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His and Hers: Gender and Garage Sales

Gretchen M. Herrmann, SUNY Cortland

It's traditional. The household and household management is women's responsibility more so than men. And I think that still is even though we have families where both people work. Whether or not to sell the spatula still seems to be the woman's decision. And because she decides to sell it, she plans the garage sale and then she ends up taking the responsibility for the sale and she also keeps the money. Now, I've known men to have garage sales, men who live alone. I don't know if I've known many men to have a garage sale when they're married. I just think because it comes out of the household it goes back into the household. It has been the woman's domain. [Lisa McFarren, 36, married]

Women comprise approximately two-thirds of garage sale shoppers and sellers, largely because the garage sale takes place at private homes. Garage sale trade is a kind of quasicommercial exchange that grows directly from the home. And the home, we know, has long been considered women's domain. Many of the activities involved in holding a sale are a direct extension of housekeeping: cleaning house to select items; cleaning, folding and arranging items; and creating an attractive display. Such tasks fall among those traditionally assigned to women (Oakley 1974). Shopping, too, is mainly performed by women as part of the "consumption work" for their families and themselves (Firat 1991; Jansen-Verbeke 1987; Oakley 1974; Robinson 1989; Weinbaum and Bridges 1979).

Lisa's statement above is an open acknowledgement that traditional patterns still govern most domestic behavior despite the large number of married women in the paid labor force. Studies on the household division of labor demonstrate that women continue to perform the overwhelming majority of cooking, cleaning, child care and shopping work for the household even when in the paid labor force; one study estimates that working women, even managers and professionals, do about 79 percent of the housework (Berardo et al. 1987). Most research indicates that husbands contribute little time to housework (Berheide et. al. 1976; Berk and Berk 1979; Vanek 1974). Hartmann (1981) even concludes that men are a net drain on household labor, in that more labor is required to maintain them than they contribute. Women perform so much housework on the "second shift" that sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989) estimates that they put in an additional month of twenty-four hour days a year above their jobs.

This paper will focus on differences between men and women in their styles of shopping and selling in garage sales. It will delineate how their garage sale activities reflect the traditional division of labor by sex, referring to how the major components of the male sex role help to explain differences in male behavior and sensibilities from those of women in the garage sale. The paper addresses "male"and "female"sales, the frequent peripheral involvement by men in selling and shopping and the opposite style of serious and purposeful involvement by men. In short, men are more concerned with money and their time, while women are more concerned with creating relationships through this informal trade. The gender differences outlined here are generalizations. Individuals -- female or male -- can and do behave in ways that do not fit the generalizations, but the patterns are common enough to delineate here.

This paper is part of a much larger body of work (Herrmann 1990; Herrmann and Soiffer 1984; Soiffer and Herrmann 1987), based on a decade of ethnographic research on the garage sale and its participants. I have interviewed, often with a tape recorder, over 200 shoppers and sellers and attended over 1,000 garage sales. I have observed numerous sales and accompanied shoppers on their rounds. Most of those interviewed are European-American, but some are African-American, Asian-American and foreign students. The shoppers and sellers are
almost entirely middle-class, stable working-class or students. I tallied the gender and approximate age of the participants, which indicates that approximately two-thirds of the shoppers and sellers are women. A major focus of the research has been the participation of women, in contrast to that of men, in the female dominated institution of the garage sale.

My field research indicates that, for heterosexual couples, the activities involved in holding a sale follow traditional patterns of the division of labor by gender (Herrmann 1990). Women are in charge of household management and inventories, except for such male domains as shops and garages; those who are mothers procure most of the household items (Fram and Axelrod 1990) and get rid of those they deem are no longer needed. The closet cleaning aspect of garage sale preparation falls almost entirely to women, as does the cleaning and displaying merchandise. Women generally do most of the shopping (e.g. Jansen-Verbeke 1987; Oakley 1974; Robinson 1989), so they do most of the pricing of the items and they are generally in charge of household budgets (Rubin 1976; Whitehead 1984). However, women frequently discuss prices with their husbands or knowledgeable (usually female) friends because pricing is difficult to gauge.

