Women's Exchange in the American Garage Sale: Giving Gifts and Creating Community

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INTRODUCTION

During the last twenty-five years, the garage sale has become institutionalized as a means of second-hand commodity exchange in the United States.1 Between 6 to 9 million sales are held each year, with well over $1 billion changing hands. Born of consumer affluence and perpetuated in part by an increasing need to "make ends meet," garage sales have developed a niche in the disposition of household goods alongside auctions, flea markets, and charity. Unlike auctions and flea markets, however, the garage sale is a female-dominated institution; approximately two-thirds of the shoppers and sellers are women (Herrmann 1990).

We can identify several reasons why women comprise the majority of shoppers and sellers in the garage sale. The most salient factor is that the garage sale takes place in or at the seller's private residence; it is a kind of quasi-commercial exchange that grows directly from the home. Many of the activities involved in holding a garage sale are also direct extensions of housekeeping: cleaning house to select items; deciding which items are to be disposed of; cleaning, folding and arranging items; and creating an attractive display. Such tasks fall among those traditionally assigned to women. Shopping, too, falls in the realm of "women's work" in that women have historically been the family's "consumptionworkers" (Weinbaum and Bridges 1979), and even today shop more than men (Robinson 1989). Women are often empowered through their involvement in the garage sale because they feel that their housekeeping and shopping skills are valorized (Herrmann 1990; Soiffer and Herrmann 1987); they evoke images of pride, competence and creativity as part of their discourse about garage sale participation.

As the institution of the garage sale has grown, so has scholarly interest. Initial studies, often telephone surveys, were done from the perspective of marketing: Dovel and Healy (1974) explore participant attitudes, marketing strategies and participation levels; Healy and Dovel (1975) deal with attitudes and characteristics of garage sale shoppers and their means of disposing of used goods; and O'Reilly et al. (1984) investigate shoppers' motives for purchasing and attitudes towards different used goods, focusing on clothing. Ethnographic treatments have attempted to understand the garage sale phenomenon within the larger social and cultural context. Herrmann and Soiffer (1984) outline the historical development of sales and present elaborated typologies of shoppers and sellers, roughly ranking them by degree of economic rationality. The garage sale can also be seen as an alternate economic form, one that inchoately envisons a degree of dignity and value in people's labor and which creates a sense of justice and community that is not found in contemporary capitalist social relations (Soiffer and Herrmann 1987). Herrmann (1990) elaborates on these themes, focusing on interrelated questions of women, work and community in the garage sale, in addition to providing an ethnography of the institution. The ethnographic or naturalistic inquiry approach has also been increasingly utilized for a broader understanding of related institutions, such as flea markets (e.g., Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990) and auctions (e.g., Glancy 1988).

This paper will treat how women create a sense of community, both for themselves and others, through the exchange of commodities in the garage sale. The specific focus is on acts of "giving." Garage sale giving engenders a sense of community in three primary ways. Women solidify their already existing personal relationships through garage sale gifts, which are often given informally. They often transmit something of themselves with the goods they sell. They also contribute to a broader spirit of community through the generalized reciprocity and even moral economy that manifests in the garage sale. Things go from where they are no longer wanted to where they are needed at little or no cost. As part of a much larger body of

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work, only a small segment of the garage sale phenomenon can be treated here.

RESEARCH, METHODOLOGY AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Research for this study of garage sales has been ethnographic. I used participant observation and interviews as the primary means of data collection. From 1981 to 1986 I interviewed, in varying degrees of depth, over 200 shoppers and sellers and attended and/or observed over 1,000 garage sales. Many of the interviews were tape recorded. Although the primary research site is upstate New York (Cortland and Tompkins counties, with a combined population of approximately 140,000), investigations in other cities and suburbs and a review of the popular literature on the topic indicate that the garage sale phenomenon is quite similar throughout the nation.

