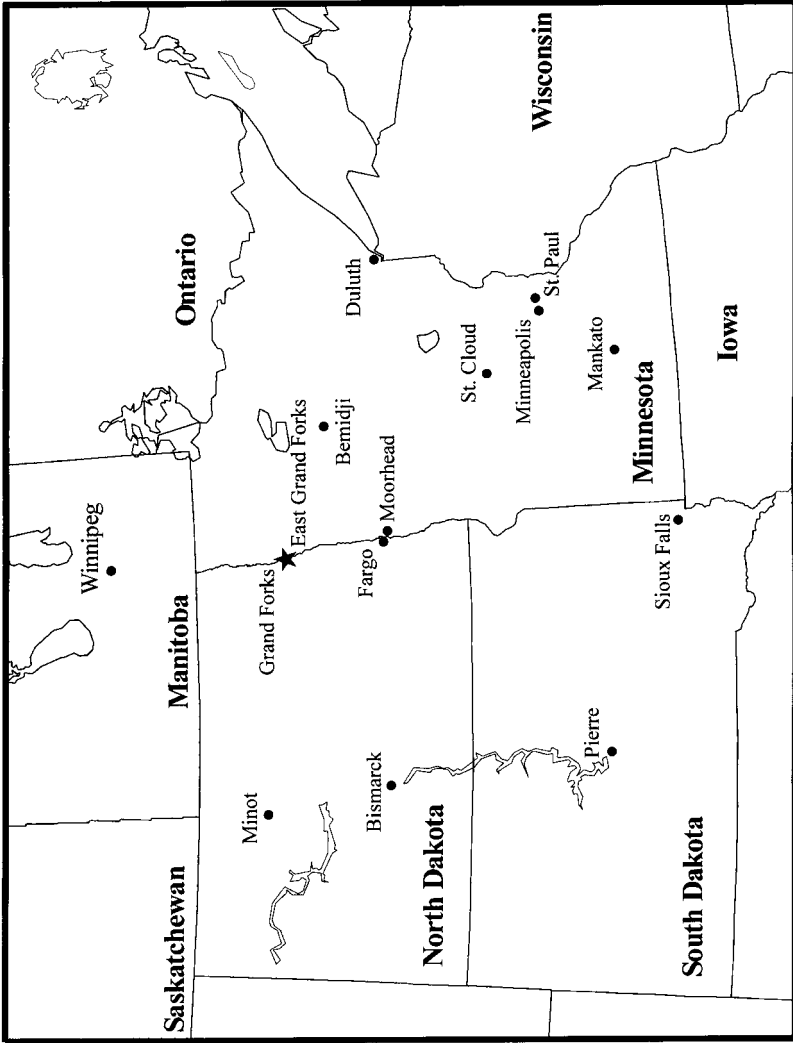


Chapter 1

Introduction: Red River Rising

Elaine was cold, hungry, and exhausted. She sat down on the pile of sandbags and put her face in her hands. She tried not to cry, but she could feel the tears fill her eyes. She let herself sit like that for a few minutes, resting, thinking, and then she knew she had to keep moving. She had been up for thirty hours, and her hands and back ached. It was frigid outside, and even though it was April, it felt like winter. Spring was often a little slow to arrive in North Dakota. She moved her toes in her boots, hoping to warm them a little. Looking out at all the volunteers, Elaine felt both profound warmth toward her fellow neighbors, as well as the hopelessness of a situation out of their control. *What else can we do?* she thought to herself.

