouraged me to begin recognizing emergent themes as they arose in the interview transcripts and inhibited the reifying of existing disciplinary categories, thus facilitated the possibility of creating new ways of seeing the world (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). Journaling also allowed me to reflect on my own thoughts and emotions with respect to the research project. According to Goffman (1989), fieldnotes and other writing about one's project may allow the researcher to get a clue into the thoughts and emotions of participants. For instance, if I felt angry about situations during the interview, I became aware that this anger may have

also been experienced by participants. During times when I had emotions not experienced by the participants, this experience provided for unique analytic moments. Over the long term, regular journaling about my experiences as an interviewer facilitated my reflexivity by providing a log of my own biases and changes in attitudes about myself, participants, and the research project (Goffman 1989).

I also created a “fact sheet” (Lofland et. al 2006). One purpose of this document was to provide a central location for managing large amounts of data. In my fact sheet, I recorded nominal and simple descriptive data for this project. The data included participant demographic information, the participants’ jobs with the Peace Corps, their country of service dates of Peace Corps service, how I learned of them, where the interview took place, the duration and time of the interview, and file names of my post-interview notes, transcripts, and recorded interviews.

I engaged more thoroughly in the analysis process as I completed more interviews. I engaged in initial coding, which refers to the line-by-line coding of interview transcripts. Later, I did focused coding, which refers to coding based on similarities in the concepts and patterns that emerge from the data (Lofland et al. 2006). As stated earlier, because this is a qualitative study, I do not make knowledge claims associated with quantitative studies such as generalizability to the broader population. Instead, I have provided an extensive description of the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers. Specifically, I have sought to understand how RPCVs render meaningful their experiences in the Peace Corps and how they understand their work with the Peace Corps as it relates to the field of international development.

CHAPTER III:

“LIFE IS CALLING, HOW FAR ARE YOU WILLING TO GO?”⁴: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING THE PEACE CORPS

A. Introduction

The sociological research on the lives of Peace Corps volunteers is minimal. As mentioned in chapter one, much of the research on the Peace Corps can be found in fields of psychology, medicine, and education. The psychological research includes studies uncovering the personality traits of volunteers who completed their two-year commitment with the Peace Corps (Becker and Eagley 2004; Chang 2001; Mansling et al. 1974; Menninger 1988). The medical research on Peace Corps volunteers includes studies addressing the physical health of volunteers during their time abroad, with an emphasis on volunteer responses to illnesses that are generally not common in the United States (Herwaldt et al. 2000; Jung and Banks 2008; Korhonen et al. 2007). The educational research focuses on observing and facilitating communication between teachers in the U.S. and the Peace Corps to help the host country in its adoption of U.S. educational strategies (Bombaugh 1995; Carano 2009; Miller 2001; Teichert 2009).

The existing sociological research addresses specific areas of Peace Corps volunteers' lives, such as race and ethnic identity, impacts of local communities, and quantitative studies of social interaction. Amin (1999) and Sia-Maat (2005) focus their research on the ways in which Peace Corps volunteers' race and ethnic identities relate to their experiences abroad. Both studies' findings assert that non-white volunteers

⁴ Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 include Peace Corps' recruitment slogans (in quotes) in their respective titles.

experience more difficulties transitioning into their communities abroad than their white counterparts. Other researchers have sought to discover the social contexts, e.g., community size and types of training, that make a successful Peace Corps experience possible (Hare 1966; Guthrie and Zekteck 1967; Himmelstein 1969). Lastly, Hare (1966) and others conducted survey research shortly after Peace Corps' inception to shed light upon volunteer interactions with indigenous communities abroad (Guthrie and Zekteck 1967; Himmelstein 1969).

This chapter of the dissertation will begin to address the dearth of research on the lives of Peace Corps volunteers. In particular, this chapter focuses on the social patterns that influence people's decisions to join the Peace Corps. First, I give an account of who chooses to apply for a job with the Peace Corps, the process of entering the Peace Corps, and who gets selected by the Peace Corps to live and work abroad in the "developing" world. I describe what it means to the participants to begin to see themselves as prospective Peace Corps volunteers. I also outline the participants' motivations for joining the Peace Corps, which include their desire to reject what they viewed as a life of middle-class complacency. Specifically, these motivations include a yearning to help the poor living throughout the world, a desire to work outside of traditional "office jobs," a need to postpone the expectations of middle-class heterosexual adulthood, a chance to travel, and an opportunity to pursue personal growth experiences. I will analyze these motivations using Bourdieu's perspective on social class and taste (1984). I use his analytic framework because I think it provides a useful way of understanding how Peace Corps volunteers see their service as a way of distinguishing themselves from what they viewed as middle-class apathy, stagnation, and laxity.

While all volunteers desired to work towards alleviating world poverty, numerous participants couched this motivation in discussions related to ambivalence concerning middle-class expectations and a desire to create a more just world. I saw the development of the volunteers' various reflections on how they first learned about the Peace Corps as falling into a few categories. Some viewed their time abroad as a way to avoid class based expectations through embracing, on a full-time basis, an heroic effort to help the poor throughout the world. Other reasons include resistance to social pressures to fulfill career and family duties. For other participants, the Peace Corps provided a moratorium period that allowed them to reconsider how they wanted to spend the rest of their lives. A vast majority of participants viewed the Peace Corps as a reputable way to have an extended travel experience to exotic parts of the world. Lastly, volunteers saw this two-year period as a time for personal growth. For each of these reasons, reflections from family and friends served as a way of gauging the extent to which many volunteers challenged middle-class expectations of adulthood.

B. Who are Peace Corps Volunteers?

In this section, I will briefly extend the discussion of the historical context of the Peace Corps, as outlined in chapter one, to include a demographic portrayal of Peace Corps volunteers. I do so to create a more complete picture of the contingencies facilitating one's interest in working with the Peace Corps. As stated in President Kennedy's Executive Order 10924 in 1961, the Peace Corps began its recruitment of U.S. citizens over age 18 to work in the field of international development. In addition to using age and citizenship requirements, the Peace Corps selected volunteers based on their performance on general aptitude and language aptitude tests (Ashabranner 1971; Rice

1981). In 1968, the Peace Corps began its move towards more stringent entrance requirements to include psychological testing and more rigorous aptitude and language requirements, none of which seemed to deter people from applying. As of 2011, entry requirements include U.S. citizenship, a college degree (though this can be reconsidered in lieu of work experience in some cases), language aptitude requirements, education, employment, and volunteer service histories, medical and dental evaluations, and some evidence that one is a “fit” for the prospective country of service, which is evaluated and decided by the potential volunteer’s Peace Corps recruiter (personal communication, 2009). Recruiters are often returned Peace Corps volunteers. Approximately 20 percent of the over 15,000 applicants were chosen to serve with the Peace Corps in 2010.

The Peace Corps has sponsored nearly 200,000 volunteers in its 50 year history (www.PeaceCorps.gov). As of 2011, a \$400 million budget supports its 8,655 volunteers abroad for 27 months of service. Sixty percent of the volunteers are women and 40% are men. Nearly 85% of the volunteers are white. The average volunteer age is 28, with 7% of volunteers over the age of 50. Eighty-nine percent of volunteers are college graduates. Approximately 81% of volunteers work in African, Asia, Central America/Mexico, Eastern Europe/Central Asian, South American countries. The remaining 19% work in North Africa/Middle East, the Pacific Islands, and the Caribbean.⁵

My study participants, in many ways, reflected the broader population of Peace Corps volunteers. Of the 40 participants in this study, 24 (60%) are women and 16 (40%) are men. Thirty-seven (92%) identified as white or Caucasian, while three (8%) identified as Hispanic. The average age of the interviewees was 35, with four (10%) people over

⁵ These regional categories were used by both the Peace Corps organization and many of the interviewees. Therefore, I’ve chosen to keep them to reflect how each viewed the world.

the age of 50. Thirty-nine (97%) of the participants attained a bachelor's degree, and 17 (42%) earned or were in the process of earning graduated degrees. One participant attending college for three years and did not graduate, but qualified for the Peace Corps through her extensive experience in the non-profit sector. Thirty-five (87%) of the interviewees worked in Africa, Asia, Central America/Mexico, South America, and Eastern Europe/Central Asia. The remaining five (13%) worked in North Africa/Middle East, the Pacific Islands, and the Caribbean.

In addition, most of the participants' parents had completed some college. This is revealing given that my sample had very few first generation college students, those who were the first in their families to go to college. The lack of parental resources to pay for college and the expectation of first generation graduates to pay off loans quickly and assist their extended families may deter them from considering the Peace Corps. Seven (17%) lived in families where both parents earned post-graduate degrees and 12 (30%) had one parent with a post-graduate education. Thus, nearly half (47%) of the interviewees had at least one parent with a post-bachelorette degree. Fourteen (35%) had at least one parent who earned a bachelor's degree and seven (17%) had parents without college degrees. All parents had high school degrees. Twenty-three (58%) participants had earned master's degrees.

Also, 37 (92%) had traveled outside of North America before entering the Peace Corps. Lastly, 36 participants (90%) completed the full 27 months of Peace Corps service, which includes three months of training. Four (10%) did not complete their service; two left due to health issues, one person left in lieu of being fired, and another left due to being unhappy in the Peace Corps.

In sum, the participants reflected the broader population of Peace Corps volunteers abroad to date with respect to gender, race and ethnic identification, percentage of former volunteers over the age of 50, educational attainment, and representation across different regions throughout the world. The average age of the study population was slightly older (7 years) than the average age of volunteers across the world, but this difference had much to do with having a small sample of the total population. I gleaned the additional demographic information, such as levels of college education (for parents and participants), travel experience, and service completion rates, from the interview transcripts. Information on the larger population of Peace Corps volunteers was either not available from the Peace Corps headquarters or was subject to privacy restrictions. Nonetheless, this information provided a useful context for the following section, understanding the middle-class contingencies influencing membership in the Peace Corps.

C. The Peace Corps as an escape from middle-class ennui.

Almost all interviewees gave multiple accounts regarding why they joined the Peace Corps. Their stories helped to shape the interviews. These narratives also aided in developing a chronology of their experiences abroad and helped to situate how the participants understood their time in the Peace Corps with respect to their broader life experience. Through my analyses of the interviews and understanding of the demographic data on the volunteers, I assert that, in many ways, the Peace Corps is a means through which volunteers can reassess and challenge their relation to middle-class values.

The key theme that emerged concerning volunteers' reasons for joining the Peace

Corps coalesced around social class issues. Specifically, I saw the participants' decisions to enter the Peace Corps as part of a rejection, at least temporarily, of middle-class expectations of adulthood, e.g., marriage, children, and more traditional middle-class jobs. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his opus entitled *Distinction*, provides a compelling framework for understanding these social class issues (1984). According to Bourdieu, key features differentiating the bourgeoisie classes from the working classes are the privileges that allow one to develop "taste" (for the arts, foods, travel, etc.) and the time and resources to retreat from work life to reflect upon and enjoy these aesthetic pleasures. With respect to Peace Corps volunteers, Bourdieu's work is useful in that, though the interviews did not address appreciating the symphony and museums, the resources allowing one to reconsider class expectations functions to distinguish (most) prospective volunteers from their middle-class families and friends. At the end of this chapter, I provide a brief analysis utilizing the notion of distinction following the participants' reflections on why they joined that Peace Corps.

1. Altruism.

All of the volunteers reported their interest in joining the Peace Corps was spurred, at least in part, by their desire to help people in the poorest parts of the world. Some of these volunteers gained further motivation from their sense that others in their lives did not share the same awareness of these issues of inequality, and that *someone* needed to help the disadvantaged in some way. For Sarah, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, her excitement about working abroad was coupled with a sense that she would be able to make an impact on world poverty--which she had seen up-close during her study abroad experience--and do so with others across the U.S. who cared deeply about social

change. Sarah explained her desire to join the Peace Corps before deciding to re-enter middle-class life in the United States:

I don't think (the private college she attended)—like, the anthropology department was an exception, but I felt like I was spending a lot of time with people who were probably a little bit more out of touch with what was happening in the world. I came back from South Africa (her study abroad placement) and I felt kind of like a fish-out-of-water. So I thought the Peace Corps would be a chance to be among people who also cared a lot about social change.

Sarah was not alone in her motivation to help poor people. Several volunteers understood their previous trips abroad, where they saw the poor experiencing numerous hardships, as a call to intervene. Most volunteers who explicitly stated altruistic reasons for joining the Peace Corps were women. This reflects what Carol Gilligan (1982) originally termed the gendered ethic of care, which refers to how girl's and women's psychological development reflects an emphasis on concern for others and a desire to help. Current feminist scholars have critiqued and expounded upon Gilligan's work, arguing instead that the gendered ethic of care emerges through girl's and women's socialization in capitalist, patriarchal society and that race and class cannot be ignored in attempting to understand care work (Cole and Coultrap-McQuin 1992; Greeno and Maccoby 1986; Larrabee 1993; Stack 1986). Natalie, a volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, recalled how several factors influence her decision to work with the Peace Corps, but the overarching one was that, "I'd been in the service professions, so helping people is kind of what I do." Ava and Alyssa, women who volunteered in the 1960s in Central America/Mexico and Asia, respectively, joined due to their anger and frustration with a citizenry that seemed unwilling to address the struggles of those living outside of the U.S. Ava explained:

I was really, really tired of talking and nothing was really happening. And I did

not want to spend any more time on the campus, at the student center, *talking* about how to save the world.

Ava's disappointment was due to observing how many of her college classmates did care about world suffering, but that these concerns were peripheral to school and career goals. Altruism was voiced in other ways that were equally gendered. Many participants framed altruism in the language of the "challenge" provided through the Peace Corps to work on behalf of the poor. For some of these volunteers, particularly men, a heroic tone marked their visions of how they would respond to the problems they encountered abroad. For them, the sense of empowerment related to their conviction that they could succeed in helping the poor. Their heroism often emerged in response to how the poor had been represented in the U. S. media. For instance, Shawn, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 2000s, had never left the United States prior to his time in the Peace Corps. However, he did see numerous Peace Corps advertisements during college, which sparked his enthusiasm. Shawn asserted that:

There were several things, I think, that excited me, both prior to seeing the poster and what I thought Peace Corps was and after seeing the poster. The things that excited me were doing some sort of service that would hopefully benefit others. I was inspired by the challenge of it.

(What specifically did you see as a challenge?)

I saw the—I expected I would be living somewhere pretty rural with limited conveniences, such as electricity and running water, that type of thing. I saw that as a challenge. The challenge of learning and adapting to a different culture, that excited me.

Shawn was able to gain a sense of masculinity through referring to his work with the Peace Corps as a challenge rather than explicitly stating that he wanted to help the poor, which, like much care work, is feminized and undervalued. Shawn ended up

working in the Peace Corps in a city with sporadic access to modern conveniences, a setting that differed from his expected vision of the Peace Corps. Still, he and others understood the media's image of the Peace Corps, which includes mostly images and stories from Africa and Central America, as a duty, as former volunteer Matthew recalled, "helping the poorest of the poor."

Volunteers connected their altruistic motivations with feelings of guilt for having the privileges of living a more comfortable life in the United States. Many women who volunteered felt this sense of guilt. For Elizabeth, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, her sense of guilt was connected to the desire to challenge herself and to see the world unfiltered by the media. She had traveled to more industrialized countries, but the Peace Corps was a chance to do something different. Elizabeth explained:

I really wanted to try my hand at living overseas and living not like a privileged person, even though of course you still are when you go there, but just, I don't know, I think I wanted to prove to myself I could do that, like, I have unfair circumstances and I wanted to see what other people lived like.

Elizabeth discussed how she wanted to help "the normal everyday person" and not live as a tourist, a "voyeur," simply observing injustices without solving problems. Ashley, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa, discussed how her travels abroad shortly after graduating from college allowed her to meet Peace Corps volunteers and, like Elizabeth and others, she felt guilt, but also inspiration, as a privileged traveler through poor areas of Africa.

I met a bunch of Peace Corps volunteers down there, and I realized backpacking around is pretty cool, but it's a lot better to have a job and actually have a reason to be in these foreign countries. That was where it really became a real thing that I decided to do.

Meeting Peace Corps volunteers persuaded Ashley to view the Peace Corps as a way of both helping and having an adventure. Dave, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, also felt a sense of guilt about his life. However, for him and others who had had little or no experience living abroad, his life in the white middle-class in the United States evoked a need to help others through working with the Peace Corps. Dave thought he had had “a pretty good gig in life, so far” and desired to help those who had been less fortunate. While he was unsure of what impacts he might have through his work, he hoped that his presence and service would enhance people’s lives in some way. In the end, the volunteers’ altruism was very real and supported by the desire to live a life that distinguished them through helping the poor on a full-time basis.

2. The restlessness evoked by traditional middle-class life in the U.S.

A seemingly undying value in the U.S. is the emphasis, particularly among members of the middle-class, on establishing a career. Talk shows, self-help books, and other media promote the importance of developing a career and often chart “proven” methods of establishing a career. Peace Corps volunteers viewed their service abroad as a move into the unknown, a move that would promote their happiness – not their careers, at least initially – through refusing these employment expectations. For most volunteers, the Peace Corps allowed for this possibility after their college graduations. Matthew, a former volunteer in South America in the 1990s, discussed at length the isolation of both growing-up and going to college in the same town, where “you’re born, you get educated, you prepare yourself, and then you die.” For Matthew, the Peace Corps was a clear link to living his values through his work and attaining some fulfillment. He explained how

...like a lot of people, I’m kind of curious about the world and would like to align a career that could help – align my career with ideals that I have about improving

the world. And I felt Peace Corps kind of worked into that at some level.

Sophia, a former volunteer during the 2000s in the North Africa/Middle East region whose older brother served as a volunteer years before, echoed Matthew's sentiments.

I didn't want to go and just get a job. That seemed very boring and typical to me, so just through his (her brother's) experiences I learned that you can see so much of the world and hopefully have an impact on others and it's only two years.

Matthew, Sophia, and others made deliberate choices to eschew the career trajectories expected of them. The tone of the participants' reflections suggests that they felt that their life objectives simple did not fit with those of their communities. Nevertheless, the urge to help was powerful, as the volunteers felt as though U.S. citizens were too occupied with having families, children, and careers to truly address world poverty, sought to differentiate themselves through working with the Peace Corps. This choice was made clear by Ava, a volunteer in the 1960s in Latin America and an active member of the burgeoning free speech movement in college before working with the Peace Corps. In her eyes, the U.S. government and media were too enmeshed, promoting the status-quo and indifference about world issues. She wanted no part in contributing to these alliances. For Ava, the Peace Corps, although it is sponsored by the U.S. government was a way to both escape (through travel) and challenge (through service) these alliances.

Many volunteers saw the Peace Corps as a challenge to middle-class career expectations through altruistic endeavors. While their friends and family felt that living among the poor for two years making very little money was admirable, this work digressed from the efforts necessary to establish a career after college. This was true of both women and men interviewed, but particularly among men, who are generally

socialized to be more career driven. Dave, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa who was the first person in his family to graduate from college, described his father's disappointment in his decision to work with the Peace Corps. He recalled his father saying to him that:

I think you're avoiding getting a job for a couple years to do something that in the end, I don't think it's gonna really affect a whole lot of change in the big picture of the world.

Dave's father's response may be illustrative of a shift in class status. Many families in the lower strata of the middle-class remember the challenges of working their way into this class and did not understand what they saw as their children's overly optimistic worldview. In this case, Dave's father thought that work with the Peace Corps would hamper his son's progress towards secure employment. Also, Dave's father alludes to the possibility that social change might not occur, something with which Peace Corps volunteers dealt during their first few months in working in international development. (I will discuss this issue in more depth in chapter four.) For Shawn, who volunteered in the late 1990s in Central America/Mexico, his family's response was more complex than that of Dave's family. While he received much support from his parents:

...other people in the family thought it was just kind of putting off work, you know? [laughs] So they were just like, "Ok."

(Like this was a vacation of some sort?)

Yeah, or just kind of a juvenile delay of the inevitable, almost. They were just like, "Ok, he's gonna go do this, and eventually he'll have to be an adult." There was a little bit of that going on as well, but not necessarily with my parents.

Some volunteers, especially women who worked with the Peace Corps shortly after college, encountered responses to going abroad that focused more closely on safety

and security issues that were often connected to fears about finances and developing a career. These concerns had to do with women's vulnerability to physical and sexual violence. In Claudia's case, a volunteer in the 2000s in South America, her mother was troubled by her decision to work abroad immediately after college. While much of her mother's fears stemmed from how the U.S. television media represents the world outside of the U.S., according to Claudia, her mother's more pressing concern included how the Peace Corps might impede her career development. Interestingly, Claudia asserted in further conversations with her mother and family how many employers consider Peace Corps experience an asset. She also described how this work provides additional opportunities to enter graduate school. In this sense, she used the Peace Corps discourse of expanding career opportunities to show significant others how the Peace Corps acknowledged and even embraced career values. At the same time, this was a creative way of improving one's options in the U.S. job market, thus facilitating middle-class goals and helping to alleviate her mother's anxieties. In Claudia's case and others, this helped to win some support from family and friends as they sought work with the Peace Corps after college.

Interestingly, the participants who had established careers before joining the Peace Corps encountered little resistance from family and friends with respect to career advancement. This may have much to do with the independence from family members as they moved through adulthood. For three of the four Peace Corps volunteers interviewed over the age of 50, the opportunity to consider the Peace Corps had to do with the fact that their careers and parenthoods had been established, i.e., they had succeeded, as it were, in proving that they could embrace and successfully perform these class

expectations. Jay and his spouse Kathy were both volunteers in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia. Both Kathy and Jay considered the Peace Corps shortly after being married 30 years ago, but Jay dropped out of the arduous application process due to financial issues, but then reapplied years later:

(Back then) I needed money. I had just finished college and really needed to start my first job. I even started my first job before I finished college. But I guess an interesting thing about that is that Kathy also thought about joining the Peace Corps when she was in college, and we had not talked about it. We had been married, I don't know, 30 years, and the kids were grown and had left the house two years ago. One of us turned to the other and said, "What do you think about Peace Corps?" And it was like, "How quick can I quit my job and go?" [laughs]

According to Jay, both he and Kathy had social support regarding their choice to join the Peace Corps later in life. Both felt as though they had nothing to lose through volunteering, that they had accomplished their goals, and both felt that the Peace Corps would be a way to continue the volunteer work that they had started years earlier in the U.S. The other two participants who joined the Peace Corps after age 50 remembered their choice as being a decision they had made independently and asserted that they did not recall anyone questioning their desire to work overseas. The only concerns reported include those centering on the health and safety of older volunteers.

Volunteers also entered the Peace Corps after a brief stint in an unfulfilling career. Ashley, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa, worked in an environment protection career for several years and viewed going to the Peace Corps as a way to change her career path. She, like Claudia, addressed those questioning her decision to join the Peace Corps by commenting on the career advantages afforded volunteers upon their return to the United States. Grace, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa, left a mundane job in a city that felt too

insulating. Despite making a lot of money, she sought a way into a more adventurous and meaningful world through the Peace Corps. She recalled:

When I was in (Washington) D.C. at that time, when I was going through the (Peace Corps) application process, I was working for a dot-com company, and that was when there was that whole boom, so everyone was living in the lap of luxury and everything was on an expense account. And I was like, “Later, I’m out of here.”

Grace did not regret her choice to leave a lucrative career in the computer industry. As with volunteers who chose to work in the Peace Corps after establishing a career, she felt certain that there would be employment opportunities upon her return to the United States. Only two of the participants reported their jobs with the Peace Corps as their sole employment opportunity. In addition, it should be noted that many volunteers who joined the Peace Corps after a career did not necessarily do so because they disliked their jobs in the U.S. Rather, they lived in a world that provided multiple employment options, and the Peace Corps was one of them. Nonetheless, regardless of the timing of their decisions to work for the Peace Corps, the participants viewed this work as a way of differentiating themselves (at least temporarily) from mundane middle-class careers in favor of an adventurous and unknown world of the Peace Corps.

3. Moratorium period.

A few respondents thought that a two-year stint with the Peace Corps provided a time to suspend and/or plan their approach to middle-class “adult” obligations upon returning to the United States. Anthony, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, discussed how he learned about the Peace Corps through previous travels abroad. He felt passionate about the altruistic and adventurous aspects of working with the Peace Corps. However, for him another key impetus for this move was the sense, communicated to

him from his family and friends, that the Peace Corps would give him the time to structure his post-college life. Anthony reported, “I guess I wasn’t as focused after college, so they thought it would kind of put me on a good path, help me figure stuff out.” In some respects he agreed with their opinions and declared that the Peace Corps helped to launch him into his current career in the medical field, one that allows him to continue his helping work in the United States.

Like Anthony, volunteers who were recent college graduates saw the Peace Corps as a time to consider their futures while also having an adventure. Many reflected on how the adventurous aspects of the Peace Corps were so appealing that this was an ideal setting for them to plan their futures. Briana, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa, saw her decision to go abroad as a “no-lose situation.” She explained:

You have no responsibilities. You don’t have to quit a job to go (after college). You’re in this no-man’s-land where you’re done with this protective shell of university and you’re in the real world where you may or may not get a job, or a job that you like. So it was the perfect transition into no-man’s-land, but with a guarantee of, if nothing else, a great experience.

While Briana remembered her time with the Peace Corps as difficult and marked by numerous challenges and obligations, her reference to having “no responsibilities” had to do with those of living in the U.S. middle class, such as a commitment to a long-term career. The issue of having fewer commitments also had much to do with postponing the responsibilities to pay rent or mortgages, school loan payments, and other bills. Many participants reported that the Peace Corps paid their in-country living expenses for them; other said that, though the Peace Corps wages are no more than a few hundred U.S. dollars per month, by host country standards they were wealthy and did not need to concern themselves with budgeting to pay for their living expenses. Though this was not

true for all volunteers, these respondents relished the opportunity to temporarily avoid material concerns.