As part of the research, I noted the gender of garage sale participants. The count from 334 sales involving 458 sellers reveals that 71 percent of the sellers were women. Of a tally of 1,258 shoppers from 9 sales, 65 percent were women. These numbers substantiate that, at approximately two-thirds of shoppers and sellers, the garage sale is a female-dominated institution.

Results of a shoppers’ questionnaire support notions of community generated through garage sale exchange. I administered the questionnaire at four sales, approaching all the shoppers at two of them and all the shoppers within several hours at two other sales (N=205). It reveals that women attend sales more often than men and they are more likely to attend sales with others, whether spouses, friends or relatives. Women are also more likely to purchase items at sales, especially for members of their extended personal networks of friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers, than are men. These data suggest that women are more involved in informal networks of exchange in the garage sale arena than are men.

Women, Community and the Garage Sale

There are a number of ways in which the spirit of community engendered in the garage sale, both for themselves and others, is especially relevant to women. First, the style of community produced appears, at least symbolically, to grow out of the home. It seems an extension of the (female) domestic sphere (e.g. Reiter 1975; Rosaldo 1974); the special responsibilities for domesticity imposed on women have made them the linchpins of family life (Thorne 1982). It can also be seen as an outgrowth of the creation of female domesticity (Cott 1977) and the relegation of morality to the domain of women and the family in the nineteenth century (Bellah et al., 1985). Cheal (1988) observes that women, as the primary inhabitants of the domestic realm, are still the keepers of the moral (Cheal 1988). Creation of community as a style of resistance to capitalist relations of production have also been attributed to working-class women and the domestic domain (Sacks 1984).

Second, there is an important connection, both material and symbolic, between relational skills and the self-conscious creation of community. Such relational skills are, of course, seen as “women’s values.” The literature on female socialization is vast, but we can see from many sources that women are raised in such a way to be more concerned with others than are men (Chodorow 1978). The “different voice” of women articulated by Carol Gilligan (1982) includes an emphasis on attachment; their discourse is filled with terms of nurturance and caring. Harstock even claims that the social construction of femininity and the institutionalization of motherhood centers women in a “complex relational nexus” (Harstock 1985:64), rendering their values incompatible with rationalized exchange. Further, women’s relational skills are frequently exploited in the labor market (Hochschild 1983). Within the structure of the family, women are the primary nurturers. Within the garage sale setting, women can nurture their family and others through the exchange of commodities.

To the extent that the generalized community ties and personal networks discussed above are instrumental, they are tied to the household economy. That is, the majority of the housekeeping purchases come out of funds administered by women (Rubin 1976; Whitehead 1984). Fourth, the creation of community through institutions such as the garage sale is especially important to women because many other sources of community, such as the ties of the workplace or ties that derive from male interactions in public
organizations and informal settings (e.g., LeMasters, 1975), are much less available to many women.

The bonds of community generated in the garage sale influence women's lives, even in a society organized around individualism and commercialization of social relations. The socializing involved in attending sales together or through coordinating efforts in multi-family, block or large neighborhood sales can help cement social bonds. The very act of selling used goods, along with their history, at very low prices fosters a generalized sense of community. Shopping for people other than oneself and then giving the merchandise as gifts solidify personal social networks.

Giving and the Creation of Community in the Garage Sale

To view garage sale exchange as "giving" or to view garage sale commodities as "gifts" requires some contextualization. Garage sale exchange occurs within an advanced capitalist society, a setting in which the cash nexus of the marketplace mediates most exchanges of goods and services. Cash is also the medium of exchange at the garage sale, but in most cases it is only token payment. Many sales have "free boxes" from which shoppers can select items, with no payment expected. There are numerous instances of actual give-away or near give-away prices. Sellers frequently report lowering prices for children and those who seem needy. I once observed some sellers return the payment they had just received for some used furniture when they learned it was to be used to furnish the apartment of a mentally handicapped woman. Social services provided the rent, but would not pay for furnishings.

