Will You Take a Little Less For This? Bargaining and Gender in the U.S. Garage Sale

Gretchen M. Hermann, SUNY Cortland

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This paper examines bargaining in the U.S. garage sale, with a special focus on the gendered aspects of this form of price negotiation, from an anthropological perspective. Bargaining is an interactive practice in which shopper and seller produce a mutually created price for merchandise, each bringing judgments and values to bear in determining what an item is worth to them. In contrast to the formal economic system of fixed prices and passive consumption, shoppers can alter prices, based on their skills and knowledge of consumer goods. Given the cultural norm of fixed prices, bargaining is often considered suspect or unsavory, characterized by such negative terms as "rude" or "obnoxious." As a result, feelings about bargaining vary greatly. Some participants, more often men than women, very much enjoy bargaining, while others find the practice distasteful. Still others have no special feelings about it, but few garage sale participants can entirely escape this form of small scale haggling.

The garage sale, in addition to the flea market (Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990) and rummage sale, is one of the few arenas in American society where participants can engage in bargaining over the cost of low and moderately priced consumer goods. It is culturally accepted to bargain for some larger consumer items, such as houses, stereos and automobiles. However, these goods represent a major investment for the buyer, have prices established to leave a large margin for bargaining, and frequently involve peripheral profits in financing, insurance, optional equipment, service packages, and so forth. Further, the purveyors of such bargained-for goods—real estate agents, (used) car dealers, Oriental carpet sellers—tend to be viewed as dishonest and untrustworthy in U.S. society. Edward Hall observes, "Americans tend to look down on people who haggle" (1959:101).

A common colloquial phrase, "to Jew a person down," emphasizes the cultural marginality or "foreignness" (in addition to the undercurrent of anti-Semitism) of the practice of bargaining to most Americans. Joy Browne writes:

Haggling has always had an unpleasant connotation to most Americans. It conjures up images of far-off, exotic corners of the less-than-civilized world in sunlit bazaars filled with rugs, citrus fruits, flies, and pungent odors. Bargaining is the process carried on between an unsavory, robe-wrapped charlatan and an unsuspecting American tourist complete with camera and flowered shirt (1973:1). Although bargaining evokes images of "foreignness," the price negotiation practiced in the garage sale is one that people from many other cultures would find quite brief.

So prevalent is the practice of bargaining or haggling in the garage sale that many proprietors set higher prices with the expectation that shoppers will bargain. The organizer of a neighborhood sale, writing for a weekly newspaper, entitled his article on neighborhood sales "Collective Bargaining." His advice about pricing is as follows: "There are two schools of thought on pricing: Set prices high and be prepared to bargain or set them low and be prepared to bargain" (Dylla, 1987:9). This rather flippant statement
emphasizes the extent to which bargaining is an accepted, even expected, practice in the garage sale setting, in contrast to the social standard of fixed prices in retail outlets.

METHODS

Research for this study of garage sales has involved extensive ethnographic field work. I used participant observation and interviews as the primary means of data collection. From 1981 to the present I have interviewed, in varying degrees of depth, over 200 shoppers and sellers from a wide variety of sales and have attended and/or observed over 2,000 garage sales. Sales observed and participants interviewed were selected on the basis of geographic, age, class and racial diversity, as well as by referrals. Many of the interviews were tape recorded. Interviews include European Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans, and members of the working- and middle-classes. I have held, singly or jointly, at least eleven sales of my own. Although the primary research site is upstate New York, including city, small town, rural and suburban populations primarily in the environs of Ithaca and Cortland, I have attended and observed sales in other regions of the United States and Canada. Further, the numerous newspaper and magazine accounts provide ample evidence that the garage sale phenomenon is quite similar throughout the United States and Canada. I will occasionally draw on the insights and observations of journalists’ accounts of sales in this article to augment my own research.

In 1997, I also administered a questionnaire to 91 shoppers concerning their bargaining behavior in the garage sale. I distributed the questionnaire, during periods ranging from one half hour to four hours, to all who would fill it out at four sales in the greater Ithaca area. The sales were in several geographic and socio-economic areas and they occurred in the months of July, August and September.