Men commonly take out the trash and are in charge of household repairs. Their contributions to garage sale preparation (Herrmann 1990) mirror these traditional tasks and the conventional attitude of "helping out" (e.g. Berheide et al. 1976) rather than taking responsibility for most household chores. Men carry the heavy items and set up display areas, largely under the direction of their wives and girlfriends. Women, usually in charge of the aesthetics, arrange the actual displays. Men may select a few items from their personal belongings (clothes or tools), but often only after their wives prod them to do so. Men usually put up the signs, and, some, since they may feel they have more "pressing"commitments (be they work or recreation), leave their wives to run the sales once they have helped set up. Men often help to dismantle the sale at the end. Many men do, of course, operate sales with their wives. This is particularly so for younger men with a more egalitarian ideology -- couples with hyphenated last names are often equal partners in selling -- and for older men who have retired and have more uncommitted time. These patterns are so common that reversals are striking, such as the male seller in his twenties who was "minding the sale" while his wife, seven months pregnant, was putting up signs in the neighborhood.

His and Hers Sales
It is a common perception that men and women operate different kinds of sales. One kind of "male sale," especially for younger guys leaving town, could charitably be described as "chaos on the lawn." There is not very much merchandise, especially in the kitchenware department. Things that are for sale might include some tapes, records, books, an old saw, a few shopworn shirts and a jacket. Too often these things are jumbled on top of one another and sometimes dirty. Recently two guys held a country sale that had the dirtiest stuff I remember seeing -- everything was in decaying old boxes. Surely they had just cleared out the basement. As with many "male sales," theirs had no prices on merchandise; often men prefer negotiation, or just do not get around to pricing things. Other men are supersalesmen, explaining at great length how their old computer or table saw works and drumming up enthusiasm among shoppers.

Steve Redman holds another kind of "male" garage sale, one that has developed a following. He refurbishes old tools (purchased at garage sales), and at an annual sale resells those he does not either use or give to relatives. Most of his customers are men. George Rolfe, a seller and shopper in his thirties, admires Redman's sales:

His sales have been an inspiration to me. It's a wonderful thing to go buy junky tools and fix them up and sharpen them up and sell them at a reasonable price. It's a public service. You just can't find tools like that anymore except in garage sales and things. It's just wonderful to see somebody who really takes the time to fix them up and recycle them and get them back into the community.

While this sale of tools has a distinctively male character in American culture, smaller versions of the same thing occur at other sales.
The quintessential "female sale" is quite different. Clean, carefully displayed tables of merchandise await the shopper. All the items -- glassware, jewelry, Avon bottles, tidy piles of folded clothes -- are priced and the seller is prepared with exact change. Or, there may be a profusion of children's clothes and paraphernalia. In contrast to the "male sale," everything is clean and marked. The proprietor is friendly, but low-key, or there may be several women enjoying the day together while selling their household extras. These stylistic differences reflect stereotypic differences between male and female sensibilities in American society, such that women are expected to be neat, clean and prepared, while men are often granted license to be messy and "just wing it" (Lott 1987).

We can speak of objects as "gendered" in the garage sale setting, just as they are "gendered" in the rest of society (Allison et al. 1979; Debevec and Iyer 1988). Typically, the man of the house sells some tools, recreation gear and perhaps even some computer equipment, which attracts male shoppers. At the same time, the woman of the house sells children's items, household goods, and fabric remnants. This is where most of the female shoppers spend their time. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) discovered a similar gender-typing of objects in American society. Men find televisions sets, stereo equipment, sports equipment, vehicles, and trophies to be important in their lives, while women value photographs, sculpture, plants, glass, and textiles more than men.

