THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF A SECONDHAND CLOTHING STORE:
INFORMAL STRATEGIES AND SOCIAL INTERACTION
AMONGST VOLUNTEER WORKERS

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

In recent years, social anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the operation of "the informal economy" in advanced industrial urban contexts. A major concern has been to show that many sectors of the city economy are organised on qualitatively different lines to those of the formal wage-earning, productive, and distributive realms (as epitomized by the factory and the large-scale department store). My focus on a particular secondhand clothing enterprise in Adelaide relates directly to this general problematic: I consider to what extent the social organisation of the secondhand clothing enterprise reveals distinctive pricing policies, idiosyncratic seller-buyer relationships, and novel ideas against which patterned action takes form. Specifically, I am concerned to explore the conflict between the idea of the secondhand clothing shop as a "socially useful" field of activity and the apparent necessity of its being run on "business-like lines".

Methodologically, the study assumes a symbolic interactionist perspective which aims to tease out the taken-for-granted understandings with which the secondhand clothes salespersons socially construct their ongoing relationships with clients. I establish that such salespersons categorize and price commodities in distinctive ways. By way of contrast to most items of practical use, for example, luxury items have a value which derives from the use to which they are put. These distinctions achieve effect in shop-counter relations with clients. Likewise, the taken-for-granted understandings about varieties of clients (e.g. the "truly needy" by contrast to the "haggin-hunter") are translated into distinctive responses in service encounters in the store. There are many ways in which such categorizations become translated into unique interactional strategies: a symbolic interactionist perspective is most suited to establishing these variations. Conversely, clients also have
established preconceptions of those from which they purchase, and those they bring to their many fleeting and episodic encounters with strangers at the shop counter. Inasmuch as pricing policy is somewhat arbitrary and that bargaining is possible, and in that many encounters are one-off and unlikely to be repeated, the seller-buyer encounter is a precarious one. A number of interactional strategies are undertaken by the female salespersons in order to maintain their prestige and their sense of occupational collegiality.

The social organisation of the clothing enterprise is not however simply a product of the salesladies' combined efforts. In this thesis, I closely examine the way in which the salesladies, on the one hand, and the management, on the other, bring to the second-hand store competing definitions of the store's role and the place of the ladies inside it. For the ladies who voluntarily donate their labour to the store, their main concern is with socialising, developing friendships, and using the store, in a number of cases, to offer major changes in their personal, domestic lives. By contrast with this definition of the situation, those who manage the charity store from a distance are concerned to emphasize its business character and the single goal of profit. Under such circumstances, the stage is set for considerable tension and conflict in the store. The analysis of the emergence of these lines of division, and the particular forms which they take in the store, forms a substantial theme of my work.

I present the social organisation of the charity store as an emergent property of the women's creative ability. I detail the many contingencies which bear upon the work place, and the many attempts made at their resolutions. By concentrating on the allocation and rotation of tasks, and the exercise of decision-making skills, I establish the negotiative and consensual arrangements which develop amongst the women in small work parties. I establish that in the charity store, the values, norms, and shared sentiments of
group members, rather than personnel in officially recognized work positions, form the basis for co-operative, co-ordinated collective effort. I also show how the women create a contented existence from the resources available at the store, and how those with ambition and a desire to test skills in novel experiences gain the prestige which comes from control. For those who are lonely and bored, the chances for inclusion in group life, and the accompanying personal rewards, serve to maintain charity work as a worthwhile enterprise.