Generalized Reciprocity and Garage Sale Giving

Transactions in the garage sale setting are less fully rationalized than in the formal economy. As a part of the informal economy, the garage sale is an important site for the construction of resistance to the alienation of contemporary capitalism (Henry 1981, 1982, 1983). Interpersonal ties, reciprocity, and a sense of moral redistribution are often distinguishable features of the informal sector. The sense of giving in the garage sale, although strong, is a "generalized" (Sahlins 1972) or diffuse notion. It approximates the "pure gift" with no defined expectation of repayment and an emphasis on generosity and sharing. The concept of generalized reciprocity is related to that of moral economy (Scott 1976; Thompson 1971) in that both encompass a moral assertion of a means to (re)distribute wealth so that even the lower classes are minimally provided for. The moral economy posits a kind of subsistence ethic. (Cheal [1988], too, speaks of a moral economy, but one that is more interested in maintaining social cohesion than in redistributing goods to those in need). Lowenthal's "social economy" (1975), which values social relationships above profit-taking, is a related model for garage sale exchange. The "gifts" in garage sale transactions are given to some generalized other and received from no prescribed other (although the giver and the receiver may be known to one another from a different context), which contrasts with the personal ties of formal gift-giving.

As part of the generalized reciprocity of the garage sale, things tend to go where they are needed. Actual cash payments are often minimal; many items are given away outright. One female seller in her mid-thirties described selling children's clothes "for just nominal amounts of money, which is practically like giving them away." Another seller of about the same age also spoke of children's clothes: I gave a lot of stuff away. Not just to get rid of them. Only for someone who needed them. And I gave them a lot. I don't mind it. If somebody likes the clothes and they're going to use them, and if they've got one child and another one on the way... I threw in a couple extras. If they bought one or two things I might charge them full price. But if they bought a lot of them, I took about $5 off of each order. It felt good. It always feels good. I'm always glad to see my daughter's clothes go to somebody who's going to enjoy them.

Children's clothes and children's items are given away frequently. Clothing and equipping children, like feeding them, is viewed as a fundamental social good.

The sense of giving also applies to adults in need. A female seller in her late twenties held a moving sale and recounted: We had an old stove sitting out there that was a beat-up piece of stuff, and some people came...
by—in a real beat-up car—and obviously needed it. We just gave it to them. I think there is a degree of pleasure in that sort of thing, especially with people who do need it.

Another seller, a lawyer in her mid-thirties, moved from a poor area in Pennsylvania and described selling a kerosene heater for next to nothing to an impoverished family. She confessed that she did not expect to feel so philanthropic about holding a sale. With the stove and the heater, as in the case of the children’s clothes, there is a special satisfaction in helping to provide others with life’s basics.

Sellers would often rather give an item to someone they know than sell it for a pittance to a stranger. The money is not substantial recompense compared to the emotional satisfaction of a friend. This attitude is clearly expressed by a seller in her mid-thirties about her children’s clothes: “I’d just as soon give them to someone I know and have them use them. I’d rather see my neighbors get some benefit out of them. You don’t get the value out of them when you’re selling items for a quarter that cost $10. What’s the use of getting a quarter for it if it’s practically new? I’d rather see someone I really care about using it and wearing it.”

This attitude underscores the fact that, although cash payments are made for garage sale items, these payments are so minimal that the transactions are almost like gifts. For many, actually giving their cast-offs is more meaningful "payment" than cash sales. The items that change hands, then, at garage sales are an odd mixture of capitalist commodities and gifts, and they may slide between the two poles according to circumstances. Similarly, shoppers and sellers may perceive their transactions shift between the poles of gift giving and instrumental exchange. Leiter (1989), in his reflections on holding his own sale, affirms the characterization of selling as giving (Soiffer and Herrmann 1987), but feels that his personal experience of giving was confined to white, middle-class participants, like himself, and that transactions became instrumental with those in need.