A few older women had just arrived at the sandbagging site and were handing out sandwiches and cookies to sandbaggers. Elaine accepted one and ate the butter and ham sandwich on white bread—not her favorite, but under the circumstances, it was fine. She got back in the sandbagging line, knowing that the work must continue if they were going to save the neighborhood. The man to her right, a retired teacher, was cold and tired, too, but he offered a smile as she joined back in the line. The sandbags started coming and he turned and handed Elaine a bag. He managed to somewhat roll it into her arms, and she used both arms to cradle the bag and turn in one motion to pass it to the teenager on her left. Then she turned back to the right, received another bag, and continued. Elaine didn't talk much in line, but she listened while others chatted as they tried to pass the time and keep positive attitudes. She tried to think only of the task at hand, focus on the sandbags, and not think about the possibility of disaster. *Take the bag, pass it along,*



Regional Map. Map courtesy of the Grand Forks-East Grand Forks Metropolitan Planning Organization.

take the bag, pass it along, she said to herself. *Don't think about what might happen.*

After another hour, they ran out of sandbags and had to wait for a delivery from “sandbag central.” Elaine decided to head home and finish moving her belongings to the top floor. Ed, her husband, thought it wasn't necessary, but she felt that it was something she wanted—and needed—to do. The night before, she had moved clothes and boxes from the basement to the first floor and stacked them in the living room. They had accepted that the basement would probably get a little water. Now she stood in the doorway, ran her fingers through her hair, and considered the situation. *The first floor is not high enough*, she thought. Moving quickly, but not panicked, Elaine started putting photo albums in a laundry basket to carry upstairs. She couldn't help but peek in one older album, and seeing a photo of her children as toddlers smiling in the backyard of their home, she felt a rush of emotion, and the tears returned to her eyes. She had been in this house for twenty-one years, and it was the only home her children had ever known. Looking around the room, she felt an attachment to the house that she could not describe, but it was potent.

Several helicopters flew overhead and the house seemed to shake. The sound of them made her feel unnerved. Quickly, Elaine closed the album, placed it in the basket, and began moving everything to the bedrooms upstairs. She carried afghans from the couch, the quilt hanging on the wall that her aunt had made for her wedding, and the ashtray her daughter had made when she was five. On her third trip upstairs, she piled her son's baseball card collection and some coats on her bed, then turned to head back downstairs. It was at that moment that she heard the siren. She stood perfectly still and listened. *This cannot be happening*, she thought, but there was no doubt that it was the flood sirens. The city was flooding.

Elaine ran downstairs and picked up the phone to call her husband. Her children, now teenagers, were at her sister's house across town. Suddenly there was the sound of someone yelling through a blowhorn on her street. It was some men from the fire station, and one was yelling, “Evacuate now!” as the truck rolled through the neighborhood. Elaine moved quickly from room to room, not sure what to take, not sure what to do. The phone rang. It was her husband. “The dikes have been breached,” he said. “You have to get out immediately. I'll meet you at Susie's.” Fortunately, her sister's

house was on the west side of town, farther from the river. Her husband, who worked at a construction company, was at his office. *He's calm, I will be calm*, she said to herself as she corralled the dog outside and into the family van. She left their cat, Lucky, because her sister was allergic to cats, and Lucky would be fine upstairs for a night or two. Her neighborhood felt like a war zone, with helicopters overhead and Humvees rolling down the streets. She ran back inside and grabbed her purse and a basket of dirty laundry. Not believing that they would really have to leave, Elaine had not packed bags, but she thought the clothes in the basket would tide them over for a night or two until they came home again. *This won't be so bad*, she reasoned, as she pulled out of her driveway; *we'll stay with Susie for a night and it'll be fine. Maybe Susie will make her baked chicken for dinner*. But when Elaine got to the end of her block, and started to make a left turn, she looked to her right and stopped. She saw the water. Her neighborhood was filling up like a bathtub, slowly but steadily.

Elaine headed west, driving through some streets where the water was halfway up her van's tires. *Please don't stall, please don't stall*, she repeated under her breath, knowing that she probably couldn't carry her ninety-pound dog out of the van to safety. She arrived safely at her sister's house, only to learn that her neighborhood was also being evacuated. Her sister's face looked strained, nervous, but she didn't acknowledge her fear and worry. "Okay, let's think about what we should all do," she said positively, as if they had arrived at the beach and had to decide between volleyball and swimming. The family was stuck. They could not stay at the shelter set up at the airbase because it did not take dogs. They could not get to their parents in Minnesota; all the roads going east were closed because the bridges over the river into East Grand Forks, Minnesota, were out. After deciding that a motel was probably their best bet, they loaded into their cars and headed out of town.