THE BARGAINING PROCESS

Bargaining in the American garage sale is not the protracted and formalized practice seen in traditional markets in much of the world, such as Morocco or Mexico. Nevertheless, as Clifford Geertz notes in his discussion of bargaining practice in the suq of Sefrou:

The technical rules are more or less given by the situation and thus are essentially universal, the same in Haiti or Oaxaca as in Nigeria or Morocco. "A tug of war between seller and buyer," bargaining as a formal procedure consists in a series of alternating, stepwise approaches toward an agreed price from separated initial offers (1979:225).

In the American garage sale, bargaining usually consists of a rather short interaction, generally initiated by the shopper, in response to the implicit initial offer of the seller on the price tag. Typical opening statements are "Will you take a little less for this?" or "Will you sell this for $3?" (when the tag indicates $5). The seller then usually agrees to the buyer's offer, thereby ending the negotiation process or, if no specific offer was made by the shopper, indicates a lower, acceptable price. Sellers sometimes initiate the bargaining process, commonly to strengthen a shopper's interest in something he or she appears to be considering for purchase: "You can have it for 50 cents" (when the tag says 75 cents).

Bargaining at garage sales generally does not go to a second round of negotiation, i.e. the party who initiates the bargaining usually accepts the first counteroffer instead of making a new bid in return. However, it can go for two, three, or, in rare instances, four rounds of interaction between shopper and seller before a mutually agreed upon price is found. While
it is not clear why some negotiations become protracted, factors related to both shopper and
seller that influence the length of haggling include: persistence (or stubbornness), pride,
status, economic necessity, sense of the "correct" price, aggressiveness, ego involvement
and gender. Because bargaining is not a generally accepted practice in American society
and there are no clear rules about how to interact, there is pressure to keep the length of
negotiations at a minimum, as compared with many other societies (e.g. Alexander 1987).
Most garage sale negotiations take well under a minute to complete. The high value
Americans place on time also promotes brief negotiations. In the anthropological literature,
bargaining "is interpreted as a method of negotiating prices where conditions of supply are
irregular, commodities vary in quality and time has a low value" (Alexander and Alexander
1991:496). While the first two conditions apply to the garage sale, clearly the third does
not and it exerts pressure to keep negotiations brief.

There is also no generally accepted cultural protocol for bargaining in America (cf. Browne
bargaining, the lack of clear rules inhibits many from bargaining, and those negotiations
that occur tend to be private and quickly negotiated. Sherry (1990) observes that in the flea
market many shoppers are not skilled in bargaining and may consequently botch their
attempted transactions. In other societies in which bargaining has a culturally defined role
(e.g. Alexander 1987; Uchendu 1967), bargaining is a public display in which participants
can show off their skills. While bargaining at times takes on an element of performance in
the U.S., bargaining in the garage sale is especially fraught with ambiguity because both
buyers and sellers are amateurs and because it contradicts the element of hospitality
attendant to selling items from the home (Hertramn 1990). At least in the flea market the
vendors are practiced at price negotiation; Maisel (1974) notes that much of the actual
bargaining occurs among the dealers, themselves, although Sherry (1990) finds that
vendors are reluctant to lose their profit margins in giving discounts to other vendors.

GENDER AND BARGAINING

Since bargaining can be construed as an aggressive interaction, it is often associated with
men in American society. Certainly men are often designated to bargain for higher ticket
items such as stereos and automobiles. But it has also been my observation in studying
garage sales for numbers of years that men bargain more frequently than do women. In an
attempt to quantify differential gender rates in bargaining, I used a questionnaire, which
asked "How often do you bargain at garage sales? (check one): always, frequently,
ocasionally and never". Of the 36 male respondents, 22 percent selected “always” and 28
percent selected “frequently,” yielding a combined total for the highest two frequencies of
50 percent. In contrast, 18 percent of the 55 female respondents checked “never” and 55
percent of them checked “occasionally,” with a combined frequency of 73 percent at the
lower end of the spectrum. At the extremes, only 7 percent of the women selected
“always” and only 6 percent of the men checked “never.” These numbers, although not
representative, clearly support the observation that men bargain more than do women.4