Most volunteers fondly recalled this aspect of the Peace Corps but knew that it would be short-lived. Dave, a volunteer in the late 1990s in Africa, nostalgically commented on his time abroad. He had difficulties adjusting to the slower pace of life and work in his host-community, but he eventually grew to enjoy it. Dave explained:

There I was, I wasn't living extravagantly, as you know. Someone's paying your bills. You have balance, basically, and you've got some work to do that's fun and you enjoy, but you're not necessarily stressed out or working 60 hours a week... It was great. I think it was fantastic, the whole gig. I had a great time. I miss it. I realize it's a little unrealistic. You can't do that forever.

Anthony, Briana, and Dave thought the Peace Corps provided the time and means whereby they could reassess and/or delay the class pressures exercised upon them.

For other participants and their fellow volunteers of the 1960s, the Peace Corps served to provide an explicit deferral of one's obligations to the state, such as the military draft. At that time, the men over the age of eighteen were required to enter themselves into the draft and await the state's decision to recruit them for military duty. Alyssa and Ava, both volunteers during the 1960s, recalled how several of the men with whom they worked joined the Peace Corps to avoid being drafted. Though I interviewed a small number (six) of volunteers from this era, all stated that they knew of men who worked with the Peace Corps to avoid being drafted. Despite their efforts, several men were drafted after their service with the Peace Corps.

A more common contingency for recent volunteers had to do with the institution of marriage. Several volunteers, all women, either alluded to or directly stated that their decisions to work with the Peace Corps were made in part in response to demands to

establish a family in the U.S. They saw the Peace Corps as a way of justifying their choice of postponing the gendered pressures to marry and have children. Part of the support against these demands of straight-identified women is built into structure of the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps has always refused to allow unmarried couples to volunteer together and, within the last two decades, anyone with dependent children has been prevented from volunteering. Obviously, this represents glaring discrimination against all couples who cannot or choose not to marry, as well as people who choose to raise children and want to work with the Peace Corps.

Still, straight-identified women who plan to marry and have children felt that their work with the Peace Corps would be a justifiable reason to postpone both. Madison, a volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, remembered how, growing up in a small mid-western town with strictly enforced expectations around marriage and family life, her decision to work with the Peace Corps functioned to delay these prospects.

These pressures were the tipping-point in her decision to begin the application process.

She explained:

You know, I think I got a little scared. I was in this two-year relationship in college, and he was talking marriage, and I thought, “Wow, I’m 21, I’m way too young!” So I just started filling out a Peace Corps application. “Let’s just see how this goes. I’m just gonna see how this starts to feel, if it’s more exciting filling this Peace Corps application out, doing the essays.” And as I did, I was like, “Oh, good, this is what I need to do.” So it was more realizing, “I’m pretty young still. I have a whole huge life in front of me, and taking two years out of it doesn’t seem like very much.”

Madison’s tone is one of excitement, but also contrition: she suggests that she would not postpone marriage and family life indefinitely. Also, her choice to work with the Peace Corps, framed for women as a full-time care work, allowed her to continue to

fulfill gendered expectations. She had not completely shunned, nor succumbed to, the cultural scripts for women regarding the responsibility to create families. Still, her work with the Peace Corps was, in a significant way, a move towards independence from marriage and family expectations.

For a few women who volunteered, the decision to join the Peace Corps was a direct challenge to the gendered discourse around relationships. Ella, another volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, discussed throughout the interview her dream of working with the Peace Corps that she had embraced since her teens. While dating in college, her graduation was marked by her boyfriend's assumption that they would become more committed to one another, though she directly stated otherwise to him throughout the relationship. For Ella, the Peace Corps was a chance to gain further independence. She recalled:

Yeah, I wanted to do it on my own. I thought of it as more of an adventure. I thought it was more exciting that way. And then when I graduated, I was actually dating a guy at the time, and I told him ahead of time, "I'm going to Peace Corps, so don't even think about getting serious." But then he got all crazy and said, "Why are you going?" And I actually thought he was right, like, mentally I thought that I was doing the wrong thing, so I called Peace Corps and said, "I'm not gonna do it any more," because I actually got accepted to go to (East Africa/Middle East country) and I was ready to leave in a month or something, however that worked. I said, "I can't do it," because this guy was like, "You're running away," blah-blah-blah....And then three days later I got sick to my stomach saying, "What the hell am I doing? This is stupid. I already knew this is what I wanted to do." And so I called Peace Corps, without him knowing, I didn't want him to know any more, because I didn't want him to change -- change my thoughts.

Ella's experience, from a sociological perspective, illustrates how joining the Peace Corps shapes the gendered cultural scripts concerning relationships and commitment for women, and how these norms get both articulated and challenged

through social interaction and the retelling of these stories. It is worth re-stating that none of the men interviewed voiced similar concerns about challenging marriage and family expectations through their volunteer service abroad. This would suggest that there are limited choices for women who choose to pursue non-traditional paths in adulthood.

4.Travel.

For many participants, second-generation college students in particular, entering the Peace Corps provided opportunities to see the world. Olivia, a 1990s volunteer in the Caribbean, grew up in the rural mid-western United States and had never traveled outside of the U.S. In her eyes, the Peace Corps provided the means to fulfill her longing to work in public health and her quest to experience cultures throughout the world. For Olivia:

I just knew that I always was definitely interested in traveling or just learning about other people and cultures from a very young age, even though I didn't do it much. It's not something my parents ever did...When they're out of their comfort zone, they're very uncomfortable, and for whatever, I love being outside my comfort zone.

Olivia's work in the Peace Corps allowed her to consider a range of possibilities. Some of her motivations stemmed from seeing Peace Corps's commercials as a child and learning that this was a way to travel and work abroad. As Olivia stated, the Peace Corps was an opportunity to leave her "comfort zone." Travel via the Peace Corps provided a way to resist some norms imbuing the middle-class.

Volunteers viewed travel as a way of testing the degree to which the popular media representations of the global South reflect life there. Emma, a volunteer in the 1980s in Africa, recalled how she considered the Peace Corps during her time in college. She viewed this experience as a chance to compare media and Peace Corps accounts of poor countries with her experiences abroad. Emma acknowledged that, "I also always

wanted to see what developing countries were like instead of reading about the countries and hearing from the media what they say. I wanted to experience it firsthand.” Addison, a 2000s volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, commented on how her desire to travel and live cross-cultural experiences abroad grew as she learned more about the Peace Corps. For her, the exoticized pictures of Africa were seductive and motivational:

It was mostly the travel cross-cultural experience that really grabbed me and gripped me. I just remember the glossy photos and being like, “I could do that, just live somewhere else.” But they were all, of course, pictures of Africa and not where my service was.

Volunteers also commented on how the Peace Corps and other development organizations represented Africa as a key location in need of intervention. For volunteers who studied abroad while in college, the Peace Corps provided a way to address inequalities through travel and living among the communities in need. Jacob, a volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, had studied abroad in South Africa in college. Though he enjoyed his experience in South Africa, he felt “like a tourist” – alienated from really getting to know the people in this country. He saw the Peace Corps as a way to continue his travels and live like “a normal everyday person, not a bigwig or a government person, but the actual people in the country live, the citizens.” Sarah, who also studied abroad, echoed similar sentiments. Before she began her work with the Peace Corps, her time in South Africa gave her a glimpse into the health issues that impact the local population. Her love of travel and her belief that, to truly address health problems one needed to live among those being helped, solidified her conviction that the Peace Corps would be an ideal job for her. Sarah explained:

When I was studying (abroad), it was my first time leaving the country, and I had never been to Africa before, but when I went, I really fell in love with it and I wanted to go back. And I also developed an interest in—I was becoming more

passionate about the field of anthropology and I also became interested in health issues for marginalized populations.

After her work in the Peace Corps, Sarah continued her work as a nurse in the international development field. Though she did study abroad, she came from a lower-middle-class background and had not considered travel as a possibility until this experience. A few volunteers commented on how their desires to travel could be fulfilled through the Peace Corps. Isabella, a volunteer in the 2000s in South America, recalled how her mother's financial struggles were interrupted by brief trips to the Mexico/U.S. border towns and how these trips filled her with hope and excitement for a better future. Isabella kept these memories with her into adulthood and vowed that she would visit new places. "I was just always wanting—again, growing up, my friends were the ones that were pretty wealthy and traveled all the time, and I envied it. I never got to do it." Isabella's time in the Peace Corps allowed her the chance to explore the world in the way her childhood friends had never experienced.

Briana, a 1990s volunteer in Africa, saw the Peace Corps as a chance to travel a world she'd only imagined and, unlike almost all volunteers, an opportunity to *enter* the middle-class and take advantage of its opportunities. When asked what most excited her about the Peace Corps, Briana explained:

Well, I think it was the emotions that were brought out in me, just the idea of being in such a unique foreign place that was totally different from growing up in a very poor household with what seemed like not a whole lot of opportunities in front of me, even though I was a little kid and would never be able to say it in those words. Just knowing where I was. You know, you know as much as you know as a little kid, but if I had to think back in time, I think it was not the duty—not even nostalgia, but—I don't know, imagination of traveling to a different world, and it felt like a completely unattainable, different world.

Briana was attracted to the Peace Corps for several reasons. She certainly voiced

her desire to help others and to consider career possibilities. However, for Briana and Isabella, travel became a way to live out dreams that they thought would not be achieved and to enter a middle-class life that they thought would be more meaningful.

5. Personal growth.

Many respondents, particularly those whose parents graduated from college, envisioned their Peace Corps work as a time for personal growth. The participants understood the concept of personal growth as an aspect of their time in the Peace Corps that they felt would make them better people. For Chris, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, joining the Peace Corps was an altruistic endeavor. However, his desire to have an adventure and improve his language skills also excited him. He listened to volunteers tell stories and hearing these stories inspired him. Others with whom he spoke said that, upon returning to the U.S. after the Peace Corps, they “just had better stories” than their friends who had remained in the United States. Chris stated that he knew his friends had great salaries, but he understood the idea of having “better stories” meant that he would be challenged in unique ways in the Peace Corps.

I think that idea, that you can really grow by just taking yourself entirely out of your natural element, that excited me. I had studied French and really wanted to be—studied abroad, and wanted to be a better French speaker and wanted to go to a Francophone country, and I did, so that was a big draw for me. And just kind of feeling like you were doing something to help people and make the world a little bit better.

Chris connected his desire for personal growth with his belief in the importance of helping people. He saw his desire to become more proficient in French as commensurate with improving the lives of the people he served in Africa through education and health work. His conversations with volunteers who had returned from their services abroad

inspired him to live in a way that would illustrate his growth.

Still some volunteers, particularly women, understood personal growth as a challenge to friends and others (including themselves) in the United States who doubted that they could complete the grueling service abroad. For instance, Olivia, a volunteer in the 2000s in the Caribbean, reported on how many of her friends in the U.S. questioned her ability to live in an area without electricity, running water, and bathrooms. The searing heat and “unusual diseases” scared her friends. Olivia viewed their responses as a challenge. As the only volunteer interviewed who never considered ending her Peace Corps work early, she welcomed these difficulties and viewed these experiences as proof that she had grown as a person.

Sophia, a 2000s volunteer in North Africa/Middle East, echoed several women’s responses concerning personal growth. For Sophia and others, meeting former Peace Corps volunteers helped them to envision themselves as becoming “amazing people” upon their eventual return to the U.S. after their work with the Peace Corps. Sophia’s admiration of her brother, a former volunteer, centered on his choice to live under difficult conditions and complete his service. Becoming an amazing person, the proof of which was the storytelling surrounding the Peace Corps experience, was an important factor that motivated Sophia to volunteer. As she described:

...I was kind of amazed at my brother. I think part of it is just the uniqueness of it. There are not very many people that do the Peace Corps and finish it, and it’s like, I remember my brother telling stories. The rich stories you have, the memories, the travel, the experiences, the friendships—all of that is just amazing. I don’t know if it’s so much people will be amazed by you, but you’ll be amazed by yourself. It’s really hard to put into words.

Numerous others saw the Peace Corps as a way to distinguish themselves from

the expectations place upon them and to reinvent themselves into someone else once their work was done – to reenter the United States as a “new person.” Addison and others thought that Peace Corps’ training, a time of re-teaching volunteers how to talk, behave, and generally live in a new culture, was a reminder of the need to frame their experiences as personal growth. Addison in particular felt that she had not been challenged much in her life, and that the Peace Corps would provide the challenges necessary to promote her personal growth. She explained:

I think it was just the most useful two years for me to really challenge myself and grow, basically. I know that’s really not what the (Peace Corps) goals are for, but that’s what a lot of the kids straight out of college are using it for, to get the sort of on-the-ground experience they don’t have. It beats maturity into you. That’s the best part, I think... You get put back into childhood in many ways. I just remember moments of sitting in my kitchen, going like, “Oh, maturity, I hate this!” I could feel myself getting older and growing up.

Interestingly, Addison’s vision of personal growth had little to do with a temporary break from middle-class routines (as evidenced by Chris and Madison above), but instead suggests a need to mature into a person more amenable to middle-class life. For Addison, personal growth through the Peace Corps was a way to prepare to live as an “adult” in the United States.

Other volunteers understood the Peace Corps as a move towards personal growth. For Hannah, a volunteer in the 2000s in the Pacific Islands, her post-college life, though fully engaged in a helping career that was meaningful to her, experienced the boredom and restlessness of “balancing checkbooks and filling my car with gas and going to the grocery store and all that regular stuff.” Once she applied and gained acceptance by the Peace Corps, she envisioned a chance to dedicate her life to living her dream of helping others without those “distractions.” She recalled how she felt pulled away from working

with the Peace Corps but followed through with her commitment:

Thank God, I did it. I had that change of heart. Because I always said, “Nothing’s gonna hold me back, not even a person. It’s about my dream. I don’t want to have regrets.” And I knew that I would have regrets if I stayed (in the United States).

Emily, a volunteer in 2000s in Central America/Mexico, acknowledged that the Peace Corps gave her something that life in the U.S. could not with respect to personal growth. She remembered thinking that volunteers do not appreciate what we have in the U.S. and we do not, as individuals, appreciate our unique talents. Emily elaborated:

...just finding that amazing trait within yourself that most of us don’t see or lack or are afraid of. It’s on two extreme spectrums, one of being in such a privileged world here and totally not appreciating what we have and what little other people have. And also the hugeness that’s in us that we never get to expose because I feel like we live in a society here that contains us, continues us to mainstream. Being there definitely helped lot of people, including myself, to see what we’re capable of that I don’t think we would have been able to see to that capacity (living in the United States).

Emily’s insight reflected the U.S. citizens’ need, among the middle-classes in particular, to ponder their personal growth and seek out ways to facilitate further growth. In a sense, working with the Peace Corps opened volunteers to a world where, from a personal growth perspective, anything was possible.

E. Discussion of findings

The participants offered a variety of reasons for joining the Peace Corps. They cited a sense of alienation and/or discomfort with middle-class concerns as important factors influencing their decisions to work on behalf of the poor throughout the world. For most of the volunteers, their college graduations provided a crossroads that would usher in a speedy entrance into middle-class adulthood if they had not joined the Peace Corps. Still, a minority of participants entered the Peace Corps as a way into the middle-

class. In either case, class issues proved critical to one's decision to work with the Peace Corps.

Bourdieu's notion of distinction presents a persuasive way of understanding the class issues that supported one's decision to join the Peace Corps (1984). According to Bourdieu, a key element in differentiating among social classes includes the degree to which people are able to recognize and appreciate aesthetic pleasures. The development of taste, which Bourdieu defines as "a system of classificatory schemes which may only partially become conscious" is not inherent in the individual, but is instead reproduced within the social structure and made visible through the lives of people of the bourgeoisie classes (1984: 174). For Bourdieu, this process begins early in life through exposing children to class-approved foods and the arts and providing the guidance and leisure to allow children to develop an affinity for these pleasures. As these children grow into adulthood, their class standing allows them the time and reflection to continue to both savor and teach others to take joy in aesthetics. This process facilitates one's membership in this class and acts to maintain boundaries between the middle-class and the lower classes.

According to Bourdieu, boundary maintenance not only supports the differentiation of social classes, it is also a catalyst for reproducing social class hierarchies. Bourdieu's analysis of education outcomes of children in France reflects the degree to which these children were socialized in ways that facilitated class mobility. Children with cultural capital, gained through being reared by parents who socialized their children with knowledge and skills that translate into educational aptitude, and social capital, i.e., the "connections" and memberships garnered through the reflexive

relationships between these types of capital, provided for them the foundation to succeed into an adulthood of abundant access to these resources (Richardson 1986).

As applied to the lives of Peace Corps volunteers, Bourdieu's ideas offer a framework for understanding the social context and motivations for joining the Peace Corps. However, the development of "taste," in this case a taste for adventure and altruism, is a response to what the volunteers viewed as middle-class monotony and indifference to human suffering. The participants' altruism motivated many of them to join the Peace Corps. While almost all volunteers garnered some support for wanting to work with the Peace Corps, many volunteers explained their choice to help others as opposition to the indifference they witnessed prior to joining the Peace Corps. This sense of apathy became more apparent when they discussed the Peace Corps with family and friends. Their resistance to the middle-class was supported by a larger U.S. emphasis on volunteerism and the Peace Corps' iteration of U.S. courageous adventurism into the unknown, each of which was affirmed by significant others, e.g., college professors. For instance, Sarah desired to work with the Peace Corps because her study abroad experience showed her some realities of poverty in Africa. Upon returning to the United States she felt alienated in an affluent community that seemed unmoved and unaware of what was happening throughout the world. This experience and the support from her college professors gave Sarah further incentive to work towards social change through the Peace Corps. Ava felt as though people in her community did care, but that their talking about social change proved ineffective – she felt called to *do* development work through joining the Peace Corps and working abroad. For these volunteers, helping others gave them a sense that doing difficult, urgent development work showed their

commitment to caring, a commitment that distinguished them from others in their lives.

The ethic of care emerged for volunteers, particularly women, in response to recognizing their own privileged backgrounds and wanting to help others who were not as fortunate. Elizabeth's study abroad experience showed her this reality. She recalled feeling as though she was a voyeur during her study abroad travels and felt both a sense of guilt and a call to do more than witness suffering. Upon returning to finish college, she saw in the media and Peace Corps advertisements of the global South as a reminder of this suffering -- and a call to do something. Elizabeth viewed herself as someone with privileges, those of which she was willing to forgo to promote social change during her work with the Peace Corps. Other women, like Ashley, echoed similar convictions. Her backpacking trip abroad during college allowed her to see how people outside of the United States struggle to survive. She felt guilty doing adventure travel amidst poor people. For Ashley and others, it was important to "actually have a reason to be in these foreign countries" aside from traveling. In these ways, volunteers, especially women socialized to embrace the ethic of care, sought to make an impact on the poverty they had witnessed abroad through working with local communities through the Peace Corps.

As Matthew, Dave, and others illustrated, the idea of living a prescribed middle-class life that centered on developing a career shortly after college felt like a confining and uninspired way of living, especially when people throughout the world needed help. For example, Matthew remembered others viewing his work with the Peace Corps as a "juvenile delay of the inevitable." These volunteers, and particularly the male volunteers, utilized adventurous aspects of their service abroad as a way of thwarting their families and friends' pressures to become breadwinners after college while also reasserting their

masculinity. Their choice to live abroad in a world represented in the U.S. media as exotic and untamed challenged the “bourgeoisie manliness” they were expected to inherit after college and legitimized their helping behavior (Bederman 1995: 172).⁶

The Peace Corps also served as a moratorium period for participants who were uncertain about what to do with their lives after college. This is true of men and women who desired time to contemplate this part of their lives. However, numerous women who chose to work with the Peace Corps challenged expectations concerning compulsory heterosexuality, i.e., expectations to marry and have children after college. Ella articulated these pressures felt through her relationship with her boyfriend while in college. She asserted to her boyfriend that she was committed to joining the Peace Corps and did not envision their relationship continuing into her service abroad. When he blamed her for “running away” from the relationship, he voiced a cultural script that many women felt – that they were abdicating their roles as relationship caretakers in favor of a move towards independence through the Peace Corps. Ella had a visceral reaction to these pressures when she remarked that capitulating to them made her “sick to her stomach.” Other women felt this in more subtle ways. For instance, Madison described how she was too young to marry and, with some guilt, remarked that putting this off for two years was acceptable given her commitment to the Peace Corps. These comments illustrate these women’s challenge to heteronormative expectations that some middle-class women encounter after college. Their preferences for resisting these gendered expectations marked a moment during which they differentiate themselves through working abroad as single women. In addition, their explanations are noteworthy

⁶ See Bederman (1995), Cockborn and Zarkov (2002), and Razack (2000) for studies on how men’s travels abroad allow them to attain masculinities that are unavailable in their local communities.

because none of the men interviewed expressed concerns about temporarily forsaking their roles with respect to marriage and family life through work with the Peace Corps.

Interestingly, the desire to travel merged with the desire to help others. Though media accounts and Peace Corps advertisements frame poverty as the dominant issue outside of the United States, it is important to remember that communities in the U.S. are as impoverished as other places throughout the world.⁷ If Peace Corps volunteers could have worked to address poverty in the U.S. instead of working abroad, why did they choose to go abroad? Media representations, which present a myopic view of the global South, instill a sense of urgency among those wanting to alleviate these conditions. For many volunteers, the yearning to travel meshed with their need to live and work with “the poorest of the poor,” which is to say they wanted to reject comfort travel and voyeurism in favor of living among the poor abroad, as they live, with little access to the comforts to which they were accustomed. For Olivia, Jacob, and others, this move to help people abroad allowed them to relinquish the “comfort zone” of middle-class life, where volunteering in the U.S. meant that they could easily return to their homes and forget about poverty. Olivia’s assertion that “I love being outside my comfort zone” differentiated her from her family and community in the U.S., one that embraced the stability of white middle-class life. Her pride and willingness to do care work abroad set her apart from her family and community.

While the majority of participants understood their work and travel with the Peace Corps as rejection of both U.S. and white middle-class stability, a small number of volunteers viewed travel with the Peace Corps as a way into a middle-class existence.

⁷ Mohanty (2004) offers an insightful critique of the discourse of international development, one that illustrates how this discourse ignores the lives of poor women in the United States.

For both Briana and Isabella, seeing their friends and others travel abroad saddened them. Neither grew up with the resources to travel, and they remembered the pain of seeing their friends do so. Sam and Isabella both desired to help the poor, but helping and having an opportunity to travel, for the first time in their lives, motivated them to work with the Peace Corps. For Briana, the Peace Corps allowed her to develop an “imagination of travel to a different world,” one she felt she would never get to see because of her working-class background. In this case, travel abroad functioned to guide Briana more solidly into the middle-class through developing a taste for travel, one that she has maintained since then. Still, her travel also separated her from middle-class travelers abroad in that she lived simply and with few amenities among the poor in her community.

Personal growth is another key feature of the middle-class of the current generation. Although no one who volunteered before 1990 discussed personal growth, almost all subsequent participants made mention of how joining the Peace Corps would provide personal challenges that would make them better, more competent people. For Chris and Sophia, overcoming challenges and developing into a better person would become evident upon their return to the United States through storytelling about their Peace Corps experiences. Having access to “better stories,” especially more interesting accounts than their friends and family who stayed in the United States, allowed them to portray themselves as mature people, people who had thrived through difficulties. Telling these stories functioned to situate them and other volunteers as full adults, with the Peace Corps as a rite of passage into middle-class adulthood. Addison most directly made this claim when she described how the Peace Corps “beats maturity into you.” This

suggests that in fact she and other volunteers shared more ambivalence about challenging the unquestionable pressures to fulfill middle-class expectations in the United States. Thus, volunteers' storytelling back into U.S. became a way of asserting that they were now prepared to live as middle-class adults back home.

Other participants understood their time in the Peace Corps as a different type of personal growth experience. For Emily and almost all of the people who volunteered during the last 20 years, the difficulties of living in impoverished areas of the world for an extended time created the conditions for them to discover strengths and talents that they might not have uncovered without the Peace Corps. Emily poignantly describes how finding that "amazing trait within yourself" may not have been possible if she had stayed in the United States, a country that she felt promoted conformity to the extent that it did not allow her to understand or even know about these additional talents.

Interestingly, she and others who were critical of the United States also described personal growth in terms of gaining an appreciation of the United States upon returning after their service abroad.

The participants gave multiple reasons for choosing to join the Peace Corps. Although I asked early in the interviews about their reasons for joining the Peace Corps, the respondents discussed throughout the interview why the Peace Corps appealed to them. They gave complicated motivations, and it became clear to me that the participants had put much thought into this decision. Their choice, one that in many ways disrupted the life and career trajectories embedded in the middle-class, positioned them to be even more thoughtful about their decision due to their need to explain their choice to people who questioned it. I also entertain the possibility that they may have felt that they needed

to explain themselves to me even though the participants knew that I had worked in the Peace Corps, too. Nonetheless, the complicated reasons for joining the Peace Corps (e.g., altruism and personal growth), usually overlapped with one another and categorizing their reasons should not suggest they these were mutually exclusive. Still, a common thread emerging from their responses coalesced around the participants' resistance to middle-class notions of adulthood, particularly what they viewed as indifference to the difficulties faced by poor people around the world.