Elaine and her family joined in as the entire city of Grand Forks, North Dakota, evacuated its city limits. Seeing the steady stream of cars, knowing that everyone was leaving, made Elaine feel somewhat stunned, as if this was too surreal to even talk about with her family. Her family members must have felt the same way, for no one spoke as they drove slowly away from their home. They listened to the radio announcers, who surprisingly were still broadcasting from their Grand Forks studio, discuss the details of the water

influx. Looking out their window, the announcers could see couches and portable toilets floating down the street, and they made jokes about this to their audience. Elaine's daughter laughed from the backseat. Elaine smiled at her in the rearview mirror, happy to hear the sound of her laugh. The radio announcers continued with listing the offers of families to take in evacuees: "The Millers of Bemidgi can take two adults, but no pets. Joan Larson of Grand Lake has offered to take in a family; cats are okay. Mike Cooper of Manvel can take one adult, no children." Suddenly, the radio announcers stopped the list of names and offers. At that very moment, Ed gasped. Behind them, he could see in the rearview mirror, was thick, black smoke rising from the city. "I think the city's on fire," Ed said as everyone in the car whipped their heads around to see. Indeed, the city *was* on fire. There was nothing Elaine and her family, or any of the other residents, could do except to continue driving as their home went both underwater and down in flames at the same time. Elaine ached with fatigue, worry, and fear as she stared out ahead onto the highway. *What is going to happen to all of us?* she thought.

Suddenly, her son sat up straight in the backseat and cried out, "Lucky!" They had forgotten about their beloved cat, still in their house. The thought of her drowning there was too much for all of them, and they felt an overwhelming feeling of despair and sorrow. Her daughter began to cry, and her son pulled his baseball cap low over his face. They could not go back now; it would be impossible to drive into the city. They drove on in silence. The last few weeks had been unimaginably difficult and stressful, but their ordeal was really just beginning.

Their evacuation would be for not only a day or two, as Elaine had thought, but for two and a half months. They stayed in a motel, then in the home of strangers, then with a family friend, and then finally moved into a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailer. They felt unmoored and nomadic. They felt homeless, and they were: their home was completely destroyed by the flood. The night they evacuated, they watched on television as the city burned and the water went up to the rooftops. Photographers went down streets in boats, filming house by house, and eventually Elaine and her family saw the roof of their home. They recognized the big oak tree in their front yard, the one they had hung a swing on when the children were little. At that moment, Elaine felt almost

as if she was having an out-of-body experience: *None of this is really happening, is it?*

In many ways, Elaine felt fortunate. They were all safe, they were able to evacuate together, and volunteers had rescued their cat. She worked hard to count her blessings, to take one day at a time, and to feel thankful for what she had. Yet, when the moment came, months later, to go back into her home, she felt it was the worst moment in her life. She stood on the sidewalk and looked up at their sweet two-story home. It had been perfect. Her feet felt like lead, and then she felt faint. She took Ed's hand, and they walked slowly up the front walk and up the stairs to the front door. "I'm not sure I can do this," she whispered to Ed. "You don't have to," he reassured her, but she knew it was time for her to go inside. Her neighbor, an elderly woman, had decided that she could not go back in her house, so she let relatives report the damage to her and volunteers cleaned up the wreckage. Elaine wanted to be strong and see it for herself.