The fact that the value of items diminishes as a garage sale progresses has an important
bearing on bargaining. Advertisements for garage sales often include such phrases as
"Everything half price Sunday [for a Saturday- Sunday sale]" or "Prices reduced after 1 p.m.". It is more acceptable to bargain for items later in a sale since both shoppers and
sellers realize that there will be fewer potential purchasers as time progresses. The
questionnaire revealed a skew by gender to the question “Do you mainly bargain: (check
one) at start of sale; middle of sale; end of sale; all the time; or never.” Only 36 percent of
the women who responded answered "all the time," whereas a full 66 percent of the men did. Similarly, 14 percent of the women responded "never," and only 3 percent of the men did. Most of the other categories had similar rates of response except that 28 percent of the women--as opposed to 6 percent of the men--chose "end of sale," or the least confrontative time to bargain.

Insofar as bargaining is considered aggressive, it is compatible with the socially constructed male role (e.g. David and Brannon 1976) and contravenes the ideal of the feminine in American society (e.g. Brownmiller 1984). Women generally are not supposed to be aggressive. Three of the women who filled out the bargaining questionnaire indicated that they were too embarrassed or too shy to bargain, and one put it this way:

"I often do not bargain, but rather I tend not to buy anything. I'm often too embarrassed (shy, quiet) to ask someone to come down in price, especially if it is early in their sale."

There were no reports of shyness by the men. Several women who filled out the questionnaire wrote that their husbands bargained more than they did (but none of the men indicated that their wives bargained more than they did.)

Despite the gains of the women's movement, many women still feel disempowered in asserting their judgments and desires in contemporary American society, and participants in the garage sale, although female-dominated, still operate in traditionally-defined gender roles (Herrmann 1995). Deborah Tannen (1990) notes, for example, that men tend to be the "challengers" in discourse, whereas women tend to agree in conversational transactions. Tannen also observes that "research on gender and language has consistently found male speakers to be competitive and more likely to engage in conflict," (1994:40). In contrast, women are more likely to avoid conflict and to be cooperative. Further, women are presumed to be less skilled at bargaining. Studies of price negotiation in automobile purchasing (e.g. Ayers and Siegelman 1995) indicate that women routinely pay more for cars than do men in part because automobile salespeople expect women to be less capable of informed bargaining than men.

Older women also seem more reluctant to bargain. Polly Meigs, a shopper now in her sixties, expresses her distaste at bargaining as follows:

"If I like something I will pay it [sticker price], if I don't, I won't pay it. But I won't say, "Will you take $4 for it?" I hate that. I did very well when I traveled in Israel in bargaining. But I don't like it. I don't feel comfortable with it. That's not for me. And, if I'm giving a sale, my reaction is not to bargain."

The special reluctance to bargain by older women may have to do with the way they were socialized to expect men, i.e. their fathers and husbands, to take care of the affairs of the world. Whatever price negotiating occurred was for big ticket items, such as automobiles; men traditionally selected, purchased, and negotiated the price for such items. Only relatively recently, as they purchase their own cars and houses, are women learning there is room to negotiate the price, although their initial attempts at doing so may be self-conscious and ineffective.

I witnessed a bargaining negotiation at a sale operated by a couple in their sixties at which the woman felt she had no ability or authority to bargain on her own. A female shopper in her thirties asked the wife if she would reduce the price on two hook rugs from $20 each to both for $30. The wife said she was not sure if she should lower the price, so she went inside to ask her husband. She returned, relating her husband had agreed to $35,
whereupon the shopper offered $33. The wife consulted further with her husband and reluctantly conceded both rugs for $34, ungraciously informing the shopper she got a very good deal. Some women who do not feel comfortable bargaining delegate that aspect of garage sales to men. Sarah Krantz frequently shops at sales with her husband and describes herself as ineffectual at bargaining: "People will say, '5' and I'll say, 'Oh Goodie! I love it. I'll take it.' So I let Michael do the bargaining."