Part of what is so attractive about giving in the garage sale setting is the face to face interaction. Sellers often take pleasure in the enjoyment shoppers derive from their things and frequently develop something of a personal relationship in their brief encounters with their customers. Yet the kind of giving that transpires in the garage sale is unpretentious. One older seller, the wife of a machinist, noted: "I charge what I think people can afford to pay. I give away a lot of stuff to poor families. It’s not charity, it’s just giving."

The giving in the garage sale is informal and accessible to people of even modest means. And for the women sellers, it is a way to nurture others, even strangers, through commodities, while at the same time they fashion a generalized sense of community through the exchange of their goods.

Transmissions of Self in Garage Sale "Gifts"

Most garage sale "gifts" are really the commodities of daily life in advanced industrial society. There are occasional status items—works of art, antiques or collectibles—at sales, but most articles are quite mundane. They may be considered "special" because of their very low price, i.e. bargains (bargain hunting is the primary motivation for shopping at sales, according to the shoppers’ questionnaire). Or they may become special to the buyer because they have a history which links one user to another. As a result of garage sale exchange, these commodities can become what Kopytoff (1986) refers to as "singularized," in that they become set apart or viewed as special by virtue of their low price or memories attached.

Garage sale exchanges can unite shoppers and sellers in a personal or psychological way, given how possessions can become a part of one’s extended self (Belk 1988). Used items may carry personal or family memories, which is why they are so often valued (Belk 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halston 1981). The nostalgia factor cannot be underestimated in the satisfaction participants derive from garage sales. Further, in the transfer from one user to another, commodities in the garage sale acquire what Kopytoff (1986) would call "life histories." For example, I have a hook rug in my house, purchased from a woman ambivalent about selling her grandmother’s rug. But she did not have space for it in her new home. She instructed me to "think of her grandmother" when I used the rug, although I had never previously met her (or the seller). Yet, it eased the seller’s conscience to
transfer the rug, with memory intact.

Shoppers, too, speak of items in which something of the user has been transmitted. This may be a generalized sense, that is knowing that someone has used the item, or a specific history of knowing who used the item and getting a sense of what the item meant to the user. Shoppers may seek items at garage sales because these things have a history and are more personalized than the fungible commodities that can be purchased at a store. Frequently shoppers tell stories about items purchased from individuals who have touched their lives, in however small a way. For example, Terry Parker⁴, a library clerk in her late twenties, recounts:

"Once I got a sweater that was this beautiful hand-knit wool sweater for $1. It was a gorgeous, gorgeous sweater of Huntington wool, a plaid knit sweater. This is a real hard thing to do. It is real complicated and real gorgeous. I have had it for a long time now. I just started talking to this woman and I just liked her so much. She was such a Mom. She knitted this sweater for her daughter and her daughter was like my age and hated it. She just hated this sweater; she never once wore it. That woman probably spent $20 on yarn and sold it to me for $1. One dollar! I was trying to communicate to her, "Look, your daughter is a jerk and she should appreciate this whether she likes the color or the style or not because there are all these hours of labor and time and all this attention to detail." And she wouldn't even take it. She left it at her mother's house and she wouldn't even take it home."

"I remember where this woman's house is. This sweater is starting to fall apart, but it is something like a memorial to her, you know, her motherly love. ...Sometimes you just strike a matchup with someone or something."

Stories like these are not uncommon and may be told from the seller's perspective. A historian and free-lance writer wrote about the ties that can be created among individuals through the transfer of items, and their memories, at garage sales. Recalling the purchaser's joy at inexpensively acquiring a cherished old rocking chair which had once belonged to her aunt, she reflected:

"I felt a mysterious awareness of the unity of human experience: that as the chair passed from me to that aging woman, the two of us shared something of our lives and ourselves. I do not know where my aunt got the chair; I do know that she valued it, and spent some of the lonely nights of old age sitting in it reading mystery stories until her eyesight failed. I know that she held my mother on her lap in that chair, and me and my children. I can only imagine it in the life of its new owners" (Paterson 1981:771).