Thus, the participants' reasons for joining the Peace Corps converged around social class ambivalence. The stringent qualifications limiting the number of applicants who qualify for Peace Corps service (about 20% are accepted) functioned to engender a sense of uniqueness among volunteers – that not only do they reject class expectations, but that there exists a state-sponsored selection process that dignified this choice. Still, many volunteers viewed their stints abroad as a temporary break from the expectations of adulthood, an adulthood characterized by conventional, established patterns of career and relationship life. The participants relished the opportunity to embark on a journey into the unknown. In the next chapter, I will move into describing what it was like for the respondents to finally move to the global South and work for the Peace Corps in a world they saw as adventurous and unpredictable.

CHAPTER IV.

“NOW THAT YOU HAVE A DEGREE, GET AN EDUCATION”: LIVING IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A. Introduction

As illustrated in the previous chapter, prospective volunteers' desires to help the poor around the world and reevaluate their allegiance to middle-class values were catalysts for their decisions to join the Peace Corps. Entering the Peace Corps allowed them to renounce the trappings of the middle-class temporarily and, for most volunteers, differentiate themselves from what they viewed as the lethargy and indifference endemic in this class. For Peace Corps volunteers, moving to the global South and living among the poor, without the comforts and social supports with which they were accustomed in the United States, fostered the volunteers' embrace of more ascetic ways of living and motivated them to meet the personal and professional challenges of working in areas ravaged by poverty.

Upon being selected to work for the Peace Corps, prospective volunteers spent time preparing for their journeys abroad. Concerning asceticism, much of this preparation involved shredding the layers emblematic of middle-class adulthood. They described how part of their psychological preparation for this new chapter in their lives included selling and storing almost all of their personal belongings, paying lingering bills and debts that could not be deferred, eating their favorite foods, quitting their jobs or finishing their schooling, and spending time with friends and family. These tasks and

interactions also functioned to promote the prospective volunteers' commitment to living in the global South as Peace Corps volunteers.

Social theorist Max Weber analyzed asceticism and its relationship to social class and economic life. His key work in this area, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, discusses how religious practices, particularly those related to abstaining from material pleasures and the emphasis on personal action, facilitated the connection between the expansion of capitalism and the idea that success in the market was a sign that one had earned God's divine grace (1958). With respect to Peace Corps volunteers, I will assert how Weber's thesis applies to their lived experiences, which were characterized by at times arduous, stressful work performed with minimal institutional and material support. Peace Corps' volunteers' awareness of, and pride in, doing this difficult work was evidence that they had succeeded in living among the poor in ways their middle-class friends and family in the United States could not fathom.

In this chapter, I will further augment the existing research on the lives of Peace Corps volunteers. First, I detail how volunteers experienced the challenge of entering their country of service and training for three months to become Peace Corps volunteers. Next, I describe how they recalled moving to and living in their host communities as bona fide Peace Corps volunteers after their training was completed. I outline how volunteers began to live their lives in more austere ways in their local communities. I also discuss how they made sense of the trials they encountered during the first several months in their host communities and how they negotiated these unique and often unexpected situations. I then describe how volunteers shifted from the excitement and adventure of the cross-cultural experience to feeling both boredom and an intense need

to immerse themselves actively in the work of international development. I will analyze these reflections using Weber's notion of asceticism as it relates to volunteers' loathing of middle-class materialism and political apathy.

B. Becoming a Peace Corps volunteer: training

After saying their goodbyes to their friends and family in the United States, the prospective volunteers flew to their country of service to begin training and meeting other Peace Corps trainees. This section of the chapter will discuss how the trainees addressed some of the personal challenges that they encountered during the first months of their service.

Prospective Peace Corps volunteers who pass the numerous physical exams and the demanding application and selection process are invited to a host-country to train to become volunteers. The Peace Corps typically gives prospective volunteers three to six months notice before they are to embark on their assignments abroad. As stated above, prospective volunteers used this time to secure their finances and responsibilities in the U.S. as well as connect with friends and family, who they may not see for some time. Once they arrived in their host countries, the uncertainties that emerged during the long flight were temporarily lifted upon meeting with Peace Corps representatives. A sense of belonging surfaced as they received a welcome from Peace Corps staff, volunteers, and other trainees. In most cases, at least one Peace Corps representative greeted the prospective volunteers and accompanied them to the training site.

Peace Corps training lasts for three months. The three-month training intensives differ in minor ways across regions of the world. However, all training consists of intensive language study, cross-cultural education, and the development of skills

necessary for one's job assignment with the Peace Corps (personal communication 2009; www.peacecorps.gov). Also, each respective cohort in each country trains as a group during this period. Typically, these early months prove to be psychologically and physically difficult. In addition to the emotional challenges of leaving the United States, Peace Corps trainees also dealt with the physical illnesses that occur when living a more austere life in the global South. Many volunteers reported disliking the challenging training period, a time during which their days were highly regimented and when most participants suffered through an illness for the first time in-country. Others, like Anthony, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, discussed during the interview how much he loved training. He elaborated:

...here's the funny thing. Most people hated the first three months of training. I loved it. I had a great time... just remember, like, I kind of knew going in that training was going to be the boot camp of Peace Corps, that it was gonna be really rough. And our country director at the time was kind of a hard-ass. She at one point actually said that she wanted to get all the people who were thinking about ET'ing (leaving the Peace Corps early), to kick them out early. She really pushed most of our training.

Anthony and the few other participants who enjoyed training, all of whom were men, viewed the training time as a period of very little rest and constant exposure to new customs, cultures, foods, illnesses, and language classes embedded within a very structured environment. These men seemed to embrace the rugged masculinities that the training provided them. Also, because trainings include a large number of prospective volunteers (from my interview notes, a range of 25 – 100 per group), the men accessed these masculinities in very public settings. This is important because researchers on gender and masculinity have argued that, because men often confer masculinity upon other men, the public domain fuels their attempts to earn masculine subjectivities that

might have been lost due to these men's choice to engage in care work through joining the Peace Corps (Butler 1993; Connell 2002, 2005). Also, these men, Anthony included, entered a group where masculine hierarchies had not yet been established, but would be developed during "boot camp."

However, the majority of Peace Corps volunteers felt that the rigors of training left them ill-equipped to do the work expected of them. Emma, a volunteer in Africa in the 1980s, felt she was entering her community unprepared for life on her own in her host community. As she illustrated:

I think I felt inept during training. You thought, "Oh, my God, who am I?" And then getting to the village, you felt totally inept, trying to do the first project, and I couldn't even speak the language.

Though most volunteers reflected Emma's concern that they did not train long enough to manage the difficult work that lay ahead, they did recall how the training period fostered a sense of community among the trainees. When times became difficult during training or while on assignment as Peace Corps volunteers, the relationships established through the grueling training period became support networks once the volunteers were eventually sent into their individual communities. Ava, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 1960s, discussed how, in her (mostly) gender segregated training group, she and the other women faced much more difficult physical and psychological challenges than those of the men in the group. Ava argued that this occurred because, though President Kennedy vowed that men and women would be treated no differently in the Peace Corps, she witnessed how, at that time, the Peace Corps hired male military officers to conduct the trainings. Although this practice no longer takes place, from Ava's perspective, the unequal treatments implemented by these

military officers as a sign that the Peace Corps wanted to find ways to excuse women from participating in favor of a male dominated volunteer service. For example, she recalled an endurance exercise. Ava explained:

We (women and men) did the physical activities differently. And we used to say that men and women were supposed to be treated alike. That was the thing. Well, for one of our physical activities, the men had a sack lunch and they hiked halfway up _____ Peak, had their lunch, and came home. For the women, we carried 35-pound backpacks and hiked all the way up to the top of the peak, which was a real struggle, spent the night on the mountain, got caught in the rain, came home, and then we had to do what they called the Marine rope jungle. Only we did it without helmets and without safety wires, because that's—and one of the women in our group fell and broke her leg and continued the rest of the training with a cast on her leg and was told—and she went ahead and passed.

Ava understood this particular inequity as Peace Corps' questionable attempt to discover if “you could take American women and put them unsupported” into the harsh conditions of the global South. Consequently, this and other experiences like it forged strong bonds among these women. Ava reported that she persevered through training because of the friendships and support of the other women in her training group.

Interestingly, compared to the discussion of masculinity and challenges in chapter three, Ava did not frame her training period as one of encountering “challenges” in the way that Anthony and other male volunteers reflected on their training experiences. Part of framing discomforts as challenges includes understanding these experiences as ones that *all* volunteers are expected to bear. For Ava, knowing that the men went through less arduous training exercises prevented her from entering into the gendered challenge discourse to which the men regularly referred.

Hannah, a volunteer in the Pacific Islands in the 2000s, recalled how the friendships she developed during training also created a sense of solidarity. While she

felt very confined during the highly regimented training period, Hannah's friendships with other trainees, especially those living close to her, helped her through the tough days ahead in her host-community.

It was definitely great (that the training ended), because we had our own lives in our sites and our work and our own experiences, but then anytime I had a rough day, I could always talk to Erin. We talked a lot, and we saw each other twice a month, maybe. It was great.

Hannah and others agreed that the friendships created through the emotionally and physically difficult training programs, where trainees began to experience loneliness and acculturation issues, provided for a support system that would prove invaluable during the next two years of service as Peace Corps volunteers. Still, even volunteers who had established superb friendships had their doubts about what life would be like after they left the protection and predictability of the training site to enter their host communities for the first time.

C. Life in the local community

1. Asceticism

After the training period, the Peace Corps volunteers prepared to leave the friendships developed during this intense time to begin their respective treks to their host communities. Although volunteers expressed nervousness and anxiety about living and working as the only U.S. citizens in their communities, they were excited by the process of moving even further, both physically and culturally, away from the United States. After completing the highly regimented training program, during which every part of the day was scheduled and predictable, volunteers longed for the opportunity to experience the freedom and autonomy they initially sought when they chose to apply to work for the Peace Corps. Isabella, a volunteer in South America in the 2000s, when asked about her

most memorable experience in the Peace Corps, recalled her first trip into her host community. At that point, she had completed three months of training and knew that life would be difficult, but she expressed how remembering her most meaningful moments allowed her to “appreciate and to hold on to, be able to get you through” the challenges of dealing with the isolation of working with the Peace Corps. As I asked her about her most meaningful times, Isabella recalled, in vivid detail, her arrival in her host community.

I had been on the bus the whole night; I had this nine-hour bus ride. Get up in the morning, it's, like, three in the morning, and then we take this other bus for three and a half hours. That's when I leave the rest of the volunteers, I'm like, “OK, bye!” and they all go their other ways, and I go three and a half hours more into the jungle with this man who doesn't really even speak any Spanish at all, so virtually there was no communication.

We go and we walk for, like, half an hour down this old gravel road. It's still dark out. I was like, “Oh, my God, where am I? Oh, my God!” And he's talking and trying to communicate with me, and we just stand there and we're on the banks of this really big river. We're just kind of standing there. And then it was crazy, the little canoe man comes over and gets us and we're crossing the river, and as we're crossing the river the sun starts to come up and I could actually see where I'm at. I'm in the middle, in this little dugout canoe, this man is paddling behind me, and the sun starts coming up, and it was so beautiful, so beautiful, and I just remember looking up, because my community was up on a hill, and just looking up and there were people standing up there, just staring at me. [laughs]

(They knew you were coming?)

Yeah, yeah! And I just knew, and I was like, “Oh, my God, this is so great! This is so awesome!” It was like this paradise, just the total aesthetic standpoint of it all. And I just remember—'cause that was my very first glimpse of what I was gonna be doing. And just the craziness of being with this man that was so nice, he was so sweet, and I didn't understand him. Just kind of the whole realization that this is gonna be my world for the next two years. It was just really intense, but I was really excited. That was probably one of the biggest moments.

Isabella's description of the beauty, excitement, and simplicity of living deep in the jungle provided the setting for the adventure she hoped to experience when she

applied to become a Peace Corps volunteer. These moments reminded Isabella and other volunteers that they had indeed left the U.S. middle-class. During the whirlwind transformation into becoming a Peace Corps volunteer, where one effectively relinquishes the accoutrements associated with life in the United States, volunteers viewed these changes as evidence that they were full-fledged Peace Corps volunteers. In a Goffmanian sense, Peace Corps volunteers, upon arriving as the lone U.S. citizens in their host communities, lost access to the props (both materialities and people) necessary to maintain their middle-class personhoods as lived in the United States (1961). As they created a home in their communities, they used the physical materials (and lack thereof), memories of training, and people of the local community to fashion themselves more fully into Peace Corps volunteers. The “paradise” Isabella describes reveals her arrival in a place where, by U.S. middle-class standards, people live with material simplicity.

Elizabeth, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, mirrored Isabella’s observation about appreciating the ascetism of living in the global South. Her enjoyment revolved around the sensuous exploration of her life there, one untainted by media representations, modern technology, and advertising. For Elizabeth, her initial experiences in her host community, ones of unfiltered delight in “seeing the town, eating the food, drinking the juice and the beer and everything,” reminded her that she had journeyed into a life of service in the “real” world of the global South. Interestingly, with respect to advertising, some volunteers sought the opportunity to volunteer in Africa, the region most visible and most exotified (and most “real”) in Peace Corps advertising. Like Elizabeth, Peter, a volunteer in Africa in the 1990s, savored his experience in Africa because it was both visually stunning and unblemished, and “as far from the United States as you can get,”

from a middle-class culture perspective.

Other volunteers spent their initial months embracing the ascetic side of living in the global South. For them, living a more Spartan existence was the key element signaling their commitment to helping the poor in the world. Steven, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, wanted to live very “close to the earth.” He envisioned himself “getting water out of a river or a well and living in an agrarian area.” As I noted his excitement about living more minimally, I asked him about the appeal of this situation, to which he replied:

I think that was something that—when you look at the statistics, as prolific as cell phones are, half the people in the world have never used one. So growing up in the States, we’re insulated, for better or worse. I think at that point in my life I wanted to get uninsulated. And how to do that, I envisioned kind of the opposite of what I was used to.

Steven’s emphasis on living an unsheltered life, here with reference to living without the givens of the middle-class, shows that he and others proudly voiced their choice to live without conveniences that their friends and families in the United States would find difficult to abandon. Interestingly, some of the women who volunteered remarked on how their relatives and friends in the U.S. could not imagine more basic, minimalistic living--which propelled them to take pride in their comfort of living with less. Alexis, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, described how her friends responded to her description of her host country, which a Peace Corps official told her was barren and without electricity or running water. She explained:

I think it’s the whole, “You’re gonna live somewhere where there’s no electricity and you’re gonna have to go to the bathroom in a latrine? That’s so gross! It’ll be hot. You’ll get diseases.” Just all of these ideas that people (in the U.S.) have about the developing world. A lot of them are accurate, but unless you have that desire to learn more about it and experience it, you see it as gross or icky or scary, whereas that wasn’t how I perceived it.

Instead, Alexis viewed this as an opportunity to live more simply and committed to assisting the poor. Most Peace Corps volunteers understood their experience of moving abroad, being stripped of middle-class props, and living with fewer reminders of their lives in the United States as evidence that they were dedicated to social change. Still, while all volunteers were forced to live with less during their service, others further seized upon ascetic principles by refusing to have sex, refusing to drink alcohol or do drugs, and postponing romantic relationships until after their service abroad.

With respect to relationships and sex, some volunteers maintained long-distance relationships with partners in the United States or partners that they met during Peace Corps' training. Five of the interviewees dated members of their host communities. The Peace Corps often discouraged volunteers from dating within their indigenous communities. Some of the other participants, when asked about dating in their host communities, felt that their mission to change the world did not coincide with dating people in the host community. Andrew, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, described how he felt that such a situation was unethical. He asserted:

I kind of felt that dating anyone, and I felt this throughout, dating anyone in my village specifically was sort of counterproductive to the job that I was doing there. In terms of dating host country nationals, I felt like the power dynamic was not equal or fair.

Thus, those who didn't date, or chose not to date, reflected on their choice as one being incommensurate with their work in the community. Many of their choices reflected a move away from sexual pleasures because these might interfere with their mission, reflecting an otherworldly asceticism (Weber 1958). This refers to Weber's notion of an asceticism that understands sexual pleasures and the pleasures of consuming

intoxicating foods and drinks as distractions from one's duty to work soberly for a cause. With respect to volunteers, the tone with which they reflected upon their choices to reject these pleasures as part of their calling to help the poor was one of dedication, a feeling that they were sacrificing for a larger undertaking.

As discussed in chapter three, the challenge discourse emerged when volunteers recalled anticipating difficulties that they might encounter. This was voiced in connection to volunteers' adherence to ascetic principles. This discourse surfaced when participants remembered the difficulties and isolation that imbued their early months in their host communities. Volunteers saw these times as moments to reaffirm the uniqueness of their *choice* to welcome the challenges that came during their early days in the Peace Corps. Ashley, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, succinctly described the satisfaction of her first months as a volunteer:

I wanted to live in a mud hut, live a sustainable-type lifestyle, low-impact, off-the-grid, really rural and low-tech. I wanted to have that kind of experience. I didn't want to be in a city in Eastern Europe or something. That didn't interest me as much. I wanted it to be completely different from anything I'd ever experienced.

Ashley's desire to "have an extreme experience," one that exposed her to the isolation and austerity characteristic of life in the Peace Corps, showed that she had made a serious commitment to improving the lives of the poor in the global South. The lack of modern conveniences and physical isolation from other U.S. citizens gave her and other volunteers a sense that they, as individuals, were fully *living* their pledge to work for social change.

∨2. Immersion

a. Beginning the acculturation process

Peace Corps volunteers live among the poor they serve. Thus, as described in the previous section, their lack of material possessions evinced their feeling that they were immersing into the local culture. A less tangible occurrence that signaled the participants' continuing acknowledgment that they were no longer in the United States had to do with their emotional adjustments to life in their local communities. In varying degrees, almost all volunteers recalled feelings of seclusion and loss as they proceeded into their service. For Isabella, a volunteer in South America in the 2000s, some of this isolation stemmed from her initial lack of facility with the local language and the fact that her community knew they were hosting a Peace Corps volunteer, but did not know about the Peace Corps' purpose in her community. Thus, as she further immersed and became proficient in the local language, she was able to assess this and attempt to explain her reasons for being in the community. Because the Peace Corps did little to coordinate and structure the relationship between Isabella and her community, she spent a considerable amount during her first months explaining that she was "just a person here to help." Others, like Daniel, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, reported similar difficulties. As he became more familiar with the national language, he was eventually able to establish contacts who later helped him in his development projects. However, before this time, the community did not know why he had come all the way from the United States to live in a remote village. He did find a counterpart, someone in the local community with whom volunteers work to address local needs, but that also proved difficult. As Daniel described:

My counterpart was, like, married with a kid or two and 45 years old and worked a lot, and it was like, she didn't know what was goin' on in town. And there weren't so many people my age in my town...(his early contacts) were kind of

few and far between.

Daniel's frustration with his early difficulties contacting people who could help to contribute to improving the community and promote his further immersion prompted him to take a more individualistic approach to addressing community issues. Like Isabella and others, as he learned more of the national language, Daniel was better able to relate to and explain his role and that of the Peace Corps in the community. Still, Daniel, Isabella, and others who had less support upon entering their host communities relied on their own creativity and problem solving abilities to establish themselves.

Other volunteers had smoother transitions into their communities. This situation was common among volunteers who replaced previous volunteers in their community. Because these communities were already familiar with the Peace Corps, volunteers entering this situation met with people who were more prepared for what to expect from U.S. citizens and the Peace Corps. Ethan, a Caribbean volunteer in the 2000s, discussed his experience of entering his community following another volunteer whose service had just ended. Joe, the previous volunteer, spent time during the end of his service preparing the community for Ethan's arrival and describing the work Ethan would do as a health educator for the Peace Corps. Later, Ethan met with a community that welcomed his arrival.

...I definitely remember people from the country getting—they were so excited to see me. They love their (local language), they love their culture, their music, their food. And they're just super-friendly people and they wanted to share that with me. It was a really cool time.

Despite some early feelings of loneliness, Ethan flourished in this community. Indeed, just over half of the volunteers described their early months in their communities

as a time during which they eventually felt as though the people in the community had adopted the volunteers as members of the community. The other volunteers, like Daniel and Isabella, eventually felt the same sense of belonging as they further immersed themselves in community life. In fact, when I asked volunteers if they felt as though the community had become a "home" for them, a place where they felt a sense of belonging and comfort, 34 volunteers reflected Ethan's sentiment concerning the friendliness and accommodating acculturation process they experienced at some point in their service.

b. Alienation

Regardless of the ease or difficulty of transitioning to their respective communities, some volunteers eventually established themselves and felt accepted. Still, the experience of being the only U.S. citizen living in the community was oftentimes lonely, even for volunteers living in the most hospitable areas. Women in particular recalled feeling emotionally isolated. As Jodi, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, discussed how her sense of loneliness was exacerbated by the Peace Corps's emphasis on women's safety. She was advised to not allow visitors into her dwelling and to never go out alone after dark. This fostered her sense of loneliness because, in her community, hosting guests in the evenings was understood as an important way of establishing friendships. Though she did say that she was friends with many people in her village, these guidelines maintained her sense of loneliness. Jodi explained:

I was pretty alone. I was alone for two years out in the bush. I did have a boyfriend, but he was, like, 25 miles away, for a while. Anyway, it was just kind of lonely. I don't think I'd want to do that again. Because I couldn't have people in my house. Nobody ever came in my house. It's like being alone every night.

Jodi agreed that Peace Corps' safety precautions were important to observe; her

issue had more to do with the fact that women in the Peace Corps had much less access to public and private spaces. Men who volunteered were often encouraged to have guests at night, drink alcohol in public, and generally exercise privileges associated with being men in the Peace Corps. For instance, Jacob a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, recalled how going to bars alone during his early days as a volunteer helped him to establish relationships in his community. Jacob explained:

(At first,) I would just go to the bar and have some beers on my own and then go back to my room sometimes and read...I just didn't have anyone to hang out with, and I wanted to go out and have a couple beers. Hell if I'm gonna stay home!"

He later recounted how:

as time went on, I made more and more and more friends. I had several different circles of friends. And I used to actually—in my heyday, I would go out. I wouldn't make plans with anyone. I would just go out wherever, to some club or some bars, and I just would go there by myself, just knowing that I'm gonna run into people that I know that I can just go and sit with. So I never worried about it. That's how good it got, I guess.

Jacob's gendered access to public space provided for him multiple avenues to “make more and more and more friends” and dissipate some of the alienation he experienced as a new volunteer. The ease with which he made his way through his community facilitated friendships and relationships that would later help him in his development projects in ways that women like Jodi simply could not participate. Thus, men's greater degrees of freedom as volunteers allowed them access to more ways of combating loneliness and feelings of isolation than women.

Given that all volunteers asserted that they joined the Peace Corps to help improve the lives of poor people around the world, both men and women illustrated how witnessing injustices, particularly seeing people who were hungry with no food and sick

with no medical care, fostered feelings of alienation. Virtually all of the volunteers discussed at length the discomfort of living among the poor and knowing that, as U.S. citizens, they had money for food and access to medical care. In addition, the volunteers always knew that they could return to the United States at any time. William, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, discussed how seeing poverty magnified his feelings of loneliness, which at times verged on resignation. He recalled how he

...had some pretty challenging times, like probably all Peace Corps volunteers do, feeling so lonely, feeling like your skills aren't applicable, and feeling just really broken in some ways at certain points. Seeing things you never thought you would ever see, just depressing things.

William later recounted how he badly wanted to confide in other Peace Corps volunteers during the difficult moments, and how he "just really wanted the familiar," some time to be able to discuss these events with other volunteers. However, the Peace Corps culture of "toughness" hindered William from seeking out other volunteers to discuss his feelings of being "broken." He and other volunteers would instead rely on friends in the local community for support, which was often helpful but, because of the contrasts between the middle-class culture in the United States and the culture of local communities within which the Peace Corps works, was often lacking.

c. Community acceptance and rejecting the Peace Corps bureaucracy

Interestingly, volunteers' dependence on themselves, the rugged individuality needed to adjust to community life, eventually functioned to engender a sense of confidence in their ability to thrive during difficult times and feel at home in their communities. The participants also gained confidence through community support and affirmation. Specifically, the community's acceptance, and the volunteers own

acceptance of the communities' support, fostered their feelings of confidence. Claudia, a volunteer in South America in the 2000s, talked about her experience as a woman working with the Peace Corps. She recalled how she received "catcalls" from people in nearby communities, but how "in my own community that would never happen." Becky felt respected and comfortable in her community, and she expressed her ease through dressing as she chose, with little concern for the local gender norms except during special occasions. Instead, she typically wore jeans and shirts, items traditionally worn by men.

Joshua, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 2000s, also gained a sense of assuredness during the first year of his volunteer experience. After he became more fluent in the local language and more skilled at doing every day tasks in the village, the people of his community threw a party in his honor. In addition, the village chief drafted a letter on his behalf. Joshua explained:

...the chief of the community wrote this really nice letter that he considered a recommendation for me to give back to the Peace Corps director to show how well I was doing. He was so—this man was so proud of himself for writing this. And he wrote it out on notebook paper. Just so proud that he did this for me. It was exciting.