Some women also feel selfish about bargaining, insofar as their financial gain comes at the financial loss of the seller, or a zero-sum-game. While this sentiment may not be so marked in purchasing new goods, it certainly comes into play in the garage sale, where some sellers really look like they need the money. Sarah Krantz observed that she felt very uncomfortable when her husband bargained with a seller who seemed impecunious:

Obviously, this woman was very poor. She said something about how her husband had just walked out and she was trying to get together some money to put her life together. And Michael was bargaining with her and I was feeling very badly that he was bargaining with her because she seemed to need the money so badly.

As a generalization, we might say that women, as part of their gendered work of tending relationships (e.g. DeVault 1991), exhibit more sensitivity to particular sellers and an awareness of the circumstances, such as time elapsed in a sale, that are conducive to bargaining.

The hesitancy of certain American women to bargain can be contrasted to some market societies, such as those in West Africa, Nigeria and Java where women are expected to be skilled in bargaining (Alexander 1987; Alexander and Alexander 1987; Little 1973; Njoku 1980). The following description of traditional Igbo trading women graphically illustrates this point:

Women dominate the retail trade. They are literally everywhere as buyers and sellers. Before marriage, girls are expected to acquire successful marketing techniques. Women are good bargain hunters. They haggle over prices in a manner which might frighten Westerners (Uchendu 1965:29).

The distinction, it would seem, is whether gender patterns in a society permit women to gain skill in bargaining. Although women in the United States still perform most of the shopping (Kraft 1993), they are, even today, less likely to shop for big ticket items and develop skill in bargaining than are men. A certain amount of aggressiveness, associated with men, is thought to be needed for such interactive negotiations and women often bring men with them to do the actual negotiation (or to support them in the process).

STYLES OF BARGAINING

Bargaining for Sport: Chutzpa

There are shoppers, more often men than women, who bargain on everything they purchase because of the "sport" of it, ego aggrandizement, or sheer compulsion. One woman commented on such bargainers at her sale: "I got the impression that some people didn't care about whether or not something was only a quarter less. Just the fact that they got it to be a quarter less was the big issue!" Mel, found at a Syracuse garage sale, sounds like someone who bargains for sport: "I always get a deal. I won't buy if I can't get a deal. This [a garage sale] is the best kind of place to talk to somebody down" (Shelly, 1980:A,11). Similarly, a man in his 40s named Phil, whom I accompanied shopping, insisted upon dickering for everything, no matter how reasonably priced. I found myself
feeling embarrassed when he insisted upon paying 50 cents for a lovely blue wool Scottish sweater that was marked $1. After every garage sale expedition, he always boasts about how much he knocked down the price of each of his purchases. Such bargainers are perceived as aggressive, often "trying to get something for nothing." Leo Rosten defines the Yiddish term *chutzpa*, a word that aptly characterizes many of these bargainers, as follows:

Gall, brazen nerve, effrontery, incredible "guts": presumption-plus-arrogance such as no other word, and no other language, can do justice to (1968:93).

Shoppers who bargain for sport often go to extremes. These are the people most likely to bargain, even when the time of sale (i.e. first hour), value of item, personality of the seller, and price on the item do not warrant negotiation. Such individuals may create a fuss if they do not get their way. They may tell the sellers that their prices are too high, a comment usually not well-received by proprietors. An anecdote about such an attempt to bargain when it was not warranted was provided by a couple in their thirties at a recent sale. Their son was selling a plastic figurine for a nickel. A woman tried to lower the price to a penny because she said it was not worth more than that. She was not successful in purchasing the figurine for that price because she went beyond any real meaning in lowering the price, and the sellers even characterized this shopper as having *chutzpa*.