The first thing they noticed was that the deck Ed had built was in the side yard, detached from the back of the house. The front screen door was hanging on one hinge, and there were several water lines on the house: the first from the initial level above the bedroom windows, and the second one, where the water had sat for weeks, about four feet up on the first floor. Inside, the house was dark and cold and smelled awful—a mixture of sewage, mold, and oil. Elaine's heart skipped a beat as she scanned the room: furniture overturned, dark mud covering the walls, a living room chair on top of the dining room table. Black slime covered every item. They slowly walked from room to room, commenting in low, somber voices on the damage. For some reason, they felt they needed to talk softly, as if someone was sleeping—or dying—in the house. Elaine thought that the kitchen was the hardest sight, until she got upstairs and looked in the bedrooms. The slime was on their beds, in their sheets, on their clothes. She put her hands over her mouth, feeling violated by the sight. Then she noticed the albums. The photo albums, which she had worked so hard to place in high spots on the second floor, were scattered about their bedroom, soaked with water and mud. The faces of her toddlers smiling in the backyard were behind a layer of mud, and the photo curled at the edges.

In the weeks and months that followed, Elaine worked tirelessly. She helped to gut her house and washed any salvageable items

and furniture. She lugged water-soaked clothes and toys to the berm for trash pickup.¹ She dealt with the enormous amount of paperwork necessary for postflood life, and she stood in lines for donations that had been given to the city. Elaine, like many residents in her town, was surprised by how long it took for life to feel normal again. Even years later she thought it did not feel like it did before—before the flood. *I am so grateful that no lives were lost in the flood*, she often thought to herself. Yet, as she threw away the handmade afghans, her son's baseball collection, and the quilt made by her aunt for their wedding, Elaine would think to herself, *but I feel like a lot of my life was lost*. She pushed aside those thoughts, finished washing the footstool her grandfather made her, and admired her work. *It looks wonderful*, she bragged to herself, *no sign of mold or slime*. Elaine stood up, peeled off her rubber gloves, and inspected her flood tan: brown arms from her shirt sleeves down to the top of the rubber gloves. The sun was out and Grand Forks looked beautiful with the green of summer. Suddenly, she heard the sound of the Red Cross food truck and realized that she was hungry. Her neighbor waved and Elaine, smiling and waving back, ran up to the truck for a free sandwich and pop. She would need the nourishment for energy to tackle all the work that still lay ahead of her.

This book is about women's experiences in a natural disaster. It is the story of what happened to women like Elaine. Based on ethnographic research on women from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, two adjoining towns on the Red River that experienced widespread flooding, evacuation, and destruction in the spring of 1997, this book tells the story of their everyday lives in extraordinary times. The women in my study, such as Elaine, shared their stories with me, and I sought to make sense of what happened to them in one of the worst natural disasters ever in the United States.² They relayed the challenges they faced, including coping with loss and emotional trauma, managing the stigma of charity, and keeping their families together. Many of them lost their homes, their sense of stability, and many of their familial artifacts in the flood. They worked hard to rebuild their everyday lives, maintain some control over their emotional and physical health, and negotiate the demands of the public and private spheres of life. The goal of this study is to capture and make sense of these stories, to understand how women re-create their daily lives

in a way that is meaningful for them. While this study focuses on a natural disaster, it is applicable to other crises—financial, emotional, familial, or environmental—that women endure every day. It is a story about overcoming and managing a crisis situation; it is about family; it is about social roles and identity; it is about gender; and it is about social-class standing and the trauma of downward mobility. It is a story about continuity and change.

Gender and Disasters

Interestingly, little is known about women's experiences in disasters. Prior to the late 1990s, women's perspectives on their disaster experiences had not been included in the fairly extensive sociological research on disasters. In 1984, sociologist Joyce Nielsen pointed out that gender was an important dimension of the social structure that was critically underdeveloped in disaster scholarship. By the 1990s, both disaster scholars and national experts, in their commitment to reduce the vulnerability of more marginalized groups, recognized a need to focus on women. The knowledge base on women and disasters is derived largely from surveys that included gender as a demographic variable and provided only basic information on gender differences. These studies did not engage in any thorough explanation or analysis of women's experiences or perspectives in a disaster. Many earlier disaster studies focused largely on male-dominated settings, such as emergency operations centers, and search and rescue teams.³