Her pleasure at virtually giving away a cherished item approaches the pure model of gift giving in which the giver receives nothing but the perceived satisfaction of the recipient. Paula Nelson, an acting instructor of 29, says something similar:

"I like seeing people able to enjoy things that I was no longer enjoying. And it's a relief to pass on something that's a little too important just to throw in a Salvation Army box. When someone else gets pleasure, that's a big thing for me. I get very personal about inanimate objects and I endow them as if they had a life of their own. So I like to see someone else get pleasure from them."

We see in these examples how even mundane goods can carry psychic contents such that, instead of "the spirit of the gift" (Mauss 1967), the contemporary counterpart might better be "the spirit of the commodity" (Appadurai 1986) to describe what changes hands in the garage sale.

Finding Good Homes for Garage Sale Goods

In addition to the pleasure of transferring items, and the memories associated with them, there is often a special satisfaction in seeing an item go to where it belongs, a form of personification of the thing. Implicit in this perception is an inherent sense of a correct place in the universe for certain items, or, at least, a relief that something valued goes "to a good home." Garage sale participants often speak of the satisfaction of placing an item in its "proper"home. Polly Meigs, a Cooperative Extension manager of 55, implied this when she gave two extra violins to a man who couldn't afford them because "I would much rather that someone who appreciated what was there have them." Similarly, that is how the seller of the plants must have felt about having Leslie Howard, someone who loves the plants as much as she, for her customer. In Leslie's description:

She kept throwing in extra stuff for free, and
thanking me. And I kept saying, "No, no, that's all right, you don't need to give me anything else." She was an older woman, probably in her late fifties or early sixties, a little bit deaf, but she absolutely loves those plants.

I have often heard sellers, parting with a still cherished item, comment, "I'm so glad it's going to a good home!" or "I'm glad it's going to someone who can really use it!" One seller repeatedly thanked a shopper for purchasing a Norwegian-made sweater, a gift from a friend that did not fit her, because it would be used and appreciated.

Participants appreciate the correct "fit" between an article and a shopper. One female shopper of 40 recalled how she, as a seller, responded to others:

"When I was selling, sometimes I liked a person and felt an object belonged to them. Some young college student wanted an interesting piece of clothing--a good thing, an embroidered Chinese robe--but it looked so good on her and she loved it and there was no question in my mind that it was for her. But she only had $2 on her, and I had marked it at $5."

The seller accepted the $2, realizing that this student was the "right" person for this robe, but she added, "People have done that with me, too, when I'm the buyer." Her last statement reflects the sentiment that "one good turn deserves another," but in a generalized community context, rather than referring to reciprocity in personal networks (e.g. Stack 1974). This garage sale participant also observed that garage sales "are a force for social interaction for neighborhood cohesiveness, for things that make a community a community."

Gifts from Garage Sales

Women also help to foster community through the giving of gifts purchased at garage sales. The literature on gift exchange indicates that women bear primary responsibility for selecting and preparing gifts (Caplow 1982; Cheal 1988). Cheal views this female responsibility as an outgrowth of the domestic domain, which is influenced more by the moral than is the public domain. The gift-giving tradition, then, can be seen as an extension of "female values." Women are the keepers of gift giving just as they are the keepers of kinship (Ayoub 1975; Reiter 1975), roles which frequently overlap and are mutually reinforcing. The sharpest gender contrast in the shoppers' questionnaire, for example, reveals that 62 percent of the women would sometimes buy things for relatives, as compared to only 37 percent of the men.