Bargaining for sport is a style that is clearly associated with men and competition, although in practice it is not always so. In the questionnaire, equal percentages of men and women (25 percent) selected “for the fun of it” as one of the reasons they bargain for garage sale items. A related reason, one that is even more indicative of compulsive bargaining, “to see how much you can lower the price,” elicited similar responses from men and women (19 and 22 percent, respectively). Nevertheless, the shoppers who approach bargaining as most like a competitive game—or sport to be won—seem to be men. One man added “the game of it and to lower the price” to the selection of reasons for bargaining on the questionnaire. The only people I have observed over time who bargain on virtually everything, including those things that are priced absurdly low, are men, such as Phil. Further, in my observation only men engage in the singularly aggressive form of bargaining that, instead of asking permission for a lower price, literally dictates the terms of the deal to the seller: "I'll give you $40 (for a table marked $60)". These bargainers wrest the control of the exchange from the sellers (who normally control a purchase), and the seller must assume an aggressive posture and tone in order to reassert control of the transaction. Local male furniture dealers bargain this way, often even before a sale officially starts, and many sellers find themselves at a loss of how to counter their unwelcome aggression. Many just sell the item to get rid of the dealers. It may be these compulsive bargainers who “want to get something for nothing” who contribute to the culturally negative image of bargaining. Twenty-eight percent of the men and 31 percent of the women questionnaire respondents indicated that one of the reasons they refrained from bargaining was because it “seems rude or obnoxious.”

Yet, shoppers who like to bargain compulsively sometimes change their behavior over years of garage sale participation. Michael Krantz has shopped for many years, purchasing most of his household furnishings and kitchenware at sales. He describes a change of heart:

Now that we are making more money than we were, I feel self-conscious about bargaining. Even when I used to bargain on 50 cent items just for sport, now it has less appeal. It feels like a petty sort of sport.

Michael's new approach reflects his change of financial status and a corresponding sense of
proportion and fairness in bargaining; his need is less pressing than it once was. He has become, like most shoppers, a selective bargainer.

Selective Bargaining

Just as sellers set high prices on items about which they feel ambivalent selling, shoppers try to negotiate low prices on articles about which they feel ambivalent buying. A lowered price can swing the balance in favor of purchase. Low prices allow shoppers to take a chance on items and to bring other items into an affordable price range.

The majority of male and female shoppers bargain selectively. They do so on the basis of some sense of the value, whether objective or subjective, of the items. For example, shoppers may find most of the prices on items in which they are interested to be quite reasonable. However, one thing may be priced too high according to their experience and will lead them to bargain on that item. The majority of both men and women (52 percent) selected “price of certain item seems too high” as one of the primary reasons for bargaining in sales. A pair of slacks priced at $2 may not be worth the gamble for a shopper who cannot try them on, but, at $1, are worth purchasing. Jenny Biggs, a shopper in her twenties, expresses the typical attitude of a selective bargainer:

‘I only bargain sometimes. It depends on how much I want it [the item] and how much the price is. If it's already low, it's ridiculous to bargain. I never would. And, if it's something that I'm not sure I really want, but I'm willing to pay less, then I will.

Conversely, when prices are favorable, both male and female shoppers are less likely to bargain. Sixty-six percent of the questionnaire respondents indicated they refrained from bargaining because “prices are reasonable.” One woman responded on the questionnaire:

‘I very rarely bargain because...whenever I’ve had garage sales, I know I’ve put time and effort into pricing things and feel prices I’ve put are reasonable. Also, some people are rude/obnoxious when they bargain and I don’t want to be like that.

Another form of selective bargaining is to lower the price on a bunch of items to be purchased. It is sort of a garage sale “volume discount.” Garage sale participants feel free to request and offer this sort of reduced payment, modeled after other forms of selling in the U.S. Nineteen percent of the men and 27 percent of the women questionnaire respondents selected “to get a deal on a group of items” as one of the reasons they bargain. While this does not represent a large gender difference, women, as the primary shoppers (Krafft 1993) may be more accustomed than men in getting a discount on a group of items.