In the garage sale, gender-typed items (e.g. tools for men or kitchenware for women) attract shoppers of the appropriate gender. Sellers even direct men and women to the expected grouping of objects; I have been steered away from the tool area more than once by wellmeaning sellers of both sexes. It is quite common for a male-female couple shopping together to actually shop in parallel, so that the man surveys the "masculine" items and the woman looks over the traditional "feminine" ones. Marsha Harris describes how this behavior pattern occurs at her sales:

It's interesting when couples come because they separate and they shop and then they come back. They quite often even pay separately. It's not that the man cares what the woman buys. I don't think he is concerned, but it's almost like they're shopping for their own separate interests.

Such a couple may shop together for items of mutual interest, such as toasters, carpets or furniture. Otherwise, there is often a "his" and a "hers" experience of shopping at sales.

Peripheral Involvement by Men: The Oblique Look

Many men are actively involved in garage sales, as shoppers and sellers, and they enjoy what they do and take pride in it. For many others, it is an "acquired taste," if it ever becomes palatable at all. Many men, husbands and boyfriends, become involved, peripherally and with considerable hesitation, in garage sales because of the women in their lives. Their aversion to participation is seen in trivializing participation, making jokes, avoiding public association with sales (e.g. remaining in the house or car) and other detectable manifestations of embarrassment. They look askance at the practice -- what I refer to as the "oblique look." While it is true that members of both genders may manifest similar behavior, it is done predominantly by males. An article in a Sunday supplement, written by a man, captures this characteristically male aversion to sales, this one in Georgetown:

I stopped. The couple who own the house are acquaintances of mine. He is a well-known physician. She is a former network executive. She stood behind her household items, hawking them in an understated fashion. He lurked inside the house, occasionally peering out the window. The yard sale was not his idea, his wife said with a giggle. My heart went out to him (Cohen 1987:7).

This male embarrassment about garage sale activities can be viewed as an offshoot of men's role as primary breadwinner. David and Brannon (1976) outline four major aspects of the male role in U.S. society:
1. No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.

2. The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.


4. Give 'Em Hell!: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring (1976:12).

The fact that the garage sale, a female-dominated institution, is as an extension of traditional women's work, can consciously or unconsciously disturb men. Studies have demonstrated repeatedly that males define themselves as "other than female," even at an early age (e.g. Maccoby and Jacklin 1974:284). David and Brannon also cite the cardinal theme in the definition of masculinity: "A 'real man' must never, never resemble women, or strongly display stereotyped feminine characteristics" (1976:14). Many male participants do not even like to be reminded that women outnumber men as garage sale participants, presumably because their masculinity then feels threatened.

Garage sales are also "marked" from the traditional male perspective because they publicly question the man's ability to provide adequately for his family and himself. Someone might think, after all, that they actually need the money from a sale; male self-esteem is closely linked with their ability to make money. The ability to provide is a part of how most men derive a sense of status (Faludi 1991; Gould 1974; "The Big Wheel" above).

Our puzzled male journalist goes on to try to understand why the Georgetown couple would hold a sale and why it bothered him so much that they did so:

Like the husband who would not come out of the house, I have no desire to appear mercenary, to seem to care about money. Indeed, maybe because my parents were born poor and seemed to save $2 for every $1 they earned, I have affected a nonchalance about money, that, besides being a total lie, has left me in considerable debt. For one thing, I will not bargain, and bargaining is what yard sales are all about (Cohen 1987:7).

This sort of male chagrin about garage sale participation, then, is linked to preserving a sense of social status, one that is predicated on the notion that one's income is comfortable and one's position in the society is stable. A middle-class seller in her thirties described her husband's aversion to sales like this:

It's kind of hard to explain. I can sort of feel it with my husband. I can tell he's kind of embarrassed to do it. I really think he is. He hasn't really verbalized it though. I think he feels embarrassed to have all this junk in his yard and try to sell it, where I'm not at all. I think he thinks it's just a lot of junk.

To him, holding a garage sale may make him look impecunious to the general public, a loss of status (Tannen 1990: "The Big Wheel" above). No words need be spoken to detect this attitude. Even strangers can pick up on the aversion of others. Marge Robertson, aged 50, described a situation where the man of the house was clearly avoiding his wife's sale:

We got there when the sale was just starting. It was obvious he was just leaving because of the sale and he wasn't planning to come back until it was over. I wonder if there's something there for some men, that it's not quite okay to sell stuff.