For Joshua, this party and the village chief's letter were turning points during the first year of his volunteer experience. Although Joshua reported that he did not feel extensive periods of loneliness as a volunteer, he did feel uncertainties about his role in the community and had concerns about how people in the community perceived him. The chief's letter in particular showed him that his community accepted him, which cemented within Joshua the assuredness he needed to continue his work. Emily, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 2000s, also experienced a very public affirmation of her work as a volunteer. As an HIV/AIDS educator, her job included some

travel to surrounding communities to discuss ways of preventing this disease. She and a group of second-year volunteers visited one community where HIV/AIDS was prevalent, but where discussions of sexuality were taboo. In addition, the community "was almost like isolationists" in that they resisted outside influences in order to protect their culture and customs. Emily asserted that, though she was leery about entering this community, with the other volunteers as her guide, she pushed on and assisted in discussing AIDS prevention in this small community. This experience was a highlight of her early months at a volunteer. Her enthusiasm during the interview seemed to live on five years after her work in the Peace Corps. She explained:

I think just going to see this culture and partaking in this culture, knowing it (prevention education) is so important for this culture. They've never had any education, never has it been talked about so openly, and the fact that I was one of the main ones helping and being able to go there. Just being there in general is a highlight....but then doing what we did there is even more extraordinary, I think.

Emily's experience assisting more senior Peace Corps volunteers on this project, which seemed difficult because of the insularity of the culture and its peoples' reluctance to talk about sexuality, buoyed her sense of confidence. This community's acceptance gave her the gumption to further immerse into community life and learn that she could make a positive impact on the community.

The self-reliance gained through adjusting to community life extended beyond the village for many volunteers. In fact, for Joseph and Ella, their communities' acceptance fostered a sense of confidence that gave them the courage to challenge Peace Corps' rules about living in their host communities. Joseph, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, discussed how he "just felt more free" after a few intense months in his

community.

I started—I just started feeling really comfortable in (his host country). I hitchhiked all over the country. I'd plan an extra day for travel, because if I couldn't catch a ride, I'd talk to some farmers, go knock on somebody's door and ask if I could crash at their place. And part of that was being a foreigner in a country that was very—that didn't receive a lot of foreigners as visitors, so they were happy to house me. Part of that was to be a foreigner who spoke the indigenous language, it would blow people away! [laughs] So that opened a lot of doors. And just—the hitchhiking and living on less money and not needing as much money. I enjoyed that I did a lot more for myself when I was in the Peace Corps. I was more self-sufficient. I hand-washed dishes in a bucket of water that I drew from a well, as opposed to sticking them in the dishwasher. I liked that.

Joseph's feeling of empowerment illustrates the reflexive relationships between being accepted by the community, gaining proficiency with the local language and culture, and living an ascetic life. He took his sense of comfort beyond his local community to interact with others, in this case farmers, who also knew the local language. By hitchhiking, which went against Peace Corps' rules, he was both saving money and expressing his independence from the Peace Corps as an institution. Saving money and resisting the Peace Corps--and telling administrators about his hitchhiking--also functioned to show that he was self-reliant in the sense that he did not need the institution nor technology ("I hand washed dishes in a bucket"), thus showing that he was officially in the Peace Corps but not of the Peace Corps.

Ella, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, reflected a similar comfort with her community. She lived in a region where it was considered dangerous for women to be out on the streets and highways alone. But, Ella was a runner who knew she needed to run to decrease stress. Though she experienced some initial feelings of isolation, life in her host community "was great." She felt an immediate sense of safety and trust with her community. She was the only woman in the area who would go on

runs. She reported how the people in her community both supported her and showed concern for her during her runs.

...And so then when I'd run, I'd run to different villages, and they would take this cantaloupe, people in their carts and gardens; they would take a cantaloupe and cut it. "Come, come, come!" They'd start feeding me on these trails. I'd be running in places maybe I shouldn't be, but I'd just run, run to different villages. I remember having one lady come up to me and she's like, they're walking with canes, really old, and she came up to me and said, "Oh, Ella." Because I was sweating and I was red and I'm a female. She's like wiping my face, all concerned. "What are you doing?" I'm like, "It's Ok!" So she just was like, "You're gonna get cold," 'cause she saw sweat.

Ella's dedication to running went counter to the Peace Corps' advice about running alone in this area of her host country. As with Joseph, her sense of belonging in the community facilitated her desires to be free of some of the rules put in place by Peace Corps to protect volunteers. In volunteers' eyes, many of these rules simply did not make sense to them once they felt they had been adopted as members of their communities. However, what is more interesting here is that the volunteers also broke these rules as an attempt to position themselves as distinct from the Peace Corps administrators, those who worked in offices in the capital cities, drove land rovers, and wore suits. These volunteers knew that Peace Corps administrators would be uncomfortable even questioning these rules. In other words, volunteers' rejection of these rules represented an attempt to differentiate themselves from the white middle-class bureaucrats who worked for the Peace Corps in-country. Volunteers had the support to do so because they were living the "real" Peace Corps experience.

Most volunteers interviewed realized later in their service that the early months of immersion, a time during which they were discouraged from working (in the U.S. sense of the term, e.g., with tangible output and records of one's performance), encouraged the

communities acceptance and the volunteers' confidence. Peace Corps officials and more senior volunteers felt that the best way to acculturate volunteers into their communities was for them to spend time talking, eating, and drinking tea with the people there and learn about their concerns and frustrations. Noah, a volunteer in Africa in the 1970s, upon seeing the poverty in his host community, immediately wanted to intervene in big ways to eradicate this core community problem. His key hindrance was learning the new language for the first time. He explained:

I wanted to communicate, and I couldn't. I was there six months and I realized that a lot of what I really needed to do was, I needed to learn from them before I could ever make any suggestions or changes, and I needed their respect. But I thought that I was wasting my time, and all the time that I was drinking tea at people's houses, that was building confidence in me. And all the time that I was going to the office and being friendly, that was—just going and maybe drawing some water for the coffee pot, I just participated. And I think I was—people came to realize that I was OK. I was always there. I was willing to go and help. Hopefully—that's what I was doing, but I felt like I was wasting my time. I was there struggling with the language, and I really wanted to do work.

Noah's urgency was curtailed until he engaged more fully in community life, and with the help of the people there, he learned the local language. Noah's excitement in the sense that this experience "was building confidence in me" allowed him to feel more at home and he developed camaraderie with his community members. Like the other volunteers, he needed to postpone "work" until he knew language and cultural basics. Meanwhile, he and other volunteers continued to witness suffering, but with no tools to combat it, yet. The more they learned, the more impatient they became with the slower pace of life and the more they felt a pressing need to address suffering. Thus, later in the volunteers' service, they felt an even stronger motivation to personally act on behalf of their local communities.

3. The call to act and the super volunteer

Peace Corps volunteers, as illustrated previously, had a difficult time during their first few months in their host communities. In addition to attempting to learn the local language(s) and adapt to a way of life to which they were not accustomed, volunteers wanted to do work to improve life in their communities. The early months as volunteers, times colored by the trials and joys of establishing a home in their communities, helped to reaffirm their commitment to the poor through their work with the Peace Corps. Their pride from successfully immersing themselves as the lone U.S. citizens in their respective communities supported the emergence of a more personal connection to the poor.

The volunteers' intimate, daily living among the poor was further developed by their belief in the importance of committing to serving their communities. Several volunteers voiced how commitment narratives propelled and inspired them to you continue their work with the Peace Corps. Interestingly, women who volunteered most explicitly referred to this narrative. Natalie, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, noted how the sacrifices associated with working with the Peace Corps were illustrative of the degree of commitment volunteers devoted to helping the poor. In her case, Natalie wanted to be different from those who observed poverty from afar and development organizations who assisted mainly through sending money to the poor. As an integrated member of her community, she "wanted to be important" and needed there, and she recognized this through the strong sense of community she felt as her service progressed.

For volunteers, the nature of their service and their dedication to helping the poor

meant that their work with the Peace Corps was not simply a “job,” but a calling. As, Grace, a volunteer in Africa in the 1990s, described her work with the Peace Corps and her struggles with the illnesses and isolation of her work, she asserted that these difficulties did not dissuade her from maintaining her commitment. She recalled:

...I could have, after a few months, been like, “Fuck this, I am out of here!” Who knows? But I also think that’s kind of in my nature and my personality (to keep her commitments). If I’m gonna go and start something, I’m gonna see it through. And I also felt like, you make a commitment to this village. Here you are, this privileged person that’s coming in here to start up these projects.

Grace’s decision to stay and endure the challenges of her work suggests how the Peace Corps attracts people who care deeply about social change and have the vision to achieve their goal of creating a better world. She viewed her work as a calling, a vocation to which she was summoned and one that was a fit in the sense that the Peace Corps reflected the values of commitment and caring that she held dear. Her choice also illustrates her uniqueness, that she could have said, “Fuck this, I am out of here!” and become a detached observer of the world, but this was not the kind of person she was. She felt it her duty to improve life in her village.

However, decisions to stay in the Peace Corps through the difficult first year were complicated by other issues. As stated in chapter three, 39 of the 40 participants said that they, at times, had doubts about completing their service. Yet, 36 of the participants chose to continue their commitment for two years or more. A volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, Madison’s stories reflected Grace’s regarding the importance of committing to social justice work. However, Madison noted other contingencies that influenced her decision to stay in Peace Corps. In this case, the consequences to the village impacted her choice to stay abroad. As she remembered:

They (the people in her community) would be very shamed if you left, because everyone in the area would say, “Your volunteer left. They didn’t like it here.” There’s a lot of gossip in the culture, and it would be very shameful if your volunteer left. Or when volunteers changed sites because they had problems, it was extremely shameful for the village. You had an American, you were blessed with this American, and they were gonna come here and help you, and then they left you, because you weren’t good enough, or whatever.

Madison’s concern for her community’s reputation, one that would be at least temporarily tarnished for resisting help from the United States, was a burden that she thought would trouble her if she left the Peace Corps. Mia, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, also reflected on how being committed to her community and her work in the global South reminded her that her compassion and dedication made her “perfect for the Peace Corps.” When she did have doubts about her effectiveness and the sustainability of her work, she recalled how much the United States government had invested in her and the rest of the Peace Corps volunteers. She explained:

Well, part of it was, you knew they’d put so much money into you going. It was totally paid for. They paid for flights and training and all that stuff. I think that was part of it. And I felt like I’d made a commitment...And there was my village, and they expected things from me, and so I felt like, “Oh, if I leave, what will happen to these people?” Probably nothing. The same thing that happened when I was here. I wasn’t doing anything. I just think—I just felt expectations from other people and from myself. They weren’t necessarily accurate.

In retrospect, Mia asserted that “probably nothing” detrimental would happen to the people in her community if she had left. But while in-country, she and others who hoped to alleviate poverty, after being immersed into the Peace Corps and the local culture, were further infused with a sense of urgency that it was their *personal* responsibility to help the poor. With this responsibility came the belief that they, as individuals, were capable of negating suffering throughout the world.

The personal responsibility to help the poor as the lone U.S. citizen in their

communities facilitated volunteer heroism. The local communities, due to media representations of the United States and overarching portrayal of the United States as a symbol of prosperity, met volunteers with high expectations about what could be accomplished. This proved difficult for some volunteers. Mark, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 1990s, discussed how, throughout the first year of his time in his community, its leaders regularly asked him what he would do to help the community, and at times offered their own suggestions. He explained:

They (the Peace Corps administrators) told us to hang out in the village and immerse. My counterpart (in the village) actually came to me and asked me six months in, “What are you doing here?” I had to tell him, “This is what Peace Corps wants me to do here right now.” It was tough, though. It looks like you’re not doin’ anything, and sometimes it feels like it.

Mark’s difficulties during his first year of language learning and acculturation were so because, in terms of a work ethic values in the United States, he was not really “working” in the sense that he did not have tangible and quantifiable results. More importantly, this community, one that had welcomed him, was not certain as to why he was there, either. Thus, Mark felt as though he needed to begin work on development projects to affirm his presence in the village and to himself.

Mark’s and others’ experiences of seeing overwhelming poverty, recognizing themselves as the only resource in the village, and feeling the sense of urgency to create social change, were conditions that allow for emergence of the heroic figure, the “super volunteer.” While no one referred to themselves as this type of volunteer, one known in the Peace Corps for quickly mastering languages, adjusting to and being revered by the local community, and initiating multiple development projects, roughly half of the participants referenced this figure with admiration and guilt. For instance, Sophia, a

volunteer in North Africa/Middle East in the 2000s, remembered how her early adjustment difficulties were complicated by Mike, a super volunteer who lived in nearby community for a few months. Sophia illustrated how

...he picked up language like that. And I just love Mike. He was great, but it was just so hard to—and that culture just so blatantly compares you. It was just like, “Please, I just want to go to my own place and be my own person and not have this comparison.” Oh, my gosh! And of course he turned out to be a super volunteer. You know what it’s like. They were just idolized by their community. I was so glad he was eventually moved to the other side of the country from me. I had enough in three months with Mike... I was ready to move on.

Again, no participant claimed that she/he was a super volunteer. As Sophia poignantly illustrated, she and other volunteers conferred this label on a volunteer, in this case, Mike. Additionally, a binary opposition had become established by volunteers through which a volunteer was a super volunteer (also termed the “real” Peace Corps volunteer) or not, leaving little discursive space for one to be defined as someone in-between these two categories, e.g., the “average” volunteer. Addison, a teacher in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, most succinctly described this phenomenon towards to end of our discussion of the super volunteer. She recalled how the Peace Corps administration encouraged her to continue to work on development projects in addition to her full-time teaching position. Because of the lack of amenities in her host community, Addison spent much of her “off” time washing her cloths by hand, cooking and heating meals on her stovetop, and other tasks that encompassed her “free time.”

When I asked her if there was such a thing as a “non-super volunteer” she replied:

Horrible volunteer? I don’t think there was any specific terminology for that, but everyone has stories about the guy who went crazy and was found in the ditch one day and was administratively separated faster than you could ever believe. Or I guess there was a guy in my town, the stories used to go around about him having inappropriate relationships with the students, perhaps. American men in (country of service) villages have it very well, oh, yeah. They get a lot of attention. So he

apparently didn't deflect it appropriately.

As Addison described this binary, in her terms the super volunteer versus the “horrible volunteer,” it functioned to create a social control mechanism that left little room for the average volunteer and promoted the attainment of heroic status through tireless dedication to enriching the well-being of one's community. In Addison and other volunteer's experiences, the isolation of one's work also functioned to assist their reliance on these norms facilitating the figure of the super volunteer. According to Addison, much of this pressure became internalized. As she later stated, “especially if you come in with a lot of idealism to the Peace Corps, you probably put that personal pressure on yourself to make a difference in the community, and you burn out really easily.”

Nevertheless, while none of the participants explicitly referred to their work as a calling to become heroic, several participants, like Sophia, Mark, and Addison, saw the connection between heroism and improving their local communities. Thus, they pursued this identity to both help their communities and resist being labeled pejoratively, e.g., a “horrible volunteer.” In fact, when asked if they would ever return to work with the Peace Corps, all who said they'd return asserted that they'd be much more productive in U.S. work terms. In other words, they would have been more heroic and done more development work on behalf of their communities.

D. Discussion of findings

The participants went through numerous challenges during their first several months in the Peace Corps. Their early weeks in their host countries as Peace Corps trainees revealed to them how they in fact had truly left the United States and comforts

associated with life in the middle-class. After the trainees swore-in and officially became Peace Corps volunteers, their moves into their local communities--as the sole U.S. citizens--was another reminder of their commitment to the Peace Corps and social change through living an austere life among some of the poorest people in the world.

Weber's notion of ascetism as it relates to the Protestant work ethic and the growth of capitalism in Western Europe provides a unique framework for understanding Peace Corps volunteers' first year in their host communities (1958). Unlike Durkheim, who saw a strong causal link between religion and society, Weber rejected this connection between religion and society, and instead suggested that the religious ethos imbuing Protestant religions created a likelihood that a society's members will behave in economically expedient ways.

More specifically, Weber asserted that the Reformation resulted in a radically differing experience of life between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics maintained their allegiance to the values ascribed to this denomination, particularly those emphasizing the notion that devotion to the Church supersedes adherence to worldly affairs. However, an association with worldly affairs seeped into the Protestant ethos and became embodied in the notion of the calling. Basic to Weber's idea of the calling is that a predestined or "chosen" individual's success in the market reflected the degree to which one was among those preordained for salvation. Thus, a spirit of ceaseless work, frugality, minimalism, and a lack of leisure characterized the culture shortly after the Reformation. This unrelenting work ethic, powered by the notion of the calling, allowed for the conditions that made possible the further development of capitalism. In this sense, Weber regarded religion as an ideological foundation that affects the consciousness of a people.

Weber's argument provides a persuasive way of understanding Peace Corps volunteers' experiences as they relate to asceticism and the calling to help poor people. Although 34 (85 percent) of the participants reported no religious affiliations, a religious zeal permeated their stories of leaving the safety and materialism of the United States to live and work among the poor. When prospective volunteers arrived in-country, they met with other Peace Corps' trainees, volunteers, and administrators, who welcomed them, and as training began, a sense of solidarity developed. Trainees' recognition of the lack of material reminders of middle-class life in the United States initiated their development of new personhoods. They were developing a "taste," in Bourdieu's (1984) sense, an appreciation for living with less and immersing themselves in the global South, which helped to maintain boundaries between volunteers and their families and friends in the United States with respect to social change. In addition, the trainees were positioned, through joining the Peace Corps, to use different props availed them through this institution, to recreate personhood as Peace Corps volunteers (Goffman 1961). For instance, Alexis's friend's declarative inquiry, that "You're gonna live somewhere where there's no electricity and you're gonna have to go to the bathroom in a latrine?" reflects how these material changes would later become props reminding her that she was indeed a unique person for responding to this calling to sacrifice for the poor. This new personhood, and the asceticism characterizing it, also functioned to remind the trainees that they were among the chosen few selected (20 percent of applicants) to join the Peace Corps.

As the three month, highly regimented training period proceeded, the trainees began to make sense of how this time related to their desire to address world poverty.

Several of the men welcomed the physical and psychological difficulties that they encountered in training. Like the men in Lois' (2003) study of search and rescue workers, male volunteers' practice of controlling their emotions and refraining from complaint about adverse conditions abroad proved that they were steadfastly committed to helping the poor. The demanding courses, particularly the language classes, along with the early experiences of getting sick and continuing their training through these trials became a way for men to identify with new masculine subjectivities to which they were unaccustomed (Bederman 1995; Cockborn and Zarkov 2002; Connell 2002, 2004, 2005; Razack 2000). Thus, journeying into unknown territory--both psychological and geographical--allowed these men to invoke frontier masculinities, i.e., those associated with taming and controlling what was defined as "uncivilized" (Bederman 1995; Connell 2005).

As Anthony described his love for the training period, how he knew that he was entering "a boot camp of the Peace Corps," he saw an opportunity to prove that he was qualified to enter this exclusive group. His comment that his country director, "was kind of a hard-ass" gave further credence to the notion that a successful adjustment to the training program reflected how he was destined to do the difficult work of helping some of the most impoverished people in the world. These comments also served to show that, although he was doing care work, work that is typically feminized and undervalued--and in this case, under the direction of a woman-- his acceptance of the stresses of training showed that he could do this work and develop new ways of accessing masculinities.

Other prospective volunteers, particularly some of the women in training, viewed this time as one marked by unnecessary suffering. Ava remembered her training in the

early years of the Peace Corps as a sexist attempt to dissuade women from becoming volunteers through unnecessarily difficult training exercises, experiences that were much more difficult than those endured by the men in her training group. Nevertheless, she and the other women use these experiences to develop close friendships that lasted through their volunteer service and beyond. For women who volunteered more recently, the training intensives, while useful in helping them to establish friendships and acquire basic language skills, delayed their chance to gain a sense of independence through living and working in their host communities. Hannah, who volunteered in the 2000s, eagerly anticipated the end of the training period because it ushered in her new status as a Peace Corps volunteer and she and other volunteers then “had our own lives in our sites,” during which they felt somewhat more independent of the Peace Corps bureaucracy. This also created the opportunity for them to prove to people in the U.S. that they could succeed in their Peace Corps work. Unlike Anthony, the difficulties of the training period did not reveal to Ava and Hannah that they were on a mission to help poor people. Rather, it served as an institutional impediment to their need to get out into their communities and work to address poverty.

Regardless of their training experiences, these budding volunteers expressed excitement at surviving training and moving into their host communities as the lone U.S. citizen and Peace Corps volunteer. They entered their volunteer posts eager to live and see life as lived by these indigenous communities. Their first encounters with their communities became still another reminder that they had, in many ways, moved further from life in the United States. During these moments, ascetic ways of living became proof that, in Peter’s words, they had begun to live an “uninsulated” life in the real world

inhabited by Peace Corps volunteers. As Isabella illustrated in her description of the long car rides and canoeing that led to her arrival in her host community, the juxtaposition of knowing that she would live a materially simplistic life as a volunteer and witnessing her community anticipate her arrival on the outskirts of the jungle functioned to show that she had indeed arrived in a “paradise,” a place untainted by the technologies of modernity with which she was accustomed. Her vision reflected the dominant vision of Peace Corps volunteers, one outlined in the novel *The Ugly American* (discussed in chapter one), whereby the protagonist entered a pristine yet destitute community to address issues that hindered local people from breaking the shackles of poverty.

Interestingly, many volunteers’ feelings of excitement were accompanied by the frustrations of entering and establishing themselves in their new communities. Isabella and Daniel’s recognition that they had embarked on the adventures they sought when they joined the Peace Corps were accompanied by frustrations. Both volunteers recalled how their local communities did not know about their purpose. Isabella and Daniel spent the early months in their sites attempting to explain their roles as Peace Corps volunteers in their respective communities. In the end, these volunteers were able to communicate to the people of their communities about the Peace Corps, but they also asserted that Peace Corps administrators could have made this process much easier by playing a more active role in facilitating volunteer and community relationships.

On the other hand, Ethan’s transition into his community was made easier with the help of the volunteer he was replacing in his village. His community, one adopted him through sharing “their culture, their music, their food” with him, knew about the Peace Corps because they had lived with a volunteer for the previous two years. Though

Ethan nostalgically remembered his years as a volunteer, he and almost every participant recounted about how lonely they felt in the early months at their sites.

Concerning loneliness, safety and security measures made it particularly difficult for women to establish friendships and address feelings of isolation. While men were encouraged to interact with people through having guests in their huts and going out at night alone to meet other villagers in their dwellings and at bars, security issues limited women's access to public spaces, such as bars and visits to friends homes in the village. In Ashley's case, feelings of loneliness marked her two years in a rural area of her host country. One of the major safety precautions noted by several women, that they refrain from inviting guests from their communities after dark, was very difficult for Ashley. Her remark that "I couldn't have people in my house," deepened her sense of loneliness, a feeling that she did not want to ever repeat again her life. The knowledge that men were supported in living with fewer limits to community immersion heightened women's feelings of alienation. In addition, the inherent challenges of moving to a new community, learning a language, and managing loneliness were made more stressful when volunteers witnessed extreme instances of poverty. This is especially noteworthy given that William and all other participants asserted that their overarching reason for joining the Peace Corps was to help poor people around the world.

Thankfully for the volunteers, the coupling of material and emotional ascetism characteristic of life in the Peace Corps was peppered by moments of relief. These moments grew to become commonplace as the volunteers learned the local language and felt accepted in their communities. The volunteers' feelings of loneliness dissipated after they knew that their presence was appreciated in their communities. Indeed, feedback

from the community was particularly important, because the individual nature of Peace Corps work, i.e., volunteers were located at least a few communities away from neighboring volunteers and there is little institutional oversight, left few other avenues for gauging how the indigenous communities felt about Peace Corps. Joshua remarked on how he never truly knew how he was impacting community life until his community through a party for him. When he received a letter of recommendation from the chief, Joshua knew that he had become adopted in the community. For him, the village chief's acceptance engendered his own sense of accomplishment and Joshua was "just so proud that he did this for me." Emily's experience of being allowed into a very insular community and taking part in AIDS prevention education was another very public way that she, Joshua, and other volunteers recognized that they were no longer viewed as strangers in their communities.

Thus, the volunteers' experiences of working through the feelings of isolation and alienation promoted confidence in their ability to survive and benefit the indigenous people they were serving. Additionally, a culture of "toughness" imbued life in the Peace Corps in part because volunteers expected little in the way of emotional support from the Peace Corps. In other words, the Peace Corps had no mechanism to avail volunteers of the social supports that could have addressed these concerns. Consequently, the cult of heroism of working as a volunteer and the physical remoteness from the agency supported the need for volunteer to look beyond the Peace Corps for these resources.

For volunteers, their personal triumphs fostered both assuredness and the desire to challenge Peace Corps' guidelines. Both Joseph and Ella described how their persistence through the early difficulties gave them the confidence to reconsider Peace

Corps' rules with respect to how they lived in their communities. As Joseph began to feel more comfortable, he decided to begin hitchhiking rather than taking taxis and public buses. His language proficiency gave him the confidence to extend his freedoms; in this case, he had the fortitude to ask indigenous people in his host country to provide lodging. When he spoke the local language, "it would blow people away" and allow for instant acceptance. While other participants chose not to let the Peace Corps know about activities that might lead to them being fired, Joseph told Peace Corps' administrators about hitchhiking. He saw Peace Corps' rules about traveling as hindrances to his desire to deepen his immersion experience and live more ascetically, thus allowing him to be more "self-sufficient."