Several studies since the 1990s have found that women are more vulnerable in a disaster. Due to their structural location, the devaluation of their work, and their caregiving responsibilities, women are more likely to be at risk in disasters and to have a harder time recovering. This is true in developed countries, and even more so in developing ones. Yet, despite these studies and the recognition that more research is needed on women and disaster, the knowledge base on this issue is still remarkably weak and underdeveloped. Thus, women's voices and experiences in a disaster have not been explored. My study is designed to address this knowledge gap by investigating and analyzing women's experiences in a disaster and placing women's everyday lives at the center of the analysis.

As I studied the women of Grand Forks, it became clear that several underlying themes and tensions marked their experiences.⁴

These themes and tensions will unfold throughout the book. The first theme incorporates the tension between women's commonalities and women's differences. Historically, the fields of sociology and gender studies have debated and detailed the arguments around the problematic nature of the concept of "woman." Gender scholars face a dilemma of wanting to give significance to the differences among women, while still recognizing the importance of what women have in common.⁵ Many contemporary gender theorists criticize the dominant Western feminist thought that speaks of an essential "womanness" that all women have, with no consideration of differences in social and demographic characteristics. According to Judith Grant (1993, p. 20), the category "woman" is one of the "most foundational if contentious ones in contemporary feminist theory" because it derives from the belief that women are oppressed not by their class or race, but by their womanhood. It was important to see women as a collectivity for political purposes. By focusing on commonalities, the feminist theorists overlooked women's specific experiences and knowledge that resulted from the material division of labor and the racial stratification system.

In the past twenty years, feminist theories have acknowledged and included the different life experiences of women based on their race, ethnicity, social class status, disability, and sexual orientation. Feminist thought is shifting away from the view of a shared female identity, and toward an understanding of difference. For example, some sociologists have researched and written about how the lives of poor African American women are markedly different from upper- and middle-class white American women (hooks 1981; Collins 1990). Ruth Frankenberg (1993), in her book on women and race, argued that "whiteness" is a location of structural advantage, a "standpoint," and a set of cultural practices. Feminist theorists agree that the differences among women are immense. At the same time, some scholars are reluctant to give up the notion that women living in a patriarchal system have more in common than not. Research has shown that gender is a central organizing principle of social life and that being a male or a female affects almost every aspect of one's life. For example, there is much evidence that women of many backgrounds share the burden of the housework and childcare, and women of all backgrounds are also victimized by sexual assault and domestic violence. As Barbara Risman (1998)

noted, women in all classes and races have lower status than men in those same categories.

Thus, feminist theorists strive for a balance between the view of women having common experiences and acknowledging the very real differences in life chances for women of various backgrounds. Theorist Nancy Tuana (1993) argued for this balance of common interests and observable differences. In exploring women's lives, she stated, "We are less likely to find a common core of shared experiences . . . than a family of resemblances with a continuum of similarities" (p. 83). Today, it is common to see this discussion center around a conceptualization of race, class, and gender as "interlocking systems of oppression" that have interacting, simultaneous, and complex effects on women's lives (Spelman 1988; Collins 1990). In this perspective, no factor or system of stratification—race, class, or gender—is considered the primary or most determining one.

The women whose stories I share in this book did not have the same experiences in the disaster. Their differences were significant. Class mattered, race mattered, disability mattered, and sexual orientation mattered. It also made a difference if a woman's family was functional and tight-knit, if she had self-confidence, if she had a reliable job, and if she had good health on her side. It will be clear, as their complex and compelling stories unfold, that the material, social, cultural, and emotional conditions made a difference in how the women experienced the disaster. However, there were also commonalities in their experiences, because being a woman shapes a great deal of one's experience in the social world. The tension between commonalities and differences can be seen in many aspects of the women's stories and will continue to be seen as their experiences are revealed in the book.