My field research revealed numerous men who look askance at or who are only peripherally involved in garage sale activities. When Lisa McFarren and Meagan Kraft held their sale, both of their husbands remained in the house and "hung out," not even watching the children. Once, for a while they came out and talked a bit, but they never became part of the activities, despite the fact that ten years earlier, Lisa's husband operated garage sales to sell antiques. But that was commercial, to make real money, and this sale was to clean house.
When husbands and boyfriends help to operate a sale, the emphasis tends to be on "help" rather than "operate." Most often, the female partner is in charge. The male frequently resists taking an active role, such as determining prices on unmarked items, even if they belonged to him. Terry Parker, a shopper in her twenties, carefully describes these sex-role differences:

The sales that are selling fishing poles and stuff usually have a guy on the scene. But if it is a sale that is run by a husband and wife, the guy does tend to recede into the background a lot. The women almost always take the money. Almost always. Even with that guy I bought the lantern from, I kept trying to hand him the money and he kept saying, "Well, I don't have my glasses on," so I had to wait until his wife came out. She didn't know how much it was, but she was in charge, he told me. So there was this little role playing thing that has been duplicated in other sales. The one where I bought some fabric, the man was right next to me and the price was right there and he made no effort to come and look at the price. The woman had to walk all the way from the other end of that sale.

This male resistance to, or lack of touch with, aspects of selling is common. I witnessed a male seller, a professor in his forties, squirm and avoid pricing his own clothes. Because his wife was involved elsewhere at the sale, he eventually was forced to come up with a figure.

The other side of female responsibility for garage sales is that they are the bosses of the events. Women direct men in such activities as pricing items, putting up the signs, and displaying items. Responsibility for operating a sale can provide an opportunity for women to demonstrate competence in areas such as pricing or knowledge of people. It can also be the arena of conflict between traditional male and female sensibilities. I have even seen women "chastise" men for such transgressions as creating a price sticker that was unattractive and making them do it over.

Very often the men -- husbands, brothers, and boyfriends -- assist in setting up the sale. Their assistance is primarily in physical activities associated with the male role (an aspect of the "Sturdy Oak" theme): setting up tables, carrying heavy items, putting up clothes lines, and tacking up signs. Some men will "help out" in setting things up and then leave during the actual sale. One woman in her thirties with two young children described her husband's behavior, with an edge in her voice. He had prevailed upon her to hold the sale and she ended up missing two days of substitute teaching to do so. In her words:

My husband helped -- somewhat. He doesn't get into it quite as much, I guess. When he mentioned having the garage sale, I told him that with the children I would probably need more help if we were going to do it. So, he's playing tennis. ... He pulled out the things he wanted to sell, his tools and some other items. He helps me put up the tables, but basically I'm the one that puts it on the tables. He had his tool table. I said, "There's your table. You do what you want there." And he'll go around and tell me if he doesn't like the prices.

A female proprietor in her fifties, originally from Australia, was fascinated with sales since they did not have any in her native country. Her husband was not minding the sale with her because, according to her:

He had to work, actually. But he wasn't too crazy about staying around for it anyway. He's a businessman -- he probably thinks this is pretty petty stuff. ... He's just like a lot of men. He thinks these are just for women. He's going to be surprised when he sees how much money I made.

Her husband apparently did joke with her about the profits of the first day, a joking that can be interpreted as trivializing female involvement in garage sales. He reportedly said, "Seeing you've made all that money, you can buy me a couple of drinks!"

While the examples mentioned here illustrate different forms of male aversion to sales, the men here were at least peripherally involved. Some men find the practice so distasteful that their wives must hold sales while their husbands are out of town. A woman in her thirties, a teacher off
for the summer, confided that the timing of her sale was to take advantage of her husband's business trip; he could not tolerate holding one. Beatrice Winter, a seller in her seventies, described waiting to hold a sale once until her husband, a lawyer, had gone on a fishing trip because he was embarrassed.