Ella's resistance to Peace Corps' guidelines mirrored Joseph's in many ways. Her decision to jog alone, a choice that, for women, the Peace Corps viewed as potentially dangerous, gave Ella the feeling that she, too, had distinguished herself from the Peace Corps bureaucracy. Her decision reflected her confidence and knowledge of her community through living, eating, and working i.e., living as a "real" Peace Corps volunteer. Both volunteers' decisions to extend their adventures through challenging the Peace Corps begs the question, What are the consequences of these decisions for the indigenous communities? Peace Corps volunteers were known in their communities as representatives of the United States, and thus as people who could radically initiate social change. Additionally, numerous countries hosting volunteers need assistance in part because of colonial legacies that left them bereft of the resources necessary to survive as independent nations. Also, as stated in chapter one, many countries' foreign aid packages were contingent upon them agreeing to host Peace Corps volunteers (Cobbs-Hoffman

2000; Fischer 1998). Thus, all countries hosting Peace Corps volunteers requested the foreign aid, but they may not have requested Peace Corps' presence in their communities. With respect to individual volunteers, like Joseph and Ella, the issue of how these colonial legacies impacted their interactions with indigenous communities suggests that taking additional personal risks put their communities' reputations at risk. In Madison's terms, these communities had been "blessed with this American" and took responsibility for volunteer safety at least in part to avoid being shamed by other local communities.

Thus, the issue of colonial legacies, from a sociological perspective, needs to include the role of Peace Corps as an arm of the United States government and a fixture in the international development apparatus. As discussed throughout this chapter, the solitary nature of volunteer work and the extent to which volunteers had to immerse to learn the local language and customs to begin their development projects reflects the long journey between the U.S. middle-class and life among the poorest of the poor. The courage and persistence needed to make this transition, one where the ability to live with little material and social supports was painful and difficult, worked to create a sense of alienation from the Peace Corps bureaucracy and encouraged more dependence on the local communities. As Joseph and Ella recalled, they felt confident in knowing their communities would offer concern, safety, food, and housing if they were in need. When volunteers needed a retreat from their austere living conditions, in many cases, they did so through resisting Peace Corps safety and security rules. At times, taking these risks made volunteers more dependent on those they were sent to serve. This was especially true for women in the Peace Corps who, because of the restrictions they were advised to observe, perhaps felt more isolated and more in need of retreat than the men who

volunteered, potentially creating even more responsibility on behalf of their communities to keep them safe. Because of dramatic shift from middle-class life to regularly witnessing hunger and illness, all volunteers reported needing to vacate their communities for short periods of time. As described earlier, these retreats also functioned to distinguish volunteers from Peace Corps administrators who did not know anything about being a volunteer

Most volunteers reported that it took from six months to a year to develop a sense of efficacy concerning their ability to help their indigenous communities. As their comfort with the local language and their place in the community grew, the participants saw this as a sign that they were called to intercede with the patterns of poverty that were indicative of life in the global South. For Grace, her community ties and commitment to her village reminded her that her work with the Peace Corps was not a job, but a calling. Her decision to maintain her commitment in spite of having little social support was because addressing the stultifying poverty she witnessed on a daily basis was much more than just a job to complete. Particularly for women who volunteered, the individualistic nature of the Peace Corps and the gendered ethic of care promoted their conviction that choosing not to answer this call was commensurate with leaving the village in shambles. Mia eloquently described her experience of this consciousness. Because the Peace Corps had put a lot of money and effort into training her and because the people in her village expected her to improve their lives, it made her wonder, “If I leave, what will happen to these people?” After witnessing tremendous suffering, the commitment narrative proved difficult to resist.

The emergence of the “super volunteer” and the lack of access to other subject

positions within the binary of the super volunteer and, in Addison's terms, the "horrible volunteer," strengthened the importance of one's commitment to helping the poor. Particularly among communities who had seen very few, if any, U.S. citizens other than a handful of Peace Corps volunteers, there was a likelihood that, as Sophia suggested, the "culture just so blatantly compares you." Although, by definition, there are few super volunteers, the ever present stories about super volunteers and the lack of access to becoming an "average" volunteer functioned as a social control mechanism pressuring volunteers to aspire to this status (Berger 1963). For a group that cares deeply about social change, living amongst those in poverty created an even greater sense of urgency to ameliorate the poverty conditions and live up to this heroic status.

According to Weber, a second sign that one had been "chosen" by God included the material abundance with which God had bestowed upon those who were actively, tirelessly engaged in the labor market. For Peace Corps volunteers, who shed the trappings of the middle-class to show that they were among those destined to serve the poor, evidence that they were among the elect would be their successes in addressing world poverty and the stories that would circulate among their middle-class families and friends in the United States upon their return. These successes would come through establishing international development projects that would provide great benefit to their communities. In the next chapter, I discuss what life is like for volunteers who have mastered the local language, solidified their positions in their communities, and responded--with renewed energy--to the call to serve the poor through actively engaging in the community betterment work.

CHAPTER V:

“THE TOUGHEST JOB YOU’LL EVER LOVE”: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PEACE CORPS WORKERS

A. Introduction

As discussed in chapter one, the historical events of the 1950s converged to facilitate the emergence of the Peace Corps. The Cold War, decolonization movements, the “discovery” of world poverty, and President Kennedy’s sense of duty to help the poor provided the perfect backdrop for this organization to materialize. U.S. citizens dedicated to social change wanted to work with the Peace Corps to help the poor and give nations throughout the world a more positive view of the United States. Peace Corps volunteers personified these humanitarian ideals by heeding the call to address world poverty and welcoming the challenges of living among the poorest of the poor. As volunteers adjusted to their new lives abroad, they gained confidence as they became more adept at living in the global South. More specifically, their proficiency with the local language, their cooperation with the people of their communities, and the daily reminders that they had made it their personal responsibility to work on behalf of the poor further fostered Peace Corps volunteers’ conviction that they were among those chosen to address suffering in the world.

In this chapter, I discuss how Peace Corps volunteers experienced life as more full members of their respective communities. I begin by outlining the ways through which the participants were fulfilled by their work among the poor. For these volunteers,

engaging in collaborative efforts with their indigenous communities to subvert patterns of ingrained poverty and feeling a sense of community in their villages anchored their appreciation for having lived the quintessential Peace Corps experience. Secondly, I consider how some volunteers became disillusioned with development efforts through discovering that the complicated nature of aid work can, at times, inhibit community well-being. Many of these volunteers discussed the confounding experience of witnessing development projects that did not address core village needs. Lastly, I report on the vulnerabilities that volunteers encountered abroad, including being susceptible to a range of sufferings with little support from the Peace Corps and their local communities.

B. Living the Peace Corps dream

Numerous volunteers recounted how living and working in their communities allowed them to have a finger on the pulse of what the poor needed, through their eyes, to promote community well-being. By being immersed in the language and culture of their respective villages, Peace Corps volunteers played an integral role in channeling resources and development projects into these communities. Volunteers' intimate knowledge of local needs gave them a unique position from which they could speak with authority on behalf of their communities. Jay, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, recalled how his perspective, as a member of his village, was a key factor in helping the poor. Because he witnessed development projects fail in other communities who did not have Peace Corps volunteers, he learned that Peace Corps volunteers can act as a conduit for the appropriate development resources rather than relying on development bureaucrats to put into action programs based on cursory knowledge of the community. Jay explained:

...I think that it's a real mistake going into it and saying, 'I know what these people need.' [laughs] No, you don't! But the people can tell you what they need. That's the way to get at any kind of a problem, interview, talk, listen. Do a lot of listening.

Jay lived in his community for three years, which gave him time to see the implementation of development projects and evaluate their impacts on the local population. By voicing village concerns to potential aid organizations and witnessing successful outcomes, he gained a more holistic understanding of the relationship between development donors and people in need.

Lily and Ashley, volunteers in the Caribbean in the 2000s and Africa in the 1990s, respectively, found ways to initiate development initiatives that promoted the vitality of their communities. Lily and other volunteers in her region saw former President Bush's PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) funds as an opportunity to assist in a broad range of community issues. She recounted how she had proposed HIV prevention education projects to attain these monies; then, Lily used the funds to do the HIV projects *and* address a more pressing issue in her community, the need for better sanitation. Similarly, Ashley's expertise as a natural resource management volunteer allowed her to help her community in ways other development organizations had overlooked. Her community inherited tree nurseries from an NGO. However, her community did not have a source to adequately supply water for the trees. Ashley quickly earned grant monies from an NGO to build a well that nourished the trees and improved life in the village. She remembered:

It (natural resource management) was—my primary job mushroomed into a much broader engagement of working with women's groups, teaching them how to cook with soybeans and changing their diet. It was just interesting. It was real organic that way. And I saw opportunities like that all the time. It's just, you had to be open to it and say, "They wanted to grow trees but they don't have any

water. We have to get ‘em water first!” [laughs] Once you do that, they have a lot of opportunities that come from getting water.

Ashley used knowledge of her community, and her connections to the institution of international development, to assist in providing for things *the community* felt was important. Both she and Lily understood how to access development resources in ways that met the needs of their indigenous communities. Their thoughtful approach, one that involved redefining how development projects get implemented, fostered their sense of heroism through, in many ways, protecting their communities from haphazard development efforts.

Other volunteers described their service in a similar vein. Chris, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, desired to live what he described as the “prototypical Peace Corps experience,” one that included living an austere existence in a remote community in Africa. He discussed his experience of being a young white man embraced by his community, one that had high hopes for what he could do to reduce illness and famine. Chris recalled both the sense of acceptance and his need to facilitate positive changes during his time in the Peace Corps. Chris described how:

...being a 24-year-old in a village and just being allowed into the circle of the elders in the village once a week, whereas other people who were 40, 50 years old weren’t allowed in, these 50-year-old men weren’t allowed in to meet with the chief at this time, but he’d come and see me, let me sit with them, let me drink with them, express my opinions and thoughts and listen to theirs, was amazing. And I thought it carried a lot of responsibility, too, not only representing people of my race, but people of my country and the ideals that I might be bringing to the table. I carried a huge responsibility. So that was a good feeling as well as a big weight on your shoulders at the same time.

Chris achieved his goal of living intimately among the poor unencumbered by the trappings of modernity. He also scrupulously considered how his work might make a

lasting impact on how his community would understand the United States. His welcomed and successful work in educating village children in disease prevention practices garnered him much community support. Thus, Chris' awareness of his responsibility to represent the United States as a compassionate state became a way for him to initiate grassroots solutions to local poverty conditions. His conversations renewed his desire to work closely with the indigenous population and create a better life for his community.

Other volunteers were also encouraged by the relationships they established with their communities. Andrew, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, recalled the importance of friendships with the people of his community and how these have endured for over a decade. Though he has not returned to visit his host country, he calls or writes letters to his friends in South America about once per month. Andrew seemed to have little doubt that he would continue to maintain these friendships throughout his life. Mia, a volunteer in the 2000s in the Caribbean, reflected Andrew's commitment to maintaining ties with the local community. She pondered the depth with which she appreciated her closest friends in her village. Mia explained how her best times in the Peace Corps were

...the moments I spent with my host family. I was with them for two years. It's just those relationships, and I would say, my host sister, I had three host sisters, a host brother, and mother, and a father. And one sister who was two years younger than me, she just had such an impact on my life and my experience. I don't think I would have been able to finish it if she wasn't there.

(What did she do for you?)

Oh, it was just—you know, I think she—as much as she could as a woman (of her host community), she really understood. When I found out for the second time that my parents' visa was denied, I think she understood how I was feeling, as best as she could have. All those little moments with her, playing games, just those nights after dinner, talking, having tea, just outside. It's like, you can't pinpoint a certain moment, but it's all those little precious moments that you

spend when you really—it's like she was really my sister. That's how well we knew each other and got along. You even fought and you made up and whatever. I think it's that, it's her.

Mia's emphasis on sustaining a close relationship with her host family, especially her sister, was an indicator that she had lived her vision of how she had hoped to spend her time in the Peace Corps. Though she, like most volunteers, experienced hardships during her time abroad, being fully welcomed by her host family provided the context for her to achieve her goal of truly getting to know the people of her village. Mia continues to remain in contact with her host family through letter writing and mailing pictures commemorating important events in her life.

Abigail, a volunteer in North Africa/Middle East in the 1990s, described a similar relationship with the mother of her host family. Abigail's work with the Peace Corps included doing preventative health education projects in local villages. Through her presentations, she came in contact with hundreds of people; Abigail felt a sense of camaraderie with most of the indigenous people with whom she worked. However, as a U.S. citizen, she was also uncomfortable with the formality of these relationships and longed to be treated more as a member of the community. Abigail developed what she defined as a "more real relationship" with Amina, her host mother, precisely because Amina's generosity included treating her as a full member of the village. When Abigail spent time with Amina and their friends, she always felt like "one of the gang," which included conversing, cooking, and having tea with these women. As I remarked on Abigail's smile as she remembered her times with Amina, she commented on how Amina made her feel like a member of her family. Abigail explained:

Amina really was like a mom to me. She really made this connection and she was

just super-welcoming. I really felt successful as a volunteer because I really felt like I had made this connection with this person. And I had other people that I was friends with, but Amina, I wasn't fluent in the language. I spoke pretty well, but we really understood each other. She was great...and she was so sweet. She would send me back and I would get home and find that she had stuffed hard-boiled eggs in my backpack as a present. [laughs] And it was like, "Oh, she shouldn't have!" [laughs] But "Yay, I have hard-boiled eggs!" [laughs]

Abigail's feelings of loneliness dissipated during the time spent with her host mother. Amina's patience and kindness moved her; the unexpected gift of hard-boiled eggs, a present that showed that their relationship was not simply limited to their time spent together, let Abigail know that she was a true member of her community.

Emma, a volunteer in Africa in the 1980s, also considered her relationships with the people in her community as close and familial. Her excitement grew as she described her determination to always have a relationship with the people she loved in her village. For Emma, this sense of solidarity also included other Peace Corps volunteers with whom she served. Emma credited the Peace Corps with providing the support that allow her to focus her energies on creating a sense of community among her indigenous neighbors and fellow volunteers. She explained:

I left Peace Corps with friends that I'm closer to now than I think I've ever been to other people, and I will be close with them forever, because we've got this experience now that bonded us together. And I think Peace Corps in itself, it may have flaws here and there in the program, but I think Peace Corps itself, they're so supportive and they're there for you. I've never had any job or anything that cared for me the way they did or supported me the way they did. Anything I needed, if I needed help, if I was sick, they were there. Everything was taken care of. I've never felt so safe with anything, and I think that's a huge component to being overseas by yourself in a new country.

Emma's story suggests that the Peace Corps made her feel safe enough to engage more openly with her community and other volunteers. Though Andrew and Mia did not refer specifically to how the Peace Corps enabled these relationships to emerge, all three

participants articulated how the relationships borne through their volunteer experience will persist throughout each of their lives.

C. Disenchantment with development efforts

As illustrated above, volunteers who emphasized the cross-cultural aspects of their time abroad were often content with their work in the Peace Corps. However, other volunteers who sought to make substantial inroads into seemingly permanent patterns of poverty were often disappointed that their plans did not fully materialize. Joshua, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 2000s, commented on how, some time into his service, he needed to reevaluate what was possible to achieve in his community. He learned that, even given the most ideal situation to promote significant social change, such transformations were a slow process. Joshua described how he felt he lived among people who were very welcoming and cooperative; he also learned that his desire for sweeping social change was unrealistic. He asserted that

...when you're talking about sustainable development in two years, it's a drop in the bucket. Most Americans go really wanting to leave and seeing that they've done something to help these communities, to build something, like a school... It's kind of a joke, you don't want to call it a joke, but it's hard, it takes a lot to really make change happen.

Joshua, the participant to whom I referred in chapter four as the beneficiary of a party and letter of recommendation from the village chief, held high hopes for what he could accomplish in a community that had been so generous to him. The lack of recognizable, tangible results forced him to reconsider what was possible during a two-year stint with the Peace Corps. His proclamation that grand visions of social change were "kind of a joke" illustrates his disappointment in the slow crawl towards world betterment for which he and his community worked.

Other volunteers understood setbacks to social change efforts as being due to limited views of development. Grace, a volunteer in the 1990s in Africa, succinctly outlined her view of how Peace Corps volunteers can impact what it means to do development work. She discussed the difficulty of being a Peace Corps volunteer and learning about development programs that she felt were unsuccessful because of their rigid understanding of what it means to help the poor. As she gained more experience, Grace grew critical of how large development organizations (e.g., USAID) addressed world poverty. She explained her vision of the Peace Corps' role in international development:

...it's interesting, 'cause that idea of development, particularly abroad, is very much like, "We're gonna pave this road," and, "We're gonna put a building here." And that's the idea of development. That idea of teaching people to fish or discussing ideas about gender equality or teaching English or those small microfinance, small business programs, HIV-AIDS awareness, that sort of thing. That's not necessarily what a lot of development people think of as development. So I think a lot of times that development definition should be expanded a little bit.

Grace's notion of development was inclusive of the micro-politics of development, i.e., the ways through which communities are helped via person-to-person contact with volunteers. She took issue not with creating roads and building health clinics and schools, but rather with the dominant definition of development that privileges those endeavors over the work of Peace Corps volunteers, whose work typically requires little or no large-scale development funding.

The work of volunteers, the grassroots development workers, and that of larger development organizations, those with the financial resources to work in cooperation with volunteers to address poverty, at times proved effective. However, several

participants recalled incidences during which the aims of development organizations appeared incongruent with village needs. For instance, Anthony, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, recalled an experience that reflected a disconnect between development providers and his local community. Anthony argued that Peace Corps volunteers, who have very little access to development monies, often did some of the most useful community work due to being embedded within their communities. He asserted that volunteers provided a necessary resource assuring that local needs were being met. Nonetheless, his work in Africa was marked by contacts with large NGOs who insisted that their “random, top-down, money-dump projects” be adopted by local communities. Anthony recalled a noteworthy example of this.

I actually had one instance when an NGO came into my village and started asking all these questions and flat-out said, “We want to do this for you guys,” and then they got in their SUVs and drove away, and the very same old men in the village who were thanking them five minutes ago said, “Why the hell are they doing that? We don’t need this. This isn’t what we want.”

Anthony and other volunteers commented that indigenous communities accepted unwanted projects from large-scale development organizations to maintain a relationship with them should these organizations eventually offer funds to do projects the community actually needed. Anthony asserted that seeing this exchange between development giants and his community showed him the value of immersion as a way of establishing trust and learning about more acute village needs. As his work continued, Anthony distinguished himself from the larger development apparatus by doing needs assessments and listening even more closely to the people of his community.

Alyssa, a volunteer in Asia in the 1960s, discussed the importance of working with well-funded NGOs to potentially increase the impact of aid strategies that are

welcomed by local communities. While she felt that development programs did in fact provide necessary resources, these organizations left indigenous peoples wanting of ways to use and maintain projects. Alyssa explained:

(An aid organization) had helped dig wells, but they forgot to tell anybody how to maintain them. A couple of our Peace Corps people, two, I think, maybe just one, managed to get into that and help them learn how to take care of their wells. And another one, there was a community where they tried to get plumbing, so they helped people put plumbing in their houses, not realizing that the women's big social event of the day was squattin' around edge of the fields when they could talk to each other and gossip. [laughs] So they (Peace Corps volunteers) kind of changed that and they made squat pots, if you will, around the field....They solved the problem, finally. But the people at USAID usually go in with their agenda rather than the people's agenda.

Alyssa was frustrated with both the lack of follow-up by NGOs, in her case, with respect to water wells, and large scale development organizations that refused to utilize Peace Corps volunteers' expert knowledge of the meanings attached to local cultural practices. Here, volunteers shared with NGOs an awareness of this community's need for better sanitation practices. However, volunteers' cultural sensitivity provided an avenue to address this health issue with minimal intrusion into the routines around which this community reaffirmed its solidarity. Their efforts included redirecting NGO work that, while important, was sometimes implemented in ways that were incongruent with community ways of life.

Thus, the tremendous responsibility of both utilizing development resources while also protecting the poor from its dangers was among the most challenging aspects of working in the Peace Corps. This fact, coupled with the complexities of living as the lone U.S. citizen amidst debilitating poverty, at times proved overwhelming for volunteers who worked hard to better their communities. While the following example is

an extreme case of a development failure, I propose it to illustrate the complicated nature of development, an enterprise that, when unsuccessful, can at times leave no clear answers as to why it did not succeed as expected. Chloe, a health volunteer in South America in the 1980s, learned from local health care workers that building latrines would improve village health, as defecating in and near rice fields exposed much of the community to disease. This situation accounted for numerous visits to the health clinic and became costly to villagers. With the health care worker's and community's blessing, Chloe set out to acquire the resources to address this problem. Chloe acquired cement, a prized asset in poor communities, to begin building latrines. Excited about how her work could help a community that had done so much for her, she went out to the rice fields to recruit men to help with building the latrines.

As Chloe's discussed her ideas with the men in the rice fields, several agreed to help with the project. However, she happened upon one man who was embittered by her presence in the community and the project. Chloe recounted the experience:

I went out to talk to this guy to say, "I would love for you to be part of this program. I have this cement top." Nobody had cement. It was a big deal. He was so hostile to me. He said—he was very hostile, and I asked, "Why are you so angry?" And he said, "You're a bone." I said, "I don't understand what you're talking about." He said, "You're a bone from the government. They keep us here in poverty, working these fields, and then they think that by throwing us a bone, a cement latrine top or you coming here and bringing us some books, that they can give us a bookshelf and somehow we're gonna be satisfied with our government. That's just not the way it is. I don't want your latrine and I don't want your bookshelves"—at the time we didn't have any books—"with no books. I don't want any of this stuff. You're just a bone and that's all you are. America's so rich. You're so rich. You have so much, and you want to give me a cement latrine top. I don't need a cement latrine top."

This experience made Chloe give pause and consider this perspective for the first time. She recalled how her community enjoyed everything she'd contributed until that

moment. She told this man that perhaps she was a cog in the development machine and that she deeply regretted this. Chloe followed, stating, “I don’t mean to be. That’s not who I am. I’m really here because I care.”

Chloe’s story reflects the precarious position of Peace Corps volunteers with respect to development. She worked to meet village needs, and given the feedback she received from the villagers and health personnel, she felt confident that she was succeeding at this endeavor. Nevertheless, this man’s viewpoint, which Chloe later learned was shared by several people in her village, that she was a “bone from the government,” forced Chloe to consider the complications associated addressing poverty in the global South. Although this was painful for her, their conversation—this man voicing his anger and Chloe’s commitment to considering a perspective that threatened her view of herself as a volunteer—allowed for a moment whereby she reconsidered development practices thorough expanding the terms within which development is traditionally understood.

Thus, even under difficult circumstances, many Peace Corps volunteers became aware of the unintended consequences of development and at times altered development paths in ways that supported their local communities. Chloe’s experience illustrates how local and world politics also impact the practice of international development. Still, as Anthony stated, the Peace Corps may “not be respected among serious development agencies,” volunteers were often able to divert development programs in ways that maintained the culture’s integrity and addressed acute needs.

D. Disappointments, difficulties, and tragedies of living in-country

Peace Corps volunteers encountered a broad range of experiences during their

service. As discussed throughout this chapter, many volunteers were able to have the fulfilling experiences they had anticipated. Volunteers also dealt with unexpected impediments that limited the degree to which they could help to improve life in their communities.

Some participants faced situations that evoked distress and even the potential for violence. Ethan, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, relayed an episode that posed a potential threat his safety. A year into his service, Ethan and the rest of the local neighborhood council members discussed building latrines throughout the community to improve village well-being. With overwhelming approval for this project, he and the council president worked together to get the necessary resources to begin the work. The president, Joseph, was a carpenter who helped Ethan to create a budget for the project. With a plan in place, Ethan set about writing grants to buy these materials. Later, upon completion of the project, he saw that 30% of the initial budget remained unused. Ethan sought to put the remaining monies into the neighborhood coffers to be used for future village improvement projects. However, Joseph felt that, because he was able to get the project completed under budget, he should be allowed to keep the remaining money. When Ethan asked the neighborhood council about this move, they balked--but did not have the political power to challenge Joseph, who also served as the council president. Ethan went alone to question Joseph about his claims to these funds. Joseph erupted in a fury, arguing that, because he was the contractor for this job, he deserved the leftover funds. Ethan was perplexed and felt slightly threatened by the Joseph's demeanor throughout the conversation. After some thinking, Ethan erred on the side of caution and told the Peace Corps that, although he felt the situation was now under control, he was

appreciably concerned that “maybe he’s really upset with me and would want to do something to me personally.” Though he wanted to remain in his community, Peace Corps administrators convinced Ethan to take a short leave. Ethan explained:

...it was just for a few days, (Peace Corps officials said) just, “Stay in the capital. We’ll cover your—just come stay in the capital and let things settle down.” I went with the person in charge of the safety department of Peace Corps and we would talk to community members, and then we all came to agreement together.

Ethan, Joseph, and the Peace Corps reconciled and Ethan continued to work in his community without further incident. Still, he valued the Peace Corps’ quick and effective response to this situation. In his words, “all the main focus (of the Peace Corps) is safety,” and thus their swift action secured within him the confidence that he would continue to be protected in his community.

Elizabeth, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, was disconcerted by the isolation of life in the Peace Corps. She enjoyed her training period, one that was very structured and included friendships with fellow volunteers and the people of her country. However, being moved to rural Africa, to a region where she was the only volunteer, with few language skills, proved distressing for her. In addition, she missed the security provided by the highly structured training program. As the months of her service continued, Elizabeth grew to dread village life. Her lack of proficiency in the local language (understandable and common among new volunteers, given she had only begun learning it three months prior) left her feeling lonely and ineffective. She started spending more and more time alone in her hut “reading all day.” As time went on, she found that leaving her hut and practicing the language did little to help her situation. However, her anxiety made it difficult for her to concentrate and began impacting her mental health. She

explained:

I was having trouble sleeping there, partly, I think, because of the heat, it's so hot, but I think partly because of stress. There was one day where I started feeling kind of weird and antsy and I couldn't focus. I mean, I read all day every day and I couldn't read and I couldn't focus on anything and my mind was racing and I was just feeling really weird, almost like I was going crazy. So I got on my bike and I rode down to another town. I remember feeling so afraid, like, "I think I'm losing my mind." And I had been given some sleeping pills to help me with sleeping.