A second theme that underlies the women's stories concerns the way in which women negotiate the public, private, and communal spheres of social life. Past research has examined the way that women handle and negotiate the distinct roles associated with the two designated spheres of life: the family role in the domestic sphere and the work role in the public sphere. Yet, interestingly, many social theorists, gender theorists in particular, criticize the two-sphere model of public and private domains. They argue that the public/private dichotomy is inadequate for understanding women's lives (Rosaldo 1980; Lamphere 1993). Nevertheless, despite the criticism, it has remained the predominant framework used

in research to examine women's work, roles, and lives.⁶ Several alternative frameworks have been proposed that take into account a third sphere in the public/private model. Hansen (1987), building on the work of Hannah Arendt (1958), proposes a social sphere, which includes activities and behaviors such as visiting neighbors, going to church, and other types of interaction within a community among nonfamily members.

Related to the idea of a social sphere is a third sphere based on women's community work. Milroy and Wismer (1994) define community work as work that is done outside of home and work. They explain their concept of this third sphere: "It can be political or publicly directed, yet often appears to be maintenance work—part of the "social glue" which holds a community together. While it may include personal or family benefits, it is always intended to provide goods and services to a broader group of people than solely oneself or one's household's members. . . . It is also more inclusive than the formally organised voluntary sector, because it includes small and informal neighbourly care-giving actions by individuals or organisations. Although it is not paid work, it is also not "voluntary" in the sense that it is not discretionary. . . . Its spatial location is neither home nor work place, primarily, but community" (p. 72). According to Milroy and Wismer, community work by women has long been overlooked and needs to be more visible in order for women's lives to be understood in full. For example, they continue their argument on the importance of recognizing community work: "Our working premise is that if domestic work is building homes, families and households, and traded work is building companies and economies, then community work is building communities and should properly be identified as a separate nucleus of productive effort" (p. 82).

Taking this premise into account, I examined all three spheres of women's lives in order to understand the scope of women's social roles, activities, and experiences in the flood. Their stories showed that they employed various and strategic tactics so they could move from one sphere to another, or suspend duties in one when another became more demanding. One of the most important findings is that the women in Grand Forks experienced "role accumulation," (Sieber 1974), meaning that they were committed to their multiple roles and were able to negotiate and fulfill them. Helena Lopata (1994), in her book *Circles and Settings*, discusses how women's roles and work are devalued in a gender-stratified

society and how most often the societal panic over women's role conflict is due to the cultural expectations for the role of motherhood. In Grand Forks, I found that the "greedy role" (Coser 1974) for women was their family role, especially if they had young children. Yet, as will be seen as the stories unfold, the women were able to meet the responsibilities of many demanding roles, including the greedy family role, in a competent and uncompromising manner.

The third theme that emerges in the stories of women's experiences in the flood is how women cope with downward mobility in a culture that embraces the ideology of achievement. The ideology of achievement is the prevalent social perspective which pronounces that "any child can grow up to be president" because the United States is full of opportunity for those who are willing to work hard. Thus, as Jay MacLeod (1995) argues in his classic study of class and race, *Ain't No Makin' It*, the achievement ideology posits that success is based on merit, and a lack of ambition or ability is the root of economic failure. As a result, when individuals are poor, the blame is put on them rather than on a capitalist system that perpetuates poverty. As Katherine Newman (1999) describes, thousands of Americans plunge down America's social ladder every year, feeling powerless. After this "fall from grace" many individuals have to turn to others—church, government, community—for help. Unfortunately, receiving such assistance is fraught with problems, often due to the belief in and the internalization of the achievement ideology.