It Doesn’t Hurt to Ask

Most shoppers attempt to bargain at some point in their garage sale shopping experience. A dominant motivation for both men and women is that "you never can tell" how a seller will respond, so it "doesn't hurt to try." This attitude is nicely expressed by a farm wife (read manager, accountant, dairy hand) in her late forties:

‘You never know how they're [the sellers] going to respond, so you might as well ask them if they'll take a little less for the things. Usually, they will. It doesn't hurt to ask.

This shopper's statement is a low-key version of those shoppers who feel that any price can be lowered, regardless of any objective referent, such as retail prices or current garage sale prices. It ties as the one of main motivations for bargaining, according to my questionnaire. A full 52 percent of the respondents (53 percent of the men and 51 percent
of the women) indicated "it never hurts to ask" as one of the reasons they bargain. One questionnaire respondent summed up this attitude like this: "Sometimes you can really get good deals just by asking. Most people just don't want to put the stuff away." Also, shoppers who are motivated by the "you never can tell" style, such as the woman quoted above, would not be disturbed, in most cases, if the seller refused to negotiate, in contrast to those who bargain for sport. This is a fairly gender neutral style, but, like any bargaining, would not be initiated by those who are very shy (more likely women, in the garage sale).

FAILED BARGAINING ATTEMPTS: THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF OPINION

Bargaining negotiations can break off. When this occurs, usually one or both parties has become somewhat exercised and frustrated over not getting their way. The failed bargaining attempt is the aspect of garage sale practice most likely to generate ill feeling in a setting which is otherwise conducive to friendliness and cooperation.

When sellers purposely set low prices to offer a good deal, such as the seller quoted earlier, and are confronted with bargainers, they may become offended. One female seller in her forties lectured a male shopper in his twenties about how the price for automobile tires for which he was trying to bargain had already been set at the lowest conceivable level. She went on to tell him how offensive his attempt at lowering the price was to her. I have witnessed many failed bargaining attempts of this type. The seller's judgment, and even the value of the seller's possessions, can be called into question when a shopper attempts to bargain. There is essentially a contested view of the value of the item, a struggle to see whose opinion will prevail.

Sellers also react when shoppers aggressively "try to get something for nothing." Once the line of the seller's sense of proportion has been crossed, hard feelings may result. The following anecdote related by Marsha Harris, a veteran garage sale seller in her late thirties, beautifully illustrates this point:

There were all these paint cans lined up at 25 cents a can. This woman came and bought a brand new gallon of--I swore I'd never forget that color, but I have--of this color that went all the way through the living area. It was supposed to be pale green and it was gray: "$18.95" from Bishops was right across the top. It had never been opened. She went home. And it was 25 cents. All the paint was 25 cents. She went home and came back with a screwdriver, opened up two more cans of the same color, and said, "I paid 25 cents for a gallon. I think you should give me these two because they're only a little more than half full for 25 cents." I don't know why that just set me off. I just said, "Lady, I'll give it to Challenge [local sheltered workshop]. That is $25 worth of paint that you have there for 75 cents and you're arguing it should be 50 cents?! You've got to be kidding!" I refused to come down on the price, and she decided she guessed she would take it. But it was--and yet I don't know why--what difference did a quarter make?--except somehow she crossed the line, that I was offended. You expect a bargain on things, but some people get real obnoxious about it and other people don't.

Failed bargaining attempts happen to both men and women, but, to the extent that male bargainers push the negotiations more than women, they are likely to "cross the line" and offend sellers more often than are women.
SOCIAL STATUS AND BARGAINING

Styles of self-presentation based upon class can enter into the bargaining equation. A female resident of Cortland was quite offended by the way many people would approach her to bargain, particularly because she had set her initial prices low. She related:

Other people tried to make me come down. I couldn't believe it! One woman looked at the wedding dress for $5 and the veil for $5 [both of which the seller made for her daughter], and asked if I'd take $5 for both of them. No way! It's just the way these people ask. I end up giving lots of other things away--erasers to the children and jewelry. But it's the way that these people do it that really bothers me.