(This was from Peace Corps?)

Yeah. So I was like, I mean, I got on a bus and I went to (the capital city) to the med people and told them what happened and I was just really freaked out. I mean, it had passed, but—and they were like, "Oh, I don't know, maybe it was because of the sleeping pills." So I stopped taking them. But when I got back, I started having—when I went to the States, I had panic attacks. So then I was like, "Oh, I think that was what that was, my first panic attack."

The Peace Corps medical staff knew very little about Elizabeth's distress until her visit to the capital, and so sleeping pills may have appeared to be a logical explanation for why she felt like she "was going crazy." When I asked her if anything could have been done differently to provide a more supportive environment, she asserted that she wished she'd been placed in a more urban area with other volunteers. Due to the fact that she had little contact with the Peace Corps after the training period, and because she was keenly aware that other volunteers had transitioned more easily into their communities, Elizabeth felt that she was solely responsible for her disappointing time in the Peace Corps. She left the Peace Corps one year into her service. During the interview, she expressed guilt at not having accomplished more, even several years after her having returned to the United States.

Other volunteers experienced unwanted impoverishments during their service. Sophia, a volunteer in North Africa/Middle East in the 2000s, discussed her site visit, a

time late in one's training during which volunteers meet and live with their new host families. Because host families can make a huge impact on the Peace Corps experience, volunteers eagerly anticipate this first visit with them. Sophia met her host family, a married couple with three daughters, at their home in a factory town. She immediately learned she would be home alone in the evenings, as the wife and daughters worked most nights in the factory. Matters grew more complicated when Sophia learned that the husband was the best friend of the health clinic director, her boss. She detailed her first days with this family.

So I got there and the host father came and picked me up, the clinic director's best friend. He brought me into the kitchen, the outdoor kitchen, and was like, "Make me a meal." (She then thought,) "Wait, I'm coming for my visit!" Where's the little celebration that everybody else got that they tell me about, like, "My family was there and they picked me up and it was so great, we had this big meal." And he showed me into this kitchen and was like, "Make something," and there was, like, nothing. What do you have? Potatoes, some eggs. What do I make? And it was just a horrible, horrible site visit. Barely any food. I was living in this weird outdoor kind of like shed thing with this big wok. It was freezing cold, with these wooden floors with these big gaps in between. It was really horrible, really horrible. I was like—and I loved my training family. I was like—I don't know, it was pretty bad. The training, everything was really, really bad.

After returning to her training post and describing the situation at what was soon to become her new home, she had hoped that Peace Corps administrators would collaborate with her about living in a more welcoming home. Sophia recalled them being impervious to her suspicions; Peace Corps officials told her "you'll be fine...Just go there and attempt it. You'll be fine." When Sophia voiced her concerns a second time, she was again told that life with her host family "would be fine."

However, as her service progressed, life became increasingly difficult. Sophia learned that her host father was not using monies given him by the Peace Corps to allay

any additional expenses incurred during her stay with the family. Rather, she continued to work with constant hunger during her first months, including stomaching breakfasts during which she and the children shared one egg and scraps of bread. Sophia then began eating meals with friends outside of the family and spending minimal time with her host father. She refrained from seeking additional assistance and support from the Peace Corps organization. Instead, other volunteers and villagers helped her to cope with this difficult situation.

Briana, a volunteer in Africa in the 1990s, recounted her own challenges of living a gendered existence abroad. In particular, she was told during training to be cautious of young boys in groups, as they often threw rocks at women and girls. After becoming proficient in the local language and winning the acceptance of her community, Briana began her work at a health clinic in a neighboring town. The 30-minute walk to this town was known for being an area where boys gathered to throw rocks at women and girls. Briana was furious about this situation, and her anger deepened when she herself was targeted by the boys. After persisting through a few such attacks, Briana told her Peace Corps administrators about these episodes. She explained that Peace Corps' first recourse was to have her tell her host family about the incidents so that they would intervene. She felt uncomfortable with this in part because so many of the young boys in her village looked alike and she did not want to call attention to an innocent child. Also, she was aware that the boys might receive a harsh punishment, such as being beaten, or their families publicly shamed—which could escalate into violence. Both consequences were vexing, and so she told her host family about being hit by rocks only in the most extreme cases. The Peace did not intervene in these situations.

Sadly, other participants lived through violent encounters. As noted in chapter four, Ella, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, jogged as a way to relax after long and grueling days as a volunteer. On one of her running days, she was exercising late in the afternoon near her town. As dusk approached, she turned and continued her run back to her community. Ella explained what occurred next:

So I'm running, and this guy on a bike comes behind me and smacks my ass. I was like, "Oh, boy. OK, whatever. I don't know what this is about." I kept on running. He rode off a little bit. I didn't want to talk, because I didn't want him to know that I was foreign. So I was running, and then he came back to me. "Where are you from?" I just kept on running. I said, "Go! Just go!" And then he comes up and he grabs me while I'm running. He's on his bike at the time, so he grabs my arm. And I just, instinct, I went "poof!" and I punched him and ran and then I started screaming. There was a bus station in that area. I started screaming because he kept on coming back. So I went in the bus station and sat there and that guy took off. I had a cell phone on me, so that was good. At that time, it was the scariest frickin' thing.

Ella called the Peace Corps security personnel from her cell phone. She grew more frantic as she learned that Deborah, the person in charge of security that evening, did not know what to do to help and she became frightened for Ella's safety. Because Deborah was uncertain—she had asked Ella, "What do you want me to do?"—and because Deborah was four hours away from Ella's town, Ella made her way back to her village on her own. The next day, Deborah and the local police arrived at Ella's home.

From there, they took her to the police station. Ella explained:

...the next day, I think she drove down and they were at the police station, trying to grill me, just, like, grill me. "What did he look like?" It was so intense. I was just like, "Why am I going through this?" They kept on questioning me over and over and over about the whole situation. "What did he look like? What did he do? What was his bike color?" "I don't remember his bike color. Maybe white. I don't know. All I remember—" I felt like I remembered his face because he had really distinct features. "I already told you this story, why are you asking me this again? I don't know." It was just—I can't explain the whole situation, but it was a really bad situation.

The person who attacked Ella was never identified. However, the Peace Corps did replace this security officer with one who she described as “awesome, a good security guy. I think he was very sensitive, too, so I felt more comfortable with him being more emotional” than the previous security officer. The remainder of her time in the Peace Corps went smoothly and her confidence was restored knowing that the Peace Corps undertook their responsibility for volunteer safety.

Tragically, some volunteers died while serving in the Peace Corps. Recent popular news programs, such as ABC’s *20/20*, have dedicated their efforts towards illuminating violence against Peace Corps volunteers, in particular assaults against women. Moreover, public attention has surfaced to decipher situations that have led to the deaths of some volunteers. Most recently, Stephanie Chance died on October 7, 2010 in the town of Zinder, Niger, just two-weeks into her service. As of yet, little has been said to account for the conditions that led to her death.

While these occurrences are especially troubling, it is often the Peace Corps volunteers themselves who have reported these violent encounters when the organization has been slow to do so. Of the 40 participants in this study, three reported knowing of a fellow volunteer who died while serving in the Peace Corps. One participant, Barbara, a volunteer in South America in the 1980s, communicated the story of a volunteer’s death. Barbara recalled how another volunteer, Robert, was posted in an area of the jungle which he later learned was a major route used by cocaine traffickers during the 1980s. According to her, the traffickers ignored Robert’s presence in the village. However, shortly after he had completed his service and returned to the United States, Barbara stated that the cocaine “crops were raided and people were arrested. They raided all these

drug people who happened to be around.” The drug traffickers blamed Robert, arguing that he was a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agent in the guise of a Peace Corps volunteer.

While the timing of these events could have been happenstance, Barbara was confident that the Peace Corps would exercise caution and withdraw from this area for a time.

However, Justine, a recently sworn-in volunteer, was placed in Robert’s community. She arrived by bus to become this community’s new schoolteacher. Upon her arrival, the people of her village told her that she needed to leave because, as a member of the Peace Corps, she could be a target for violence. Barbara elaborated:

They said, “Your life is in danger. They (the drug traffickers) think that this other Peace Corps volunteer told and that you’re drug enforcement agent. So you need to get out of here” ...Coincidence or not, she goes to the village, and she’s just like me. “I’m your new Peace Corps volunteer. Here’s what I’m doing.” She was gonna work with schools. So she’s scared, and she says, “OK, I’ll leave.” But the next bus isn’t till 6 in the morning, and nobody has a car, that kind of stuff.

Barbara reported that Justine was unaware of the circumstances that preceded her arrival in this community. She was also unsure if the Peace Corps knew of anything that happened after Robert’s departure from this community. Later that day, while making preparations to take the bus out of the village the next morning, Justine’s host family heard the sound of cars converging on the community. They knew, in this remote and poor village, that the only people who own cars were the drug traffickers. Barbara continued:

So they go and say, “You have to go hide.” They got her out the back window of this bamboo hut and said, “Go hide. They’ll kill you.” The (drug) runners asked for her. So the people said, “No, she didn’t come,” and they beat the crap out of this family. They just practically killed this family. And they didn’t tell where she was.

Justine hid in the woods just outside the home and heard the beatings. After things

went silent, she continued to hide in the woods, long into the night, fearing that the drug traffickers were waiting quietly for her to return to the hut. At daybreak, one of the family's young sons found her and urged her to take the morning bus out of the village en route to the capital city and the local Peace Corps headquarters.

When Justine arrived at the Peace Corps offices, she recounted these events to the administrators. They told her that they knew nothing about what happened after Robert's departure. They asserted that he was not part of the DEA and promised to relocate her in a region far away from where the violence had occurred.

In the meantime, she remained in the capital city for two months to recover and regroup from this trauma. The Peace Corps then relocated her to another area, far away from her previous post, yet still located in the jungle. Shortly into her time in the new village, she was found dead in a nearby river. It was reported that she died from drowning.

According to Barbara, the Peace Corps' official statement read that Justine went swimming in the river and drowned. She was skeptical, asserting that "I think she was murdered. I don't know if it was the same people or if she just happened to be murdered." Barbara said that she knew of volunteers who died in accidents, but this situation was particularly difficult because she was convinced that someone intended to kill her. In addition to suspecting that the drug traffickers sought to enact revenge through killing a Peace Corps volunteer, Barbara discussed, at length, how ardent the Peace Corps trainers had been about avoiding going into dangerous areas, such as rivers and beaches. She explained:

I don't know any female volunteer who would go swimming in the river alone. Who would go to the river alone? You wouldn't. I lived by the beach. I went to

the beach once. I lived 20 minutes from the beach. Buses went by every day. It wasn't safe. That's where these five Peace Corps volunteers, these females, were raped, on the beach (two months prior to Justine's death).

She went on to say:

I didn't know her (Justine) very well, but I knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't have gone to the river to bathe. That was part of your training. Understand that you're at risk because of this. They would train us on safety issues. Safety issues were a big deal down there. I think they're probably a big deal in a lot of countries, but I think this Peace Corps could do more in terms of safety training, a lot more. Because there is so much risk. They should have done more for (Justine).

Barbara's own experience of learning about the risks of living in-country, including the rape of five women shortly before Justine's death, gave her reason to believe that volunteers, women in particular, were known targets of violence. In her eyes, and given her experience, living in her host country exposed volunteers to numerous dangers. Even given Peace Corps' safety directives, women's gendered vulnerability to violence proved that these happenings can—and do—occur regardless of well-intentioned safety precautions. Barbara felt that Justine's death was much more complicated than a tragic case of accidentally drowning in a river, as had been explained by the Peace Corps. As of my interview with Barbara, she still has not learned more about the events that led to Justine's death.

E. Discussion of findings

Peace Corps volunteers encountered a range of experiences as they worked to help the poor. Their early struggles to learn the local language and culture impelled participants to develop relationships with the people in their villages and work with them to improve their lives. Overcoming these early days of strife emboldened volunteers with the sense that their hard work and dedication would bring about social change.

Most volunteers saw their efforts to work closely with their local communities, especially learning about pressing village needs, as central to Peace Corps' role in addressing poverty. Jay, Ashley, Lily, and Chris realized their visions of creating a more just world necessitated that they spend considerable time communicating with the people of their communities. Jay's experience affirmed the notion that it is difficult to truly understand what local needs entail without living among those in need. His sense of pride, that he in fact undertook this challenge, reminded him that he was doing the work that made Peace Corps' development work effective.

For Ashley and Lily, fulfillment also included finding creative ways of accessing development monies to promote their villages' livelihood. Their holistic approach to community betterment allowed them to be opportunistic, as they saw how seemingly distinct aid programs could be utilized to meet core community needs. Another volunteer, Chris, reported that his community needed less in the way of money. Instead, they needed an adult to organize and educate children about the importance of preventing disease, which he and the elders sought to transmit to future generations of children. In each case, these volunteers achieved their goals of helping the poor in ways that may not have happened had they not lived intimately among those they assisted.

Other volunteers emphasized the relationships with their host communities as the key source of satisfaction during their Peace Corps years. Andrew and Mia cemented relationships with people in their local communities despite the limits of distance and technology. Both used letter writing and cell phones to reaffirm these friendships. Mia's friendship with her adoptive sister grew and continues to flourish in part due to Mia's feelings of being understood during periods of loneliness as a volunteer. Although

Abigail did not report of any current contact with her host mother, Amina, she remains fond of Amina's efforts to include her in ways that extended beyond Abigail's role as a volunteer, which was symbolized through her gift of eggs. Lastly, Emma valued the intimacies of Peace Corps life, including friendships with her community and other volunteers. She credited the Peace Corps' attention to volunteer safety for structuring an atmosphere that permitted these friendships to thrive.

As this section suggests, the intimacies established through immersing oneself in the local community were especially important for women who volunteered. In fact, women were more likely to share Andrew's position on their service than the men. To extend the discussion from chapter three, I posit that the gendered ethic of care was a catalyst influencing how women view their missions in the Peace Corps. The ethic of care refers to the ways through which women are socialized, as a class, to assume an inordinate amount of responsibility for nurturing people (Cole and Coultrap-McQuin 1992; Gilligan 1982; Greeno and Maccoby 1986; Larrabee 1993; Stack 1986). Further, regarding the socio-economics of care work, women's lack of access to the labor market and exposure to poor women and children through social work occupations (e.g., the Peace Corps), which pay little compared to male-centered occupations, suggests that encouraging these needs and desires among women facilitates gender inequality (Agustin 1988; Scott and Tilly 1975; Vicinus 1985).

In the case of Peace Corps volunteers, the ethic of care influenced the extent to which women emphasized the cross-cultural aspects of the Peace Corps. Even Ashley and Lily, who readily included resources from development organizations in their work, emphasized that their relationships to aid organization were secondary to their village

commitments. When Ashley proclaimed, “We have to get ‘em water first!” to support the village’s desire to maintain their tree nurseries, she alluded to utilizing development resources in a strictly utilitarian sense. In other words, she did not seek out relationships with these organizations and did not see her role as a volunteer as one with any allegiances to aid programs. Instead, she viewed her position in her community as one dedicated to nurturing their vision, one that she took on as her own.

Other volunteers used their time in the Peace Corps to more closely consider the role of international development in the lives of the poor. The gradual pace at which development occurred engendered Joshua’s frustration, as he learned that his two years as a volunteer would not allow him to affect the change he desired to take place. He felt a sense of kinship with his community, making this truth especially difficult to bear. Disappointed, Joshua referred to development efforts as “a joke,” thus reflecting the dominant narrative of development, one that involves using millions of dollars to fund large-scale development programs (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Mosse and Lewis 2006). Interestingly, this view coexists with the mythology of Peace Corps volunteers as heroes. Particularly in the U.S. middle class, as illustrated in chapter three, one either lives a life of superficiality and political apathy, or one lives an adventurous life dedicated to social change, with the Peace Corps facilitating the later. There is little room to consider, for example, how an average person helping a stranger can be considered an act of social change. Thus, those like Joshua, with middle-class backgrounds and a deeply entrenched sensitivity to the plight of the poor, saw their daily efforts to change the world as insignificant.

Grace and Andrew offered rearticulations of the dominant view of development.

For Grace, her experience showed that what it means to do development “needs to be expanded a bit.” As a volunteer, she saw that large development organizations were not providing--or unable to provide--the education resources needed in her community. In her eyes, Peace Corps volunteers bridged the gulf between development donors and poor communities, while, in her case, generating more complex ways through which development can be understood.

Andrew, like Grace, questioned the viability of such limited versions of development. He related his experience of witnessing the complex relationships among development organizations, practitioners, and local communities. Andrew understood that indigenous communities work to foster good relationships with aid organizations, even during times when the programs did not address community needs. As Andrew saw this occur, he felt as though he had little power to voice his concerns, since the Peace Corps was “not respected among serious development agencies.” However, he was thoughtful enough to know that challenging development initiatives which were not helpful might destabilize village ties with aid groups, a possibility that threatened village improvement (Rossi 2006). Though they had very little political power to influence aid programs, as Alyssa’s case of volunteers disseminating information about maintaining water wells illustrates, volunteers were able to welcome opportunities to solve smaller problems left by development organizations.

Chloe’s latrine project revealed that making inroads into poverty conditions can illuminate unintended consequences of development. Even though her latrine building project garnered the support of much of her community and staff at the local health clinic, the fact that she was viewed a government worker—“a bone of the government”—

extinguished her credibility among several residents. This is not to say that her project did not help her community, but rather to highlight that even the most thoughtful and discerning volunteers happened upon situations that encouraged them to question international development and the Peace Corps' responsibility to the people they are serving.

For the preceding volunteers, other development problems did not overshadow what they felt was a rewarding time with the Peace Corps. However, some volunteers had particularly troubling times abroad, occurrences that colored how they remembered the Peace Corps. Elizabeth's feelings of isolation, which eventually impacted her mental health to the extent that she left the Peace Corps, continued to have recurrent pangs of guilt years later. Sophia endured numerous hardships, from being ordered to cook by her host-father to living without the subsistence from this family. Her difficulties required her to seek help from her neighbors and other Peace Corps volunteers in her region, none of whom lived in her community. Briana braved through encounters with boys who hit her and other women and girls in her community with rocks on her way to and from her job at a local health center. Ella survived an attack as she exercised near her village one afternoon, with no immediate support from the Peace Corps. Lastly, Barbara discussed Justine's death, reported as a drowning in a river.

Interestingly, Ethan was the only male volunteer who discussed threats to his safety. Although he was evacuated for a brief time, the conflict between him and Joseph was eventually resolved and life went on in his community. As illustrated above, women were overwhelmingly more likely to discuss the hardships of being in the Peace Corps. In fact, seven of the 25 women interviewed described experiences that range from

Elizabeth's debilitating sense of isolation to Ella's being attacked. Their stories reflect the global issue of women's vulnerability to suffering and violence. They also show that the privileges associated with being a woman from the United States do not offer protection against violence. Particularly noteworthy is that each of these women felt that Peace Corps had not been dutiful enough in exercising their responsibility to protect volunteers.

Women's experiences in the Peace Corps illuminated how the converging narratives of the hero and the gendered ethic of care created conditions of possibility for violence to occur. As outlined in the previous chapter, volunteers' months of training and immersing in their villages were characterized by the need for extreme self-reliance, a tactic that imbued volunteers with the sense that they were called, in the Weberian sense, to address world poverty. Intrinsic to the notion of recognizing that one has been "chosen" to do this work is the desire to heed the call, that is, to claim as one's personal duty the need to respond (Campolo 1985). From a sociological perspective, volunteer feelings of being uniquely equipped with the fierce independence, sensitivity to suffering, and adventurous spirit of the Peace Corps solidified the boundaries separating them from U.S. middle class lives they found unsatisfying. Thus, the participants' active embrace of their vocation served as a perpetual reminder that they were fulfilling their destiny to help poor while resisting middle-class conformity.

Heroism, coupled with the gendered ethic of care, further complicated women's experiences in the Peace Corps. While observing extreme poverty troubled women and men, women's enculturation throughout their lives with the responsibility to attend to children and those in need—reaffirmed through gendered village life—was amplified in

the Peace Corps. The lack of support from the organization and the isolation from other volunteers, all the while living among the poorest of the poor, fostered women's sense that they, as individuals, had to do something to help, even if this meant sacrificing their own mental health and physical safety. When I asked Barbara why Justine chose to continue working with the Peace Corps after being evacuated due to being in a life-threatening situation, she replied that Justine, "wanted to be a volunteer; she wanted to fulfill her commitment." In this sense, the individualistic nature of heroism and women's socialization to work tirelessly to help those in need gave women little space to organize around these issues and demand more accountability from the Peace Corps.

The middle-class contingencies and volunteers' dedication to learning the local language and immersing in their communities opened the doors for volunteers to have intense experiences abroad. Two years of service, years during which they saw themselves on a crucial mission to address world injustices, showed volunteers that they had achieved their goal of helping the poor. In the next chapter, I discuss how volunteers made sense of their stints with the Peace Corps after leaving and how they locate the Peace Corps in their lives and with respect to worldwide social justice movements.

CHAPTER VI:

“YOU’LL COME BACK WITH MORE THAN YOUR LUGGAGE”: VOLUNTEERS’ REFLECTIONS AFTER RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES

A. Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, numerous volunteers came to realize their visions of the Peace Corps of both providing assistance to their respective communities and developing close relationships with members of their villages. These participants ended their volunteer service with the satisfaction that they had triumphed over the adversities of working in very difficult, destitute areas of the world. Other volunteers traversed the difficult terrain of international development through challenging and redirecting the ways through which these programs get implemented. Sadly, several volunteers suffered through a range of disappointments, including violent encounters, during their work with the Peace Corps.

After a difficult and challenging two years of service, the volunteers focused more intently on making meaning of their experiences. Their stories took center-stage amidst the backdrop of middle-class nihilism into which they anticipated reentering soon after their service was completed. As volunteers reflected on their experiences abroad, class issues shaped how they recounted their lives in the Peace Corps. And, in keeping with their initial desires to forgo middle-class lives unencumbered by concerns about the poor, their accounts were a testament to their dedication and sacrifices on behalf of social

change.

In this chapter, I will begin with volunteers' accounts of what life was like as they reentered the U.S. middle-class after completing their service. Their early months in the U.S. were marked by times during which volunteers dealt with adjusting to life back home and making sense of their time among the poor in the global South. Next, I discuss how volunteers' appreciation for living among the poor drove them to question how life is lived in the United States. I also discuss stories of volunteers who were highly skeptical of the Peace Corps upon their return to the United States.

B. Re-entering the United States and culture shock

Peace Corps volunteers were both excited and ambivalent about their impending return to the United States. All of the participants recollected the challenges of leaving the Peace Corps and adjusting to life in the U.S. after living among the poor for two years. Shawn, a volunteer in Central American/Mexico in the 2000s, remembered being awestruck by the change as he moved from his remote village to his family's home in the Midwest. On his first night back in the United States, his family celebrated by having a barbeque for him and his close friends. While Shawn caroused with his loved ones he became dumbstruck by the abundance of food, something he never saw in his Peace Corps community. After the food had been cooked and the family sat at the table, Shawn helped carry the heavy plates, seemingly straining to hold the food, to the table. When he noticed that a piece of cheese had fallen to the ground, Shawn snatched it in his hand, wiped the dirt from it, and devoured the cheese. His family mesmerized, he slowly realized that he had reacted as if a piece of cheese, which was nonexistent in his host-community, had fallen from a plate in his poverty stricken Central American community.

Hannah, a volunteer in the 2000s in the Pacific Islands, reflected on how she continues to grieve the loss of what had been such an important part of her life ten years prior. For her, the end of her work with the Peace Corps “was kind of a big break-up.” She longed for the simplicity of life as lived in her Peace Corps community. One of the memories she continues to carry is an instance of giving the children of her village sparklers to light at night. These children thought the sparklers were “the coolest frickin’ thing in the world.” She recalled with excitement how enthusiastic the children became when they played with the sparklers in the evenings.

Later in the interview, Hannah described shopping trips she had taken during her early months back in the United States. These were difficult given her recent return to the U.S. She explained:

...I remember coming back and I’d run into kids and we’d go to Target or Wal-Mart, where kids are just yelling and screaming about not getting the fourth GI Joe or whatever. And me just thinking about Josh (a child in her village), who was kind of my favorite little guy in the world. He would take these huge beetles that we had and tie a string to one of their wings and hold it like a balloon. So it would fly around on this string, and he would just carry it with him like it was his little—and I just—like, I think that I’ve always had that fascination with life and things and nature and situations, and I always felt like I was a little on the odd side, and then I went into Peace Corps and actually felt like I wasn’t, and then I came back kind of feeling like, “She’s the odd one again.”

Hannah’s distaste for U.S. consumer culture evoked feelings that, as she and other volunteers described in chapter three, reminded her of how estranged she felt from this culture before entering the Peace Corps. Her belief that “she’s the odd one again” illustrates how her sense of alienation continued beyond her service and into her life back in the United States. However, her experience in the Pacific Islands allowed for an additional layer of critique of consumer culture through invoking moments during which

she and indigenous children shared a “fascination with life,” i.e., one of simplicity untainted by an excessive need for material possessions.