A natural disaster provides an interesting context for a test case of attitudes toward and perceptions of poverty and welfare. A natural disaster and its destruction are not usually blamed on individual victims—it is not seen as a result of their laziness, their weak wills, or defects in their characters. Natural disasters are mostly seen as random, often indiscriminate acts of God over which individuals have little control. Some disasters may be seen as the fault of those in decision-making positions. In other cases, blame is directed at those who choose to live in high-risk areas such as California (earthquakes), Florida (hurricanes), or Oklahoma (tornadoes), or at those who do not take appropriate precautionary measures, such as purchasing insurance. Most often, however, there is a public outpouring of sympathy for those who are affected by a disaster, and criticism of the victims is considered socially unacceptable.

What are women's experiences with downward mobility and the reception of assistance in a disaster? Do such experiences lead to

any shifts in ideology about poverty and welfare? Disasters often throw individuals and families into downward mobility. While there have been studies that touch on economic losses to communities and businesses in disasters, there are no studies that examine how downward mobility affects the victims of disaster, how they cope, who they blame, and how, or if, they recover. Downward mobility is also a gendered experience. Economic inequality, divorce, and the growing number of female-headed households in the last three decades have led to the feminization of poverty, as thousands of women and children have plunged into poverty and onto welfare rolls. Thus, the experience of downward mobility, the stigma of charity, and the ideology of achievement have to be examined with a gendered lens.

The women of Grand Forks greatly appreciated the generosity of others after the flood but profoundly disliked the feeling of accepting charity, whether from public or private sources. They felt humiliated and stigmatized, and they believed that other people thought they were taking advantage of the system. The women felt humbled and embarrassed by needing help; they experienced the stigma of charity. Lewis Coser (1965), expanding on Georg Simmel's ideas on poverty, argued that the poor are viewed "not by virtue of what they do, but by virtue of what is done to them."⁷ Simmel declared that when people were classified as the poor, they lost their previous status—they went through a "formal declassification"—and their private troubles became a public issue. According to Coser, being poor meant people lost a right to privacy and their behaviors were open to public observation and scrutiny. Thus, the more public the charity—standing in lines for food or staying at a large public shelter—the more difficult it was for the Grand Forks women. Public exposure meant that the women lost their middle-class status. In Grand Forks, the receivers of charity often were women. Women, more often than men, went to stand in line for food, clothing, shelter, cleaning supplies, and gas vouchers. Perhaps how men and women have fulfilled their social roles historically can help to make sense of this phenomenon. While it was a violation of the women's caregiving role—which involves giving to and taking care of others—to accept charity, it would have been an even greater violation of men's provider role, which was to take care of their families financially, and would have contradicted the general cultural expectations that men be self-sufficient, independent, and

stoic. Historically, women's family role has included being the link between their families and community services and agencies. Accepting charity during the disaster was an extension of this role, but it was also "dirty work," which is often women's responsibility due to their lower status.

The women of Grand Forks had a difficult time being suddenly classified as poor because it went against the norms and expectations of their traditional middle-class, female role of giving and making contributions to society. The poor, Simmel (1965) theorized, are no longer expected to make a social contribution. Coser (1965) added that the poor have a low status specifically because they cannot contribute to society, and they fall into a "condition of unilateral receivers" (p. 147). The poor, according to Coser, can be "fully integrated into the social fabric only if they are offered the opportunity to give" (p. 147), an idea that explains why the women were determined to find ways to give to others in the midst of receiving assistance: they were resisting the "unilateral receiver" role. The women felt virtuous when they had given, shame when they received. Coser supported this assertion by claiming that the price of accepting assistance is the degradation of the individual and that receiving assistance "means to be stigmatized and to be removed from the ordinary run of men" (p. 144). The experience of downward mobility and the stigmatized nature of receiving charity led some of the women to rethink their views about poverty, welfare, and the ideology of achievement. "It's easier to work than to be on welfare," as one woman told me, surprised by the amount of red tape, humiliation, and time involved in receiving assistance from a public source.