There are, of course, instances in which the woman is the unwilling partner in holding a garage sale, but this is less common. Steve Redman's wife would routinely leave the house when he held his annual tool sale. Marsha Harris told of a couple she knew who would have an annual sale, initiated by the wife, who insisted her husband run it because she was shy:

Every year her husband asks her how much he has to pay her to not have them. He hates it. She sets up and he works the sale. She will not deal with the people. She sets up and he does it.

Do Men Lack the Shopping Gene?
Male distaste for shopping is so well known it has become the stuff of comedy routines (Syracuse Post-Standard 1991). One shopper in her early thirties, a Ph. D. candidate in biology, described her husband's loathing of the activity:

Frank hates stores, he hates being in them, he hates the mall with a passion! Think of all the women who go there to kill the time or to window shop or whatever. Frank wouldn't be caught dead doing it. Many times I've dragged him in there for some purpose and he always complains and tells me how he hates it. I guess yard sales fall into the same domain.

It is easier for a man (or woman) to avoid shopping at sales than to avoid involvement in one held at home. These men simply do not have to go to the sales or, if for some reason they are out with their wives, they can remain in the car. Susan Katz's husband, a professor, would remain in the car on the rare Saturdays he accompanied her. Men may joke with their wives about sales by "putting their foot on the accelerator" as they happen to pass one, a form of "torture" some women attribute to their husbands.

The most common form of male aversion is to joke about shopping at garage sales and the items bought there. Such joking trivializes shopping, especially second-hand shopping, while it distances the men from an activity perceived as feminine. Male joking about what women bring home from shopping expeditions is a staple of comic strips and television sitcoms; it is firmly embedded in the culture. One "Hi and Lois" cartoon, for example, depicts Hi with a look of concern, worrying, "I knew I shouldn't have let your mother go out in the car today." When his son asks why, the scene shifts to the driveway where Lois is unloading lamps, furniture, rugs and paintings. Hi explains, "It's tag sale season again." Male aversion, and even condescension, is accentuated by the nature of items at garage sales; there are some truly strange and unusual things that can lend themselves to ridicule more readily than most new merchandise. As the husband (an insurance agent comfortably well-off and near retirement) of one shopper I interviewed said, "She brings home the most God-awful things." His sentiment is quite common. Another husband spoke of garage sale shopping as a disease.

Men who do not like sales can make it uncomfortable for spouses by giving them grief about their purchases. Some women literally smuggle in their goods. Cindy Banner, aged 31, only shows her husband the really good things she gets at sales, rather than take the kidding she knows she would get if she brought home something so unworthy as a pocketbook. Sally James' husband keeps garage sales at arms length by joking with his wife upon her return from sales: "Okay, show me the loot." Marsha Harris worries about what her husband will say when she comes home:

When I go to a garage sale, I always worry, "What is Frank going to say when I get home?" I'm always concerned that he is going to say, "Why didn't you just go and buy a new one?" I'm the type, and he's not. I think women are more shopper oriented and bargain oriented than men are anyway.

Later in the interview, she described her husband's general dislike of second-hand goods.
Jean Vanek attributes male embarrassment about garage sale purchases to their "bigger egos":

I think that men, generally, have a lot bigger ego than women. I think that every man likes to think he makes enough money that his wife doesn't have to go buy second-hand stuff. A man wants to think he can provide everything for his family.

Super Involvement by Men: Getting Serious
The quality of male participation in garage sales is often colored by concerns associated with their historic role as primary breadwinner (David and Brannon 1976; Ehrenreich 1984; Faludi 1991) and their need for status (Goode 1982; Tannen 1990). The men that do become involved in garage sales -- as both shoppers and sellers -- frequently do so with a degree of purposiveness less often found among women. Men focus on the monetary aspects of sales and are keenly aware of money's corollary -- time. Their participation tends to be more commercialized. Men's motives for participating places financial considerations closer to the top, although they do participate for reasons of housecleaning, socializing (especially older men), recycling, amusement, and the like. Men are more often found at sales of greater size (which generate larger profits), at sales where more expensive (e.g. large furniture or appliances) or "manly" (e.g. sports equipment or tools) items are sold, and at sales that are operated primarily to generate profits. Michael Krantz, aged 38, put it this way:

You'll see guys involved in selling when there are large and expensive items for sale. Men are much less likely to be at sales when there are a lot of little gizmos and tchotchkes than when there is a dresser or stereo, not to mention manly stuff like tire irons or old tires.