Returning to the (comparative) excesses of middle-class life also proved troublesome for Isabella, a volunteer in the 2000s in South America. She described her experience of going to a friend’s wedding after her return to the United States. Isabella recalled comparing the cost of things in the U.S. to those in her South American community. On the night of the bachelorette party, Isabella was jolted by the dissonance of returning to the U.S. middle-class after living among the poor for two years. She explained how the situation

...really kind of turned my whole world on its head. I remember coming back for the wedding and we had the bachelorette party two weeks before, and I just flipped out, I lost it. I had gone out and spent \$100 in one night, because it was the bachelorette party. You just throw the money down. And I was drunk, too, so I remember I just got so upset. I remember my friend looking at me like, “She’s gone crazy!” I’m like, “No, you don’t get it!” It’s so hard, because I was living off \$200 a month, which is so much in (her country of service). And I think that, coupled with coming back and living in the U.S. and then starting to work at this restaurant, when I look at it now, probably wasn’t the best thing for me to do, because I jumped into this restaurant... where people throw down \$300 on dinner all the time. To do that, to jump right back into that, \$300 is more than what I made or probably any of the people in my community would make in a year. Just that whole aspect of it really—and I’m still dealing with it.

Two years later, Isabella continued to ponder living in the United States and, as she said, “come to terms with” the income disparities faced by the poor throughout the world relative to that of her and her friends. Like Hannah, Isabella felt the challenge of coping with the surreal experience of reengaging with life in the U.S. through spending \$100 dollars on the bachelorette party. Additionally, working in an exclusive restaurant deepened Isabella’s feelings of alienation; but, her story resembles Hannah’s in that she integrated her experience of existing more simply, in this case, living comfortably off of

\$200 dollars per month in her host country, into this story. The sense of community that she gained while immersing in her village strengthened her desire to question--and do so publically--what she felt was the extravagance of this ceremony.

These and other volunteers learned during their work with the Peace Corps that others shared their concern about the injustices faced by the poor. Their unease fomented their desire to experience material simplicity, to learn what life in the U.S. could entail if it were stripped of its excesses. Sarah, a volunteer in the 2000s in Africa, understood the impediments to the sense of belonging that she sought in the U.S. as being due to the distractions that support superficial communications with people. She described how the Peace Corps reaffirmed her values of living in community with people, values that came to life in her village. She explained:

I think now I'm finding, too, that the elements of those experiences that made them so great are the things that still make life really great, like having a nice meal with people, or just having a meal with people and having the time to just talk and have a glass of wine or a beer and just get to know people. I think so often here, people are really attracted to the new and the—especially LA. This is the case where things are constantly changing. “Let’s go to the coolest club.” People have really shallow relationships with people. I think as I get older, I realize that those three things, good friends, good food, and having the space to just have a dinner, are still really some of the greatest things in life.

Sarah’s experience provided the support to distinguish her from the “shallow relationships” that exist in spheres complicated by excesses and constant change. For her, sharing dinner with friends was a simple way to bring meaning to her life and recognize how she benefitted from the Peace Corps. Interestingly, the emphasis on how the Peace Corps provided the guidance for enriching relationships back in the United States was specific to the women interviewed. Sarah, Hannah, and Isabella became dedicated to extending what they learned in the Peace Corps to support a culture of

community in this new chapter of their lives in the U.S.

C. Cultivating new ways of understanding of the world

As stated earlier, Peace Corps volunteers reentered the United States tasked with making meaning of their time abroad. More to the point, volunteers came home to friends and family who were eager to discover what this experience had been like – occasions ripe for autobiographical moments.

Several volunteers used these times to reflect on how the Peace Corps changed their worldviews. Jay, a volunteer who served in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, asserted that he learned to have a more global view of life while serving in his community. He first embraced this idea while listening to the BBC, the only radio station he could access on his shortwave radio during his service. Jay was struck by how the news from the United States was typically given the same amount of airtime as news from other countries. He argued that this experience illustrated that the United States need not be viewed as the nexus of what is important in the world. In addition, he felt that the Peace Corps and similar cultural exchange programs "would really make the world a safer place." When asked to elaborate on this, Jay recalled his experience growing up in the 1950s during the Cold War.

The thing's that—probably in the '50s, my grandparents were from Belarus (a country on Russia's western border). Grandpa always said he was Russian, and yet I grew up in the '50s and we were supposed to hate the Russians. I saw Nikita Khrushchev pound his shoe on the podium and say, "I will bury you." And a lot of Americans were afraid, and a lot of U.S. military people wanted Americans to be afraid. So we were supposed to hate the Evil Empire. Now I've been to the Evil Empire... I found out that everybody puts their pants on the same way.

Jay's reference to his childhood, one that included messages that he should love his grandfather and hate the group with whom this man identified, was colored by Cold

War propaganda that pitted the U.S. against Russia. Decades later, working in the former Soviet Union as a Peace Corps volunteer moved him to consider how people live without U.S. media accounts portraying hyperbolic caricatures of Russian people. As discussed in chapter four, volunteers' needed to depend on their local communities for help in the absence of institutional support from the Peace Corps, and ironically, this fostered intimacies that required volunteers to reconsider dominant understandings (in the U.S.) of the people of their host countries. For Jay, this experience brought about his own understanding that people have more in common than differences upon which politicians and the media emphasize.

Thus, volunteers who asserted that they, too, were the beneficiaries of the Peace Corps experience fought to instill the values of community and understanding here in the United States. The immersion experience—and the worldview that was sprung through the struggles to learn local languages, customs, and people—supported volunteers' ability to understand life as lived among the poor. Matthew, a volunteer in South America in the 2000s, epitomized this notion when he discussed how, through living in his community, he became aware of what people need in life. Matthew explained:

I think on the most basic level, it (the Peace Corps) confirmed my belief that people just want what everybody wants. They want to be able to raise their kids and have a job and live a good life. I think Peace Corps really, when you live—when you get to a point where things become ordinary in a different culture, I think you can really start absorbing what people want and what people are doing, why they're doing it, that kind of thing. When things start making sense at that level, it really opened my eyes to—especially the news we get here, where they try and put a political twist on everything, on why an uprising would happen, why some farmers might do something, protests, things like that. It's real basic. People just want simple things.

Matthew and other volunteers concluded that their service in the Peace Corps

facilitated their understanding that the people around the world are more similar than the differences that get emphasized. Matthew's assertion that "people just want what everybody wants" served to both affirm his Peace Corps community and suggest that U.S. citizens also have much to learn from the poor—that U.S. citizens, too, are working to "raise their kids and have a job and live a good life." Matthew's experience suggests that the United States benefits enormously from learning how people around the world live. In his eyes, this occurs through the intense immersion experience of working for the Peace Corps.

For William, a volunteer in the 1990s in South America, this experience created the opportunity for him to gain a greater understanding of the connections between U.S. corporations and his host country. For instance, he remembered the impact of an oil pipeline being built by Halliburton in the waters near his community. This endeavor required the oil company to build a paved road that led to the only walking entrance into his village. William recalled how, because the company built and owned the road, trade and transportation into the community became contingent upon Halliburton's building plans for the oil pipeline. He remembered how much this situation "messed with people's lives," a people who already had numerous challenges to their survival. He explained how the Peace Corps had impacted his life:

If anything, it just made me—I just feel like my eyes are so much more open to everything that's going on and just kind of really taking it in as—I don't know, to use a cheapie phrase, like a "global citizen." Whereas I don't really—I just—where a lot of people I don't think about it on a daily basis, and I'm constantly very much involved in everything international and it really concerns me. I think it's one of the most important things, just what's going on in the rest of the world and how that can affect everything and how important it is. I feel like a lot of people don't look at life that way, they just kind of focus in on their certain area.

William's story referred to his newfound awareness of world issues precipitated by his life as a volunteer. His months abroad observing Halliburton's impact on life in his indigenous community made him realize that U.S. corporate interests reach into unexpected areas of the world. In William's eyes, the experience of witnessing the consequences to life among the poor inspired him to maintain a connection to world politics, not just those in the United States.

Another unique way through which Peace Corps volunteers felt they had broadened their understanding was through deconstructing simplistic notions about the daily lives of people living in poverty. According to Chris, a volunteer in Africa in the 2000s, problems central to the lives of people in his community required much more than simplistic solutions to address these issues. Specifically, he was skeptical of the idea that implementing programs that had solved similar problems in the United States would be successful in the global South. Chris's stint in Africa taught him that the world is a complicated place. He explained how the U.S. populous often embraces the notion that the United States should be exalted as an example of how all countries should exist. Through being immersed in his village and seeing the "day-to-day actions" of people, he realized that "there's reasons behind everything that people do." He argued further that living abroad as a volunteer showed him that the U.S. press and popular media filter ways of framing international development issues that don't include solutions based on what has been successful in addressing problems in the United States.

Lily, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, shared Chris's view that media discourses in the United States limit the ways through which problems maligning life among the poor can be understood. She elucidated the ways through which she came to

reconsider her own assumptions as a U.S. citizen working with those in poverty. These moments urged her to look with more depth at the milieu within which the poor made decisions that people in the U.S would consider nonsensical. Lily described her own experience of how she could not comprehend why a bright seventeen-year-old girl in her village would get married. She recounted how:

One of the girls in my youth group ended up getting married, married as in, her boyfriend came in the middle of the night and they went away and had sex somewhere and then came back the next day and now they were married. That's how people get married. And she was 17 and she was still in high school, and I was like, "Why?" You know? So that was probably the biggest downer as far as, this is why I'm here, to help youth have this longer-term vision and to not do things like get married and pregnant when they're still in high school, and then it happened with the youth that I was working with.

Later in her service, Lily realized that "it totally made sense" that this girl would get married to this guy. Lily learned that he was one of the most responsible guys in the village and how, because her father had seven other children, there was no opportunity for her to go to college. Knowing this, the girl "saw a good opportunity and took it" and this choice made sense given this community's gross exclusion of from resources that would allow it to consider a different future. Given the contingencies that limited all girls' and women's access to other alternatives, this girl's decision to marry was one of for herself a more certain future.

Other volunteers recognized the urgent need to attend to inequities in the United States following their work with the Peace Corps. Alyssa, a volunteer the 1960s in Asia, discussed how living abroad made her more mindful of numerous social problems, including injustices plaguing women's lives. She articulated how her upbringing in a largely white, affluent town in the Midwest sheltered her from understanding the

discrimination faced by women in the United States and throughout the world. During her service, Alyssa worked in a capital city where sexism was rampant. Bearing witness to the prejudices women face in the global South motivated her to work for women's rights in the United States. She explained:

...you have empathy for other women in other cultures, particularly when you see some of the things that are done to women in other cultures. Even though (her country of service) is a pretty open place, there still is a pretty male chauvinistic bent in many ways. So you see that and you say, "Oh, boy, I'm sure glad I can not have to have that in my country." [laughs] Maybe it is in my country, but not in my culture. We were not—we were a privileged minority. We were there because we had skills. So we were not looked down upon. We were prized, if you will.

For Alyssa, the compassion engendered through living among subjugated women inspired her to consider her own experience of gender in the United States. While she did not directly compare sexism in the global South with sexism in the U.S., she appreciated her life in her host country as someone with status. Alyssa went on to trace how working with poor women moved her to become more involved in progressive politics upon returning to the U.S., including holding voter registration drives for marginalized women while volunteering with her local chapter of The League of Women Voters. Thus, observing suffering abroad motivated her to educate disenfranchised women in the U.S. about political awareness and the importance of voting to instigate social change.

Alexis, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, attended college in a town where many of her friends identified as anarchists. During the application process to the Peace Corps, several of them rebuked her for, as she described, "working for the Man" and strengthening U.S. interests abroad through exploiting the poor. Alexis considered their perspective, but felt that these friends were being shortsighted. Later, while living in-country and visiting a fellow volunteer, she recalled how working among the poor

supported her need to analyze the polarizing discourses around social change movements in the United States, e.g., the anarchist movement. When she returned from the Peace Corps, Alexis asserted that a big part of these movements was an attempt to live in community as articulated by media accounts of the global South. Alexis thought that romanticizing the so-called simplicity of life among the poor keeps U.S. citizens from truly addressing suffering in the U.S. and throughout the world. She explained this through recalling a moment in a town in the U.S. shortly after her return:

I think that, the understanding of what community is. I think living in (this town), it's funny to hear all these pop terms of what we should do. "We need to have community. We need to have potlucks. We need to do all these things." I lived in a community. And I feel like a jerk, but it's like, I know what that is, and it's beautiful and it's painful at the same time. I think we're trying to create change in the U.S. and get back to some of the things that we see in other countries. I know the ways that it was positive and negative. So that was the biggest thing for me.

Alexis's experience of living among the poor and feeling a sense of belonging did not come without conflict and at times a concern for the viability of her membership in her local community. The symbols of U.S. community life, such as potlucks, felt superficial to her. For Alexis, these markers of community in the U.S. proffered a veneer of idealized belonging and social progress that did not reflect the ambiguities of village life in the global South.

A few men articulated different understandings of how the Peace Corps impacted their views of the world. Joseph, a volunteer in the 1990s in South America, was indignant about the effects of war on the global South. He recognized that his attentiveness to this issue was spawned as he gained facility with the local language. Specifically, he thought that learning the local language from the people in his village eventually provided him with a means of understanding the world from their perspective.

He was troubled to learn that U.S. culture and values get exported to the global South through the Peace Corps. Following his service, he returned to the U.S. with a better understanding of the consequences of US foreign policy. Joseph recounted how, in the United States:

We think everybody should speak English. I'm generalizing a lot about the U.S., but I think that having some folks who have spent a good deal of time outside the States gives us a better worldview, so that the U.S. is an empire, and having folks who have made friends and formed strong bonds in another country, when the U.S. talks about going to war with somebody from that country, or somebody with that country or in that region, there's an important countervoice within the U.S. that says, "Hold on a second. I can speak with a great deal of authority that your military actions are going to harm a lot of people."

Joseph acknowledged that living abroad and learning another language provided the platform from which he could challenge and complicate the narrow and hegemonic understanding that the U.S. incites war strictly to protect the people of the world. Interestingly, his ability to "speak with great authority," which emanated through the pangs of persisting through his time with the Peace Corps, allowed him to feel as though his skepticism deserved an audience. Joseph felt that his experience warranted his way into a position of influence with respect to important discussions about war.

Daniel, a volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, declared that it is imperative for U.S. citizens to become more knowledgeable of how the U.S. is interconnected with the rest of the world. For him, a poignant moment symbolizing the necessity for a more comprehensive worldview occurred during his second year in the Peace Corps. At that time, NATO had begun bombing Serbia, a nation neighboring his country of service. Interestingly, this occurrence impelled Daniel to reflect on his study abroad experience while in college. He explained how his college experience of learning

about other cultures now felt superficial, in part because English is often spoken in study abroad programs. He felt immersing in the local community through the Peace Corps fostered his learning about the consequences of military actions and the impressions these leave on the people of other countries. He explained:

...When I studied abroad, I was with all American students. We went out on the town, of course, and it was in Switzerland, too, and just about everyone speaks English. To really—I began—that's when I had an appreciation more for America. I had a greater appreciation for the American language, just the ability to speak English, how far it goes. What I realized is that unless you've gone internationally, and I don't mean goin' to Toronto or goin' to Cancun or somethin' like that, it's really impossible to know your ass from a hole in the ground when it comes to understanding the world you live in and who you are if you haven't gone to different countries. You don't have to go overseas, you could go to, like, Honduras. You have no idea, no concept....You cannot possibly understand your culture, where you come from, have a great appreciation for your culture. It's easy to be all pride and patriotic, but that's all bullshit. You have no concept and understanding.

Daniel observed that one cannot truly appreciate the range of conditions lived by people around the world without leaving the comforts of the more structured and exclusive travel to which U.S. citizens are accustomed. His service in a country neighboring Serbia energized his conviction that travel to tourist destinations does not qualify as *really* traveling abroad and learning about life as lived by the local population. One had to live with and near the tragedies of life, in his case, war, to truly appreciate and understand the world.

D. The debate about Peace Corps' role in world betterment

For some volunteers, broader knowledge of the world included skepticism about the Peace Corps place in the international community. Emily, a volunteer in the 2000s in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, commented on how she had always been politically active even before her service with the Peace Corps, but her work as a volunteer alerted her to

the urgency of issues such as genocide. Emily learned that living and immersing in local cultures is needed to see the world with more depth. She explained:

I don't want to get political, but in terms of the last eight years with the Bush administration and their international policy all around us, it's just been abhorrent. I just think that things could have been done so differently. The conflict in Darfur, why have we not done anything even though we've declared it a genocide? A lot of different things. Suddenly Condoleezza Rice is trying to put together a Middle East peace plan, in the last six months of his administration, I mean, come on! [laughs] I know geography so much better, and I know a lot more about what's happened in the world (since being a volunteer).

Emily's skepticism concerning U.S. foreign agendas was magnified through living abroad and getting a different perspective on the United States. Because she left the U.S. to work with the Peace Corps, she grew more cognizant of the consequences of Bush administration policies that she viewed as geared toward serving U.S. and Republican Party interests. This led to her indignation about the United States' evident disinterest in the genocide in Darfur.

Other volunteers felt that their service facilitated U.S. political interests abroad. Andrew, a volunteer in South America in the 1990s, was adamant about the impossibility of separating Peace Corps' humanitarian efforts from U.S. foreign policy agendas. Because the Peace Corps is part of the U.S. State Department, Andrew understood the Peace Corps' primary mission as one congruent with this arm of the federal government, whose goal, in Matthew's terms, "is to execute foreign policy, that's what the State Department is all about." He learned during his service that USAID (United States Agency for International Development), like the Peace Corps, is also a branch of the U.S. State Department.

When he arrived in his community, he saw that USAID and other development

agencies were continuing ongoing projects. Andrew acknowledged that these agencies welcomed his cooperation, but he also asserted that he had little input into how the projects were implemented and managed. Instead, he felt like his presence functioned to promote the altruistic nature of these programs. Andrew explained:

When I went to my site...Peace Corps was there, sort of to put NGO projects that USAID funded and the nature conservatory had been funding in a more humanitarian light...and in my view Peace Corps is being sent out to sort of put a more, to make these projects that USAID does seem like they are being articulate through multiple agencies...so that it is not just USAID's "stamp" on these projects.

Andrew's insight into his time as a volunteer with respect to larger development programs reflected his sense that the Peace Corps was about more than goodwill ventures to help the poor. In recalling his role among these powerful institutions, Andrew was reminded of how his idealistic visions of the Peace Corps in some ways did not reflect the realities of his experience.

Jacob, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia in the 2000s, shared Andrew's suspicion about the broader political consequences of the Peace Corps. Jacob was assigned to work in a country that was among those most populated by Peace Corps volunteers, but was also established enough to "almost become a member of the EU (European Union)." This fact made him consider why so many volunteers worked in a country that was fairly "developed" compared to other countries of the global South.

Jacob asserted:

It is my speculation that the reason why (his host country) has the largest program in the Peace Corps is largely because of political reasons, because it's a nice way of getting Americans in there, and getting them to know us better. (His host country) is a strategic country in a lot of ways, you know. Right now the Bush administration has been trying very hard to get NATO into Eastern Europe, and (his host country) is certainly one of those countries that they're really courting. There are oil pipelines going all through the country, and they have uranium

deposits...

He went on to say how:

...for the most part it (the Peace Corps) greatly improves the image of the U.S. within the community that you are in, because they're like, "Oh, you're not all bad, you're not all looking to invade Iraq." Think of who usually goes into the Peace Corps, it's usually somebody who is peaceful. They're against the war, they're looking to help other people, and have a solid education. Usually it's a really nice move in terms of international relations.

Jacob's view of his volunteer service, that the U.S.'s overarching political interests clouded what he hoped would have been a more focused humanitarian effort, reflected his and other volunteers' dismay with the Peace Corps. As he learned more about U.S. interests in his host country, he felt misled when he realized that his personal goal of helping those in need was complicated by political interests.

In a similar vein, Elizabeth, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 2000s, reflected on how she lived in a community riddled by poverty, yet surrounded by affluent resorts. She stated that because her host country "in so many ways had their shit together," she wondered why she was serving in a somewhat "developed" country. As the years have gone by, Elizabeth continues to question the extent to which her volunteer service benefited her community. Her work as an agriculture volunteer included assisting her village in finding ways to manage and store trash, a situation that was complicated by its location adjacent to a huge landfill. Elizabeth enlisted the help of a large development agency to assist with this task. After talking with agency officials about the need to change the region's infrastructure to better manage this issue, Elizabeth maintained hope that this problem could be resolved. However, she grew furious when this agency donated a dozen trash cans to help with the problem and did not consider the

infrastructure issues. At that point, Elizabeth realized that the Peace Corps was not just about helping people. Elizabeth recalled a recent conversation she'd had about the issue:

I just hung out with one of my buddies (from her Peace Corps days) and we were arguing that we shouldn't have development work at all. What is it doing? By us being there, did it take away the responsibility of the government there? Partly yes, but also, Americans are taking advantage of them in so many ways, like resorts and all of the hotels. I think it's still—the question that comes up to me is colonialism. The country as a whole is still being colonized, so development work just feels like pennies to what's really happening. They're still kind of getting raped.

When I asked Elizabeth what she meant by her statement that the people of her host-country were “still kind of getting raped,” she referred to how the tourism industry charges rates too high for local people to afford but low enough for Western tourists to consider attractive, while the people of the host community “work there for pennies.” She continued, saying that the economic dependency on tourism industry has increased the cost of living in the country as a whole due to émigrés buying property throughout the country following their vacations there, and thus making Peace Corps volunteers' work to lessen inequities much more difficult.

Nevertheless, other volunteers rejected the possibility that the Peace Corps could be implicated in U.S. politics. For example, Shawn, a volunteer in Central America/Mexico in the 2000s, served in a small democratic country that had a Peace Corps presence for decades. This suggested to him that the Peace Corps inhabited the country solely to better peoples' lives. When asked if he thought if there might be any indirect U.S. political objectives in his host-country, Shawn denounced such a possibility. He explained:

To say that we would have any sort of political influence with 100 college graduates running around the woods in (his host country)? That's ridiculous...I could definitely see where if it was in a different country where there were less

democratic ideals that you might suspect that, and that might even be true. But (his host country)'s a republic.

Shawn's assertion that the commonalities between his host-country's political ideals and those held strongly by the U.S. suggests that, because on the surface the Peace Corps had nothing to gain politically, volunteers who served were there to help the poor through the apolitical endeavor of international development.

Other volunteers' stories mirrored Shawn's understanding of the Peace Corps. For Addison, a volunteer in Eastern Europe/Central Asia, and Olivia, a volunteer in the Caribbean in the 1990s, choosing not to vote, protest, or support local candidates in their host countries meant that they and the Peace Corps were abstaining from political involvement and adhering to development directives. Addison felt that the Peace Corps was doing development work through education projects that improved the lives' of the poor in her community. She understood that, because she could speak freely about the United States, there was little possibility of a U.S. political agenda enmeshed within her work. When asked if politics might influence development, Addison asserted:

Cultural imperialism, no, I don't buy into that at all. Anything about spreading America's agenda for democracy in the world, anything like that is absurd to me. I never had any experience like that. And we always had the freedom to express our personal political opinions about America. We were never given any direction about, "This is how you should talk about this politically in your country," other than "Don't talk about it. For your safety, don't talk about it." It was never like, "Support this candidate or support this policy." None of that. But inside the other branches of the U.S. mission, they were very vocal in lobbying (her host country) to do certain things.

Interestingly, Addison, who lived in one of the countries most populated by volunteers, differentiated her work from U.S. political interests, such as lobbying, through her refusal to become active in local politics. Olivia shared a similar opinion. A

short time into her service, many people in her host country asked if the Peace Corps was affiliated with the CIA. Olivia routinely asserted that this was untrue. Unlike Addison, Olivia recalled being told in training to refuse to be public about any political stances, including her opinions about U.S. foreign policy. When the Persian Gulf War began in 1991, Olivia wanted to protest against the war while living in her community. However, because a fellow volunteer was fired for criticizing the war, she chose to, in her terms, “back off” and kept quiet about her views. She felt that her commitment to her community was more important than publically questioning the war.

Other volunteers echoed Olivia’s and Addison’s sentiments, that because they disagreed with much of U.S. politics, particularly those of the right-wing, they were absolved from considering their role within the broader political struggles in the world. Claudia, a volunteer in South American in the 2000s, was deeply distraught by George W. Bush’s presidency. She was determined to differentiate her work from Bush administration political aims during her service. She recounted her frustration at seeing President Bush’s picture hanging in the office at Peace Corps headquarters. The arduous travel to her village from the capital made her feel as though she was invisible to U.S. involvement abroad--she felt she could escape it. Still, she was oftentimes reminded of her ties to the U.S. In one instance, Claudia remembered how, when people learned that she was from the U.S., they would exclaim, “Oh, George Bush! You love him, right?” Her response, “No, no!”—that she was critical of his politics, reminded her that the United States’ political reputation reached all corners of the globe. Throughout her service, Claudia worked to help her community and offer a different, more compassionate view of the United States.

F. Discussion of findings

Peace Corps volunteers thoughtfully reflected on how their service informed their current worldviews. Returning to family and friends in the United States provided opportunities for volunteers to engage in storytelling. Their recollections, which took place in middle-class settings that reminded them that they had indeed truly left life in the United States, provided a platform for volunteers to share their viewpoints about the role of Peace Corps in the lives of the poor.