The fourth and final theme that emerged in the research was the notion of the "self" and how women's identities were altered or solidified based on their everyday actions in the disaster. According to Mead (1934), we have no self at birth, but through interaction we learn to stand outside of ourselves and develop an ability to self-reflect. This sense of self, which is a sense of having a distinct identity, arises through social activity and social relationships. The conception of self, or the taking of self as an object, arises out of a human reflexive process. Individuals actively construct a sense of self through their interactions with others. Turner (1976) explains that the self-conception "refers to the continuity—however imperfect—of an individual's experience of himself in a variety of situations"

(p. 990). However, even though there is some constancy of personal identity, the self can change with time through the course of one's life, especially under the impact of "disjunctive experiences" (Lindsmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1975, p.10). Traditionally, the self is seen as the core conception of the real person, no matter the various roles that one occupies; the self is the thinking, feeling being that links the various roles and identities that people put forth in various situations.⁸ In other words, an identity that is tied to a role has implications for one's real self, although some roles are more salient to an individual's self than others, and some roles are so important that they merge with the self (Stryker 1968; Turner 1978).

The self is a gendered concept. Gender scholars have shown that gender is an achieved identity and that being a woman is what Hughes (1945) called a "master status," meaning that one characteristic of an individual becomes that person's identity. A woman's self, therefore, is her core identity. A gendered self is formed early in life, as society communicates its views and expectations of gender when individuals are very young. Gender theorists believe that gender is one of the most significant categories of identity in our society. In other words, it is a major focus of how others perceive us and how we view ourselves. Individuals are rarely able to imagine themselves as the other sex because being male or female is central to their sense of who they are.

According to some gender theories, a gender identity implies that maleness and femaleness are properties of individuals, created by early childhood socialization and fully solidified as different personalities for men and women by adulthood. Women have been socialized to be nurturing and family oriented; men are competitive and work oriented. This is the creation of a "gendered self" (Risman 1998). This gendered self, or self-identity, provides the motivations to individuals to fill their socially appropriate roles. Others do not see gender identity as so fixed and static, but rather a product of interactions—in other words, men and women "do" gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). According to Kimmel (2000), gender identity is socially constructed, meaning that "our identities are a fluid assemblage of the meanings and behaviors that we construct from the values, images, and prescriptions we find in the world around us" (p. 87). Our gender identities are voluntary, but also coerced—we do not get to make the rules, but "nor do we glide perfectly and effortlessly into preassigned roles" (p. 87). There are

elements of both structure and agency in the formation of our selves and identities.

This book is concerned with the tension between structure and agency, and the relationship between self, identity, and roles. It examines how women construct a sense of self and how they feel about themselves, as individuals, women, family members, and community members, as well as how external forces, such as cultural expectations or institutional opportunities or constraints, help shape those feelings of self. In other words, I believe that each woman's sense of self develops in a dynamic process within a culture and social structure that often devalues women and relegates them to the domestic sphere.

In this book, the women's stories show how they perceive themselves, what they see themselves as capable of achieving or coping with under circumstances of distress, and how they maintain or construct their self-conception. Their stories illustrate that they experience both shifts and continuities in their roles and identities: some stay the same and some are altered by the flood experiences. One important finding is how identity is tied to the conception of "home" (Sarup 1994) and interpretations of self engender a sense of being "at home" (Cuba and Hummon 1993). In the Grand Forks flood the women lost the cornerstone of their selves—their homes. Unlike those who give up their everyday routines and homes voluntarily to travel and for the discovery of self, the women in a disaster do not have the same "liberating experiences" (Hatty 1996). Instead, women affected by a disaster, either a flood or homelessness, are thrust involuntarily into situations where they must construct identity in the absence of the defining framework of home. Furthermore, because of this profound alteration of identity and self, disaster survivors have to rebuild their homes and also their "sense of reality" (Smith and Belgrave 1995, p. 265). To do so, many women reaffirmed their selves as intimately tied to home and family. Yet, women's identities shifted with the expansion of their nondomestic roles. It is indeed a paradox—how women embrace stereotypical roles that reflect and perpetuate gender inequality at the same time they emerge from the disaster with new skills and confidences to challenge the status quo.