Items purchased at garage sales may be used as gifts, either for formal occasions or informal giving, because they are so inexpensive. There was mixed reaction among those I interviewed concerning whether or not they would give an item purchased at a garage sale to someone as a gift for such conventional times as birthdays or Christmas. Some would do so, but most of those had learned to distinguish which potential recipients would accept an item purchased at a sale and those who would not. Further, many shoppers would avoid garage sales for formal gift giving, such as weddings, altogether. Aside from possibly devaluing the recipient by paying so little for a gift at a garage sale, many avoid the potential "contamination" (Belk 1988) of used goods for a formal gift. 5

Polly Meigs, a middle-class woman, aged 55, often gives garage sale purchases as gifts. In her words:

"I would buy something for someone at a sale if it was something they wanted or needed. I wouldn't feel at all upset about it. In fact, I got a really pretty wicker basket and it looks just like new. I want to give it to a friend (there's not a mark on it) for a housewarming gift, and she'll be delighted with it because she's got a new porch and it will be just perfect."

"I would also give someone a formal present if I found something I thought was new and hadn't been used. I would and I have. I don't even tell them I got it at a garage sale. I remember getting a cheese keeper once. It was brand new. It had never been out of the box. There was no reason to say, 'Oh, by the way, I got this at a garage sale.' I just said, 'Happy birthday!'"

Although Polly learned (the hard way) that her daughter-in-law did not appreciate gifts purchased at sales, in some circles, a gift from garage sales may actually be a status presentation. The gift itself is an emblem of a social tie and the fact that it comes from a garage sale solidifies a special set of (most likely countercultural) values.
Polly, like many other shoppers, is always on the lookout for items that members of her extended network--friends, relatives and co-workers--might use. She will call even distant acquaintances to tell them of a sale where they can find a costly item they are seeking. For less expensive items, or for people with whom she's closer, she will simply purchase the item. Such impromptu gifts are usually given unwrapped, as part of their informal character. Polly and most other shoppers do not ask for repayment for these offerings.

Many shoppers have variants of this style. It is very common for friends to be looking for such items as pieces of a china pattern, old Nancy Drew books, vintage clothing, a child's car seat, or whatever it is that members of their personal networks want. Cindy Banner, a shopper and seller in her mid-thirties, was looking for baby items for her newly pregnant sister-in-law. She also looked for items for her friends:

"A lot of times I will see a plate or a dish or a bowl or a shelving thing that my friend, Dot, likes. So, if I go to a sale and there is a decent thing I will get that for her. People that I know that collect specific little things, I will get."

She uses a price ceiling of about $5 to determine whether to purchase these things for her friends. She then gives the items as informal gifts, and expects no repayment:

"It's exciting to go over to somebody's house and say, "Look what I found for you! Haven't you been looking for this?" I'll buy clothes for somebody else's kid that I know maybe they can't afford to go and buy themselves. That to me is great fun to get stuff for other people. It tickles me. I just love to do that."

There is also a woman in the Cortland area who expressly shops for those who cannot afford clothing and other basics. This is her way to do service.

Personal Santas

Given how far the dollar stretches at garage sales, many shoppers find themselves in a position to be quite generous with friends, relatives, neighbors and even casual acquaintances who just happen to drop by. Many, like Cindy Banner, just keep the items to give away as appropriate:

"I have two shelves upstairs of just things that I can give as gifts to people and most of it is kids' stuff. An interesting jacket or an old feeding bowl that I found at a sale for a quarter that I know is worth much more than that. So I buy these things and pack them away and sometimes I save them with specific people in mind. It's like having my own little store up there to go to."

Marge Robertson, aged 50, has an entire attic of garage sale items, many of which she gives away.

Purchasing things to give away also provides many habitual shoppers a reason to continue shopping beyond satisfying their "legitimate" consumer needs. Susan Katz, a woman in her sixties, justifies her shopping partially on this basis. She buys things for her grandchildren and others:

"I have young friends who have children, and I'm always delighted to have lots of things around so that when kids come here they never have to go home empty handed. Mothers understand that they are getting second-hand and the kids know it, too."

She finds that she can be very generous through shopping at garage sales. Instead of giving a child only one book purchased at a retail store, she can easily give the child several purchased from garage sales.