The fact that so many of the sales in which making money is a primary motive are operated by men indicates the importance of profits to their participation. Even men who are not running mini-businesses are likely to keep a keen eye on the likely proceeds of a sale to determine if it worth their time to run one. Steve Redman states:

During this spring, we had a sale that got $400, which is fairly significant for a garage sale. I will not hold a garage sale if I don't think I can make at least $400. I'm not going to spend a day unless I can get that kind of money, with all the work that goes into it.

Couples who hold sales together often find the husband is more interested in making money and in pricing items higher than is the wife. Michael Krantz, for example, described his approach as different from his wife's in this way:

Sarah wanted to price everything low enough to get rid of it. Just wanting the things out of the house. My feeling is really strong if we're going to sell stuff, to sell it at a price to make it worth while to get the money. Better to sell half as many things for twice as much money than to price everything to move. Mostly we've been going with the prices I have been suggesting. The stuff we sold was at real prices not nickel and dime prices. We went to the store and checked with the stuff that was selling new, like the Lennox china, and priced it at half of that, not 10 percent of it.

This was describing a sale they once held to clear out, among other things, unused wedding gifts. Later, Sarah compared her orientation to holding the sale to Michael's:

Michael was more interested in making enough money to make it worth the time. I'm more interested in getting rid of the stuff and making sure they get to a good home. And the people can be really interesting.

While Michael was interested in making money, Sarah was more concerned with making an emotional connection with shoppers. These respective goals conform to Deborah Tannen's (1990) depiction of male concern with independence (eg. money), contrasting to female concern with intimacy (eg. connection).

Some men become "sale proud" or otherwise proud of their competence or achievements in garage sales. This attitude is not limited to men of course, but it goes along with a common male attitude that sales should be worth their
investment of time and effort. A mathematics professor in his forties exemplifies this pride in hosting a high quality sale, one that is worthwhile to attend:

It was good. I sold about $300 or $400 worth of stuff. I had a lot better stuff than most people have. I had a church pew I sold for $90. Stuff was priced well. I got rid of some excess building supply stuff. I gave a guy about a third off the price at Grossman’s on some fence sections and so it was good for him and good for me. So, I sold about $350 worth of stuff. The main thing I needed was more space and it was stuff I had accumulated over a long period of time. It was fun. I think I had a better sale than a lot of people because I had a lot of good stuff. I had a treadle sewing machine that I think I had a good price on. I had some duck decoys, but I priced them at the high end and everybody knew that. I had some interesting things. ... I just don’t like to waste people’s time. You like to put out a lot of stuff. It is embarrassing if you go out of your way, you drive, and you go in and the person having a garage sale really doesn’t have all that much stuff.

There is a lot embedded in this extended discourse. The emphasis on money is apparent from the numbers of times it is mentioned and from the fact it was mentioned first. Other motivations for having the sale are there — those of cleaning and having "fun" — but they are overshadowed by a preoccupation with profits, pride in the quality of the sale, and the competence with which he priced things. It is also clear he is sensitive to the issue of status in that he would be embarrassed to hold a sale with few or low quality items.

Rather than merely "helping out" some male sellers become super-salesmen. They latch onto prospective customers and shepherd them from item to item, demonstrating how things work and sometimes trying to convince shoppers to buy things. This style of selling is more aggressive than that of most women. In addition to gaining increased control over the situation, the super-salesman often engages in more conversation, playful fantasy, joking, and even manipulation than most sellers. This predominantly male style is highly engaged and in charge (Tannen 1990). Other men run the sale and have their wife running back and forth to get okays on prices or to tend to the needs of customers.