Shawn, Hannah, Isabella, and Sarah recalled the unexpected moments of confusion that signified that they had returned to a life in the U.S. that was culturally removed from life in the global South. Specifically, Hannah's trip to the U.S. mega-stores, where she witnessed children fighting for the latest toys, reminded her that she was "the crazy one," in that she had more in common with her Peace Corps' community than her fellow U.S. citizens. Similarly, Isabella's sense of alienation from what she saw as the frivolous spending on her friend's wedding was painful. She calculated how this money could have been used to create major improvements in her Peace Corps community. At the bachelorette party, Isabella cried as she lamented the reality of the differences that emerge from drastic income disparities. Her friend's glance, a look that showed Isabella that her crying challenged feeling rules associated with this celebration, confirmed her conviction that she could no longer acquiesce to a middle-class life that ignored world poverty.

Sarah's experience of culture shock was less traumatic. She returned to the

United States critical of U.S. citizens' inclinations to blindly adopt the newest popular trends. Sarah learned in the Peace Corps that a more simple life of sharing meals with her friends without distractions was a key feature of community life, one that she continues to emulate in her life in the United States. For each of these women, recognizing the impediments to the feeling of belonging in the U.S. reminded them of why they desired to join the Peace Corps – to live a life more receptive to the sense of community they sought. Each volunteer's experience of shunning, intentionally or not, the norms of middle-class behavior in the United States, e.g., Shawn eating cheese that had fallen to the ground, reminded them that they now had the experience abroad and solidarity with other returned volunteers to confidently challenge class expectations.

Volunteers also emphasized how the Peace Corps experience opened their eyes to new ways of understanding life in the global South. Jay, Matthew, and William recalled how living among the poor showed them how portrayals of the global South as entirely distinct from life in the United States need to be questioned. For Matthew and Jay, the immersion experience provided the setting to learn that people across the world, regardless of the culture, have many of the same wants and needs. As Matthew asserted, most people across the world want to support their families and friends and live well. Like Matthew, Jay's service in the Peace Corps in the former Soviet Union reminded him that the people of Russian and the U.S. share many similarities. Beyond the propaganda perpetuated by ideologues in the U.S. and Russia, people in both countries simply want to survive and live well. Interestingly, by suggesting that U.S. citizens are similar to the poor around the world, these stories function to destabilize the binary opposition that informs development's articulation in the global South, which positions the industrious

and progressive U.S. citizenry as the core element in alleviating world poverty by changing the ways that indigenous people live (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995, 1999, 2000; Ferguson 1990; Haney 2000; Kothari 2001; Latham 2000; Mosse and Lewis 2006; Kriemild 2002; Willis 2005).

Chris and Lily gained a more nuanced understanding of the complicated nature of life in the global South through the immersion process. For Chris, seeing the day-to-day lives of people in his community helped him to realize that simplistic explanations about world poverty can be self-serving and limiting. His assertion that “there’s reasons behind everything they do” in the village showed that his time with the Peace Corps allowed him to see how poverty conditions result from the intersections of global politics, climate issues, gender, religion and cultural milieus, and the country’s role with respect to Western expansionism. Also, Lily’s story of the 17 year-old woman in her village who married illustrates how, contrary to her own socialization and U.S. media accounts, indigenous people are thoughtful and strategic about how to improve their lives. In this sense, Lily’s affirmation of this woman’s choice may have gone against traditional development practices. Thus Lily’s insight gave her a perspective from which new understandings of what it means to serve the poor would include knowledge gained by development workers who live among those in need, Peace Corps volunteers.

Alyssa’s attention to the issues facing indigenous women in her country of service made her both appreciate the rights available to women in the United States and work to further extend these freedoms in the U.S. Thus, her feminist consciousness grew throughout her service abroad and spilled into her work in the U.S., in particular her work to increase voter registration among disenfranchised women through The League of

Women Voters. Alyssa's commitment to gender issues was facilitating by her sense of justice and confidence gained through working with the Peace Corps.

Alexis returned critical of U.S. attempts to create a sense of community. She felt that these efforts, such as having potlucks or joining the anarchist movement, were well-intentioned but ill-fated attempts to marshal support for the sense of community people craved. In her eyes, each of these moves seemed superficial in that they attempted to create belonging without the conflict and resolutions that help people to bond with one another. In addition, she chided the anarchist movement for refusing to consider how government resources could be used to help the poor; in their eyes there was little ambiguity—one was either for the movement or against it, with little thought into the consequences of their beliefs on the people they fought so hard to help.

Other volunteers also spoke critically of how U.S. citizens fail to account for the perspectives of the poor abroad. In particular, some men used war as a moment that called for them to challenge U.S. politicians. Joseph was critical of the U.S. populous that felt it imperative for everyone around the world to learn English; the ethnocentrism of this notion angered him. Joseph discussed going to war, like the imperative to speak English, is a shortsighted and self-serving attempt to create a world amenable to U.S. interests and oblivious to the consequences to others. Through having overcome the difficulties of living amongst the poor and truly identifying with their plight, he felt he had the clout to defend his community from military actions.

Like Joseph before him, Daniel critiqued Western occupationism. He did so through comparing his study abroad experience to his Peace Corps work. Daniel thought it was ethnocentric of U.S. citizens to depend solely on the English language and to

engage with other countries without actively immersing into the culture. By citing his experience of living in an area plagued by war, he secured a place from which he could speak about what it means to be a global citizen. Daniel's claim that U.S. citizens cannot truly know themselves without learning about the world outside of the United States served to spark his own commitment to encouraging people in the U.S. to educate themselves through cross-cultural experiences.

Another group of volunteers used their post-Peace Corps lives to debate the United States government's influence on international politics. Emily was impassioned about the U.S.'s dubious role in the international world with respect to genocide and the political expediency of a peace treaty near the end of the Bush presidency. Andrew, Jacob, and Elizabeth spoke directly to the ethics of the Peace Corps' role as an arm of the U.S. government in global politics. Interestingly, each of these volunteers interviewed with me while earning or having earned their graduate degrees. While their graduate studies alone may not have prompted their critiques of the Peace Corps (several participants with graduate degrees, like Addison, did not question the politics of the Peace Corps), their post-bachelorette studies gave them additional discursive space from which they could make sense of their Peace Corps service. In fact, those who viewed the Peace Corps as Elizabeth did, noting how the Peace Corps functions to extend colonial legacies in poor nations, *all* have since attained graduate degrees. This suggests that participants who completed the two years of service, but did not pursue graduate studies, were less likely to be critical of the U.S.'s involvement in the global South through Peace Corps work. Further, for all of the participants, two years of mentally and physically difficult work among the poorest people in the world made it complicated for volunteers

to critique the Peace Corps, as an organization, without belittling their individual struggles and sacrifices to help the poor.

It is also significant to point out that critiques of the Peace Corps may also act as coping strategies for volunteers whose goals during their service did not become realized. For instance, a perspective gained through graduate education may also serve as a tool to explain volunteers' disappointments. In other words, proclaiming that the Peace Corps is, as Elizabeth stated, a form of "colonialism"—whether true or not-- may function to excuse volunteers from what they viewed as their personal failures to improve life in their respective communities. Her conversation about how the people of her host community seemed to get further entangled in the web of poverty through the years made her question the possibility that an individual volunteer can subvert the international development apparatus.

Shawn, Addison, and Olivia challenged the aforementioned views of the Peace Corps. Shawn's declaration that political entanglements did not occur in *his* host-country, but may have been occurring in other countries, reflects an individualistic understanding of the politics of development. Each of these volunteers felt that their stints with the Peace Corps characterized what is good about the organization and international development – that their work was not complicated by global politics. All three volunteers used evidence from their own experiences to testify on behalf of the apolitical focus of their work. The individual nature of Peace Corps' work fostered the opinion that, as Sophia, a volunteer in North Africa/Middle East in the 2000s, asserted, "You can't have much of a political agenda there as (individual) Americans." The difficult months of acculturating and the sense that they had traveled so far from their

lives in the United States engendered this vision of their work. Shawn and Addison, who acknowledged the possibility that the Peace Corps might serve U.S. political interests in *other* countries, saw their experiences as uniquely theirs and altogether different from those of volunteers elsewhere throughout the world.

Interestingly, the self-reliance fostered through being one's sole source of U.S. support in her/his indigenous community also functioned to promote the belief in the importance of intentionality. For Claudia, who was repulsed at seeing then President Bush's portrait displayed in the Peace Corps offices, felt that her noble plans to help the poor were enough to overcome any residue of U.S. political aims that followed her on the long road to her rural community. As these stories suggest, the individualism emblematic of working with the Peace Corps promoted the volunteers' belief that their service was distinct from U.S. political agendas, or at least that their efforts to deconstruct myopic views of the United States were successful. Through living in a world governed by their intentions, which was fostered by volunteer successes despite minimal institutional support, and bearing witness to debilitating poverty, volunteers thought that they *must* do something to help, even if they were not confident in their work's potential for success.

The commitment to working with the Peace Corps gave participants a legitimate place from which to consider this organization after returning to the United States. Numerous volunteers became highly critical of both U.S. interests in the global South and how the humanitarian pretext of the Peace Corps assisted in extending U.S. foreign influence. Still other volunteers believed that individual Peace Corps volunteers simply could not, as individuals, unintentionally support U.S. interests to which they were opposed. For these volunteers, the cult of individualism, as discussed in chapters three

and four, fostered during their Peace Corps service gave them little discursive space to consider the history, politics, and national mood that launched the United States Peace Corps in the 1960s.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSIONS: THE PEACE CORPS AND PERSONHOOD

A. Introduction

The Peace Corps continues to be an avenue through which U.S. citizens seek to create a more just world. Peace Corps volunteers make the courageous choice to leave the familiarity of life in the United States to embark on an unmapped odyssey into the unknown. In this study, I investigated what life is like in the Peace Corps through interviews with returned volunteers. I began by focusing on the social context that engendered prospective volunteers' view of the Peace Corps as a viable way of supporting social change efforts around the world. I discussed how volunteers understood their first several months in the global South and how they coped with a world that was dramatically different from the United States. Then, I offered accounts of how Peace Corps volunteers worked with in their local communities, particularly within the context of international development. Lastly, I examined how Peace Corps volunteers made meaning of their work with the Peace Corps after having returned to life in the United States.

B. The Peace Corps journey

As this is the only study to date on Peace Corps volunteers' reflections on their work in the developing world, it is important to understand the social context and motivations behind joining the Peace Corps. Bourdieu's (1984) notion of distinction, one

that provides a compelling explanation for understanding how middle-class ideas about taste work to solidify class boundaries, is useful in understanding how Peace Corps volunteers were inspired to join the Peace Corps. As gleaned from the pre-interview demographic data on the interviewees, e.g., parental educational attainment, volunteer educational attainment, etc., I suspected that membership in the middle-class might be a key element in preparing people to join the Peace Corps. The interview data confirmed this idea. The central theme that emerged from the interviews for joining the Peace Corps was ambivalence about middle-class values and expectations, particularly with respect to adulthood.

Volunteers sought to use their lives to address poverty. However, the volunteers, both directly and indirectly, viewed their decision to work with the Peace Corps as more complicated than simply helping the poor. Many participants asserted that this work also functioned to provide an alternative to a mundane career track after graduating from college. Still others saw the Peace Corps and its two-year commitment as a way to postpone developing a career and impending relationship and family pressures, while also pondering what they would like to do with their lives after their service abroad. Almost all interviewees saw the Peace Corps as an opportunity to help the poor while also experiencing the excitement of world travel without the boundaries of being a tourist. Lastly, the participants' desire to facilitate their personal growth through the physical and psychological challenges of the Peace Corps motivated them to join this organization. A small number of participants understood personal growth as a means of channeling their post-Peace Corps lives into the mainstream middle-class, of forcing them to "grow-up." A larger number of respondents saw their personal growth as something that

differentiated them from a middle-class that was overly focused on career aspirations.

Almost every participant in this study asserted that their first few months in the Peace Corps were marked by numerous challenges. In particular, the stresses of the training period, the excitement and anxiety of moving to their host communities as the lone U.S. citizen, and the loneliness and isolation of living with little material and social supports were clear signals that they had left the abundances and certainties of the U.S. middle-class. For some volunteers, living under these difficult conditions provided evidence that they were suited for working among the poorest of poor. For others, it was not until much later in their first year of service when they began to see that their struggles engendered a euphoric confidence in their ability to overcome local conditions of poverty. Being among the chosen few to enter the Peace Corps and the enormous strides volunteers made during their first year reminded them that their work was more than a job—it was a calling.

Peace Corps volunteers understood the notion of calling as their dedication, unlike the rest of the middle-class, to taking the radical step of living among the poorest people in the world and actively addressing poverty conditions. The idea of the calling gave Peace Corps volunteers the sense that they were destined to make sweeping improvements to their communities' livelihoods. Towards the end of their first year, witnessing the daily violences associated with poverty and growing frustrated by their inability, in U.S. terms, to be “productive,” the volunteers heard this call loudly and could no longer resist actively working on behalf of poor people.

As Peace Corps volunteers became fixtures in their communities, they were exposed to a broad range of experiences that shaped how they understood their service.

Numerous volunteers felt that they had lived their vision of what they hoped to gain from the Peace Corps. For these participants, embracing the cross-cultural aspects of their time abroad helped them to establish long-lasting friendships with their indigenous communities and other volunteers. Still other volunteers emphasized the development aspects of their work. These participants were frustrated at the slow pace at which their vision for social change occurred. This experience made them question the meaning of development and also seek out ways to work with aid programs to expedite community improvements, many of which might not have occurred without volunteer interventions. Sadly, several volunteers endured painful and violent episodes while working with the Peace Corps. Women's disproportionate exposure to threats to their health and safety at times made their service intolerable. A few of these women were assaulted; one volunteer reported on another woman's death.

After having lived abroad for two years, Peace Corps volunteers were uncertain about how life would greet them back in the United States. After they reentered the United States, the participants remembered these early moments as times during which they dealt with the material excesses characteristic of some parts of the middle-class. While most participants eagerly anticipated returning to the comforts and familiarity of home, many remembered the transition as a difficult one. Sadly, some volunteers re-experienced the sense of alienation that spurred their desire to join the Peace Corps just a few years prior.

The experience of living intimately among some of the poorest people in the world prompted volunteers to reconsider dominant (U.S.) understandings that influenced how volunteers previously viewed the world. By returning to the United States and

recounting their experience abroad, Peace Corps volunteers contributed an additional layer of complexity to what had become, given their experience, trite portrayals of life in the global South.

C. Peace Corps volunteers and the global South

As I discussed in chapter one, the national mood and political landscape in the U.S. and the significant changes that occurred throughout the world after World War II precipitated the growth of international development and the idea of the Peace Corps. This study of Peace Corps volunteers illustrates how these larger world events, in particular defining world poverty as a social problem that required U.S. intervention, evolved with support of a U.S. citizenry that was inspired by this challenge. More specifically, this movement gained momentum through the notion that, while the United States situates itself as a symbol of what is good about individualism, progress, and democracy, prospective Peace Corps volunteers saw few people living these ideals in their daily lives in ways that addressed human suffering. By joining the Peace Corps and working within the structure of international development that required intense self-reliance and determination, volunteers embodied these ideals in their effort to help the poor.

The reflexive relationships among international development agencies, the organization of the Peace Corps, and individual volunteers allowed for my access into how these volunteers understood their work within the context of these interconnections. With respect to critical development studies and the colonization metaphor, which position development workers as minions of the international state, Peace Corps volunteers showed that their work deserves a more complicated analysis. Although

volunteers acknowledged the limits of working with the Peace Corps to bring about social change, they also asserted that, through their strategic work with their communities, volunteers were able to navigate this field to mitigate some difficult situations among the poor. Volunteers credited the immersion experience as a vital means of identifying local needs. Thus, their individualism helped volunteers to address issues that aid agencies failed to recognize.

Hence, this study augments the scholarly research in the areas of post-colonial studies and international development. Concerning post-colonial studies, this research offers the data and context that can strengthen scholarship in this field. Through my interviews with Peace Corps volunteers and learning about how their personhoods are reconstituted throughout their service, this project adds empirical evidence to the rich theoretical work for which post-colonial scholarship is known. For example, some volunteers in Eastern Europe/Central Asia were critical of the Peace Corps' presence in communities that seemed to have little need for foreign aid. These volunteers thought the Peace Corps provided a U.S. presence that helped the United States in meeting *its* economic and political objectives, e.g., the desire for oil. While this evidence confirms a post-colonial studies thesis concerning how Western interventions function to control resources abroad, it also provides a counter-story for how individual volunteers attempted to subvert this process. Volunteers who held this view also found ways to use their position and resources afforded through the Peace Corps to address true village needs. For instance, I discussed in chapter five how volunteers in this region utilized funds for AIDS prevention programs (for which there was little need), to address the acute problem of improving community sanitation. In this sense, Peace Corps volunteers, who could not

help but be culpable in U.S. expansionist efforts by way of working with the U.S. abroad, resisted this by offering resources necessary for the betterment of their communities. Moreover, volunteers working so closely with their communities that they did not see the connection between U.S. foreign agendas and the Peace Corps still unknowingly thwarted Western expansionism through their work. Again, this occurred through their intimate knowledge of village life. Whether cognizant of global politics or not, volunteers' immersion in their villages provided the context for them to help fulfill community needs.

Regarding international development studies, this study provides the theoretical depth necessary to understand and improve aid practices through a critique of development practitioners' reliance on Enlightenment inspired programs. The critical development studies literature in particular has called into question the effectiveness of supplanting indigenous social practices with those based in Western capitalism and modernization (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Kothari 2001; Latham 2000; Mosse and Lewis 2006; Parpart 1995). This research project, through being informed by feminist perspectives, extends this critique of international development. Feminist theorists have remained wary of the masculinist gaze that frames nations of the global South as crippled and despairing, i.e., in need of Western "Man" for their survival. In the case of Peace Corps volunteers, who represent this gendered (male) rescuer of the poor (female), they illustrated that development programs have yet to resolve the problem of world poverty. Although volunteers do have an impact on the livelihoods of their individual communities, their stories suggest that, as a whole, the people of the global South continue to suffer, their hopes dependent on a

relationship to the West that has now lasted for over 50 years.

With respect to individual volunteers, this project benefits gender scholars' understanding of gender as it relates to the Peace Corps. All of the participants in this study asserted that they joined the Peace Corps to help the poor. Many of the women in this study recalled how their commitment to do care work inspired their resolve to continue their service under difficult conditions. Women's vulnerability to violence, which the Peace Corps recognized through encouraging them to live more sequestered lives abroad, also functioned to make women more prone to feelings of loneliness and alienation. None of the interviewees spoke of the ways through which the Peace Corps provided the social support to compensate for women's lesser access to public space. Sadly (and tragically), a few women recounted violent experiences that the Peace Corps failed to adequately address. The gendered ethic of care proved powerful, as none of the women interviewed left the Peace Corps subsequent to their violent encounters. I assert here that the pull to remain a volunteer in difficult times may be related to women's care work being universally undervalued. Because the Peace Corps is a ubiquitous symbol of social work, women who continued their service may have been inspired by the recognition of their work through being a Peace Corps volunteer. Some women may have internalized their service as one where both their care work was publically recognized and they may have understood their service as a commitment they needed to keep under any circumstances. In this sense, the Peace Corps and other U.S. foreign policy efforts benefitted from the gendered ethic of care by promoting U.S. interests at the expense of women's health and safety.

The male participants, though they also reported joining the Peace Corps to help

the poor, framed their work in terms of the “challenge.” Only one man spoke of concerns about the possibility of violence. The men understood their emotional hardships as part of the Peace Corps mission – as a reminder that they were destined to work among the poor. The Peace Corps encouraged them to go out and become acquainted with their communities at bars, in their dwellings, and in public spaces where women were often not permitted or encouraged to gather. These freedoms functioned to both abate men’s sense of loneliness and provided for a fuller immersion experience. Thus, male volunteers had routes through which they were able to engage with international development work more expansively than women. As the men reflected on their work in the Peace Corps, they spoke of their time as one of adventure: an exotic rescue mission to unshackle the poor from their prison of poverty. For some of these men, this perspective supported their view of Peace Corps volunteers as ambassadors of the liberation needed to save the poor. This understanding of their service allowed men to masculinize their care work by translating it through the narrative of heroism.

D. The Peace Corps, the United States, and the larger social world.

This is one of the few research projects to date that details life among development workers who have made a two year commitment to live among the poor. Thus, the accounts of the volunteers, while not speaking for the poor, nevertheless raise important questions both for scholars and practitioners of what it means to help the poor. As stated in chapter one, although development efforts do better the lives of the poor in some cases, poor nations’ relationship of dependency on the U.S. and Western Europe remains intact. Further research into the contingencies that enable these relations to persist is therefore needed to continue the work of dismantling a dependency that

maintains the cycle of poverty in the global South.

With respect to sociology as practiced in the United States, this project expands the discussion of the scholar's role in investigating patterns of inequality. Anthropologist Laura Nader called for social science research to "study up," that is, doing scholarly work that focuses on people with privilege and how they benefit from inequalities (1972). In some ways, my research on middle-class, mostly white and college educated people in the Peace Corps provides a lens through which one can deliberate on what U.S. foreign policy initiatives and international development projects look like as they are implemented in poor areas of the world.

This study of elites also uncovers how volunteers benefit from working with the Peace Corps. The organization provided a means by which a disaffected section of the middle-class was able to commit two years to live out their altruistic ideals by working for the state. They were not hindered by obstacles that often do not allow working class people to even consider this choice, e.g., the need to live close enough to their immediate and extended families to provide support, taking the risk of embarking on a career path that radically diverges from the norm, pursuing a personal growth experience during which they would have an extended period with no income, etc. In this sense, my research demystifies the idealized view of the Peace Corps volunteer as one who selflessly does the "good work" of the United States abroad. I argue instead that middle-class socioeconomic contingencies impelled prospective volunteers to consider working with the Peace Corps as an affront to class nihilism, all the while affirming the nationalistic fervor that made the Peace Corps and their volunteer service possible.

Still, it must be asked, what is it about middle-class life that makes the Peace

Corps so attractive? In a world brimming with possible alternatives, how does being a Peace Corps volunteer--and its potential dangers and uncertainties—surface as a prized subject position into which one situates oneself? I posit that it is not the lack of other options for creating social change that draws participants to the peace corps, but the limited scope within which social change is defined by the middle-class volunteers. Within this population, working on behalf of the poor in the United States did not satisfy their longing to be a part of major social change movements or, tangentially, to satisfy their urge to travel. Rather, their stories suggest that they had not “done enough” to help the poor prior to their work with the Peace Corps, even if they had previously volunteered in the United States. The desire to live abroad demonstrated that they cared deeply enough about the less fortunate to commit their lives to change efforts in a foreign and unknown culture. Thus, the middle-class contingencies are augmented by volunteers’ sensitivity to injustice and the narrow lens through which social change is defined within the frame of exoticism and foreignness. Each of these factors is a catalyst for supporting the large numbers of applicants to the Peace Corps (43,275 in 2008). As stated in chapter three, the highly selective nomination process (20% of applicants are chosen to serve), reminds volunteers that they are among the chosen called to make radical social change.

Interestingly, as discussed in chapter six, none of the volunteers were able to instigate the level of social change for which they had hoped and instead needed to rely on their indigenous neighbors--in part because of a lack of support from the Peace Corps organization. Most participants depended heavily on village support, particularly during the early months of service, to learn the language and perform the most basic tasks. Volunteers remembered how their communities provided food, shelter, and safety

throughout the course of their work. Although the indigenous communities were often grateful for their work, it was the *volunteers* who were overwhelmed by the kindness and sacrifices made by the poor, acts that inspired some volunteers to maintain these relationships long after their service was completed. Their communities' offered little in the way of material resources, showing volunteers that there are multiple ways to support those in need.

Thus, the disappointments and difficulties experienced by the volunteers were made bearable and more manageable by the relationships they formed with the indigenous population. Volunteers greatly appreciated these relationships; so much so that these relationships became more meaningful than the development objectives that were rarely achieved. Volunteers returned to the United States with a desire to mimic life as learned in their villages. As Sarah described in chapter six, her community taught her the importance of sharing meals as a way to maintain relationships and creating a better world. Volunteers' awareness that their village communities had much to offer the Peace Corps reminded them that large scale development programs are just one (and not the only) way of building a more just existence for people throughout the world.

This support inspired volunteers to persevere and recalibrate their objectives. With the help of their villages and other volunteers, Peace Corps volunteers returned to the United States with a refined understanding of poor peoples' plight. As the volunteers started their new lives in the U.S., making sense of their service included viewing the U.S. government and the Peace Corps through a critical lens. The acceptance of their communities and their confidence at having survived their service stimulated within them a desire to improve life in the United States as well.

The participants helped to foment new discussions about what it means to work for social change. The Peace Corps emerged in part to export capitalism and modernization as tools to help people of the global South and gain justification for the universal benevolence of these approaches. Volunteers and development scholars have shown that these tactics alone are at best partially effective and, at worst, supportive of continued poverty around the world. As Ashley described her success in getting a water well built in her community to support their tree nursery, Peace Corps volunteers play an integral role in mediating between development giants and local communities. Given the ineffectiveness of large-scale development work, Peace Corps volunteers have described how grassroots movements and the interactions with their communities—across innumerable differences—deserve a more prominent place in learning about what it means to aggressively address world poverty.

My research suggests that Peace Corps volunteers undergo a unique personal growth encounter, what some participants described as “an amazing experience,” and one that has shaped how they live their lives in the United States. In a world where the United States’ reputation has been seriously compromised by recent wars and charges of human rights violations, the Peace Corps offers a counter image of a benevolent and concerned Western power. And yet, life has improved little among the poor over the last five decades. Over 25,000 people die every day of hunger-related causes (U.N. World Food Program, 2009). So, the question remains, under what conditions will the United States take seriously its promise to invade the global South and destroy the real enemy-- global poverty?

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