"Potlatching"with Garage Sale Purchases

So generous can garage sale shoppers be with gifts that they may actually shower others in garage sale presents. Terry Parker describes how she and some friends gave one another numerous, often kitschy, items discovered at garage sales:

"Some of my friends and I have a real relationship about giving and receiving. It's almost competitive where you try to shock the other person with what you give them....We even call it potlatching."

Terry described how one Christmas the coveted item was a little black rubber face they called "scary face."

"It was a scary face; it really was scary. It looked like a junk manufacturing company's idea of some
African scary emblem or something. Everyone else decided they wanted it and traded for it. And a week later it was lying on the floor and nobody cared about it. But the essential thing about this is the one-upmanship, who can find the most appropriate, strange item for another person. And yard sales are just a gold mine."

As an anthropology major, Terry called these exchanges "potlatches;" they do bear a superficial similarity to potlatches, in that the giver of the "best" gifts receive some social recognition. While there is no reason to believe that this sort of exchange is common among garage sale participants, this example does underscore how garage sale shopping, even among these relatively low-income shoppers, allows for a degree of generosity in gift giving that is simply unavailable through retail stores.

A Boon to Sellers

For the most part, shoppers receive in expensive purchases or "gifts" in garage sale exchange, which allows them in turn to be generous with what they have bought. Sellers, too, may feel as if they receive gifts through garage sales. In that the money received for unwanted items seems like a boon, found money, sellers benefit financially from what they can no longer use. One young female seller put it this way:

"Getting money through a garage sale is like getting a gift, like getting money from nowhere. You forgot how much you paid for things."

Aside from the satisfaction of giving and insuring items go to good homes, sellers may feel as if they got unexpected money for what is basically housecleaning activities.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As roughly two-thirds of the shoppers and sellers in the garage sale, women play a central role in the creation of community through garage sale exchange. This style of community can be seen as an outgrowth of the domestic domain, just as many of women's activities in the garage sale are an outgrowth of their housekeeping and shopping skills. Further, the sense of community is one shaped by women's role as nurturer; in the garage sale, women are concerned with providing for others, that things go to where they belong (emotionally) and that somebody actually uses the items. As garage sale sellers and shoppers, women can provide for and nurture others through commodities. They often shop with others and for others, thereby reinforcing their social networks.

Giving within garage sale exchanges and giving through garage sale goods allows women to fashion a sense of extended community. They do this by redistributing goods to those in need, in a generalized spirit of giving. There is a giving of "self," in that personal memories and histories are transmitted with items sold. Bonds of friendship are strengthened with the informal giving of inexpensive gifts purchased at sales. Insofar as we can speak of distinctly "women's values," we can say they shape the giving and sense of caring community engendered in the garage sale.

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1Research on which this paper was based was made possible by a New York State/United University Professions Professional Development and Quality of Work Life Study Leave.

2For a detailed discussion of the various components of the research and specific techniques utilized, please see Chapter II of the resulting dissertation (Herrmann 1990).

3Any social divisions--class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual preference, poverty--can act as barriers to a sense of giving in the garage sale. Some informants seem to have experienced such barriers, as has Mr. Leiter (1989), while others have not. However, based on the research, I would argue that the informality of the garage sale serves to break down social divisions as often as reproducing them. Mr. Leiter's observation that his feeling of giving was circumscribed by class and race potentially reveal as much about him as about giving in the garage sale. Some study of these factors involving more than one participant is required. Further, gender may be the most important factor in Mr. Leiter's experience; his "male construction" of giving may require a display of gratitude from beneficiaries, whereas women, trained to nurture, may respond directly to need.

4All of the names of the informants have been changed to protect their identities.
The felt sense of contamination deters many from shopping at garage sales and other outlets for used goods. Further, my own observation and that of O'Reilly et al. (1984) indicate that, among those who buy used items, many avoid the contamination of items, such as underwear, that are intimately associated with another's body.

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