Men are often more reluctant to spend time shopping at garage sales than are women. For example, men often plan routes on the basis of strict, "rational" criteria, such as location of sales and items sought, leaving little room for spontaneity. One male shopper in his forties described himself as "all business" when he was shopping. If their wives linger, men may become impatient, especially over items they do not consider interesting. Sharon Bonn’s husband, in his twenties, shopped regularly with her and enthusiastically shared in their search for antiques and collectibles to resell for profit. But Jim could not tolerate it when Sharon wanted to look at clothing or household items. If she wanted to buy clothes at a sale, she had to return later after dropping off her husband. Sharon used these terms to describe why men are reluctant to go to sales:

Because a woman won’t leave when they want to. They want to stay to look at clothing or jewelry or dishware, where the man doesn’t want to. The man wants to be where the man wants to be. If you’re looking at something, he wants to leave. Just like Jim, he won’t want to come because he says I stay too long. I tell him they have men’s stuff at garage sales. He says I look at junk. Jim was very interested in the profits to be made from collectibles they purchased, but he had no patience for domestic consumption; in his working-class background that was women’s work.

Value of their time can also enter into the calculus of whether a male shopper chooses to purchase an item. Terry Parker describes her boyfriend in these terms:

He tells me all the time, "It is not worth my time." It is one of his favorite phrases. It is a statement that I have said, but not very often. He says it a lot more often. Just grunt work,
like repairs on something at a yard sale or something if I wanted to pick it up he would say, "It's not worth the time to fix it." But I'll say that I'll never see another one of these again and it is unique or that it is exactly what I wanted. Unfortunately, it is broken, but it is worth the time because it is irreplaceable.

She notes that when he feels like repairing an item from a garage sale, his sense of the value of his time changes.

Garage Sale Participation as Extensions of Traditional Gender Roles

What emerges from field research is that participation in garage sales often follows traditional gender roles for men and women. The predominance of female participants in the garage sale can be attributed to its close link to traditionally defined female activities, such as shopping, cleaning, and socially engaging others. Their style of participation in sales is colored by the "female" values (Tannen 1990) of creating connections, community and consensus.

Male participation in garage sales, and their reluctance to participate, can also be viewed as an extension of their traditional role as primary breadwinner. They are concerned with money and time, both of which are strongly associated with the breadwinner role. These concerns color male participation in sales, and serve as the reasons for them not to participate -- "They're not worth my time," or "It's too penny-ante." Similarly, male concern with status ("The Big Wheel") in the garage sale is associated with breadwinner anxiety about job hierarchies, public perceptions and social prestige. The factor of status can manifest as male reluctance to become involved in sales (e.g. embarrassment) or can translate into claiming special status within sales (e.g. hosting a really good sale). Drawing on Tannen's (1990) delineation, they are interested in status, hierarchy and power.

Male participation often focuses on physical strength, such as lifting, or construction-type skills, such as putting up clotheslines. These are activities associated with the male role, and which, at least partially, derive from the fact that most males are physically stronger than most females.

Issues of competence ("The Sturdy Oak") may characterize male participation. They are likely to undertake garage sale activities with a degree of completeness and purposefulness not as commonly found among women. Also, an element of "Give 'em Hell" can be seen in the disproportionate number of men who bargain for sport.

As with most distinctions of gender differences in behavior, the similarities far outweigh the differences (Lott 1987, 1988). What has been emphasized here are tendencies. Overall, both men and women engage in garage sale activities with similar motivations, friendliness, and enjoyment. Character differences can color the style of participation of men and women, along with factors such as ethnicity, class, religion, race and sexual preference. Also, generational differences can play a big part in garage sale participation. Grown sons of fathers who would never hold a sale can be seen hawking their things along with mothers, friends, and wives. Younger men, in general, are more likely to be full participants, that is, equally "in charge" of holding sales and equally involved in shopping at them.

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