This seller was irritated by the bargaining attempt and the person who attempted to bargain. The seller was solidly middle-class in background, and the shopper, described by the seller as "having rolls of fat," was among the rural poor around Cortland.

This response would seem to suggest some of what Weber described as "status honor." The seller's reference to "these people" is at least in part to distinguish people of her social standing from people of theirs. When someone of lower social standing tries to lower (already low) prices, the seller may feel his or her own social standing is challenged insofar as seller's still identify with the quality and value of their belongings. Her pride, sense of value, and judgment were also at stake in the interaction. In this case, the seller reasserted her status by sticking to her price. This interaction questioned the worth of the people involved, as well as the merchandise. Questions of status can enter the bargaining process. Even in cultures where bargaining is the norm, styles of bargaining and who may bargain may be class specific. Khuri (1968) notes that people of high status do not bargain in Lebanon. If they did so, they would be considered cheap. The same would hold true in the American garage sale.

The issue of status and garage sale bargaining is especially marked for men. Since men still derive their primary sense of gender identity from their ability as breadwinners, bargaining in the garage sale, indeed, even shopping at a garage sale, could call their earning power into question (i.e. they might really need to buy things cheaply). As I have outlined elsewhere (Herrmann 1995), issues of status are one of the reasons men participate less in the garage sale, both as shoppers and sellers, than do women. And for men, especially those middle-class and above, who are sensitive about their earning power status, bargaining, i.e. dramatizing that price really matters, is anathema. Consider this statement by a Washington Post columnist concerning the physician husband of some acquaintances who hid in the house while his wife held a sale in Georgetown:

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 7).

Similarly, to many automobile salespeople it seems that African-American professionals take pride in paying full price for a car, "as if they were ashamed to bargain" (Brown: F.4). While those men actively engaged in garage sales may bargain more than the women, those men who do not participate may do so in part to avoid bargaining and its perceived negative impact on their social standing.
SELLERS AND BARGAINING

Most of the discussion about bargaining has focused on the role of shoppers, but sellers, too, have a perspective in the bargaining process. My observation is that male sellers are somewhat more likely to bargain for goods than are women. They are certainly more likely to preside over sales where none of the goods are priced, thereby insuring all prices will be verbally negotiated. There are a number of reasons sellers may not like to bargain: they want to get the highest prices possible; they do not enjoy the interactive process of bargaining and prefer fixed prices; they feel their prices are already at the low end of the price range; they believe the quality of their items is high enough to allow them to resist attempts at lowering the prices; or they do not like the style of the shopper(s) who attempts to bargain with them.

Sellers especially dislike bargaining with dealers, disproportionately men, who resell their items for a profit. Sellers may feel alright about lowering prices for shoppers who will use the items, themselves, but be disturbed when a dealer, who will turn around and resell the item for a profit, tries to bargain. More often than not sellers do not know until it is too late that they have been bargained down by a dealer. The regrets expressed by Betsy Collins are typical of those a proprietor feels when "duped" by a dealer. She had sold her child's bike to a dealer, who bargained the price from $20 to $15. She was later made an offer, at her original price, by a father who wanted it for his child.

I'm so mad! I thought he might be a dealer, and then I saw him put it in a truck and there were three other bikes. I would have much rather sold it to the other man for $20 and let them get some enjoyment out of it.

Most sellers are willing to negotiate prices in the garage sale and many encourage the process in various ways. One seller in the Cortland area put it this way: "I don't mind bargaining. About a third of the customers do it. You can give them a deal and still get a good price." Frequently, sellers tell shoppers when they arrive that, if they do not like the prices, to make them an offer. Sometimes sellers will encourage bargaining by hanging up signs, such as "Haggling Spoken Here" or "Make Me An Offer." Occasionally, sellers even wax poetic, as exemplified by the following sign at a sale in the Ithaca area:

If you like what you see,
But the price doesn't agree . . .
Make us an offer
We aim to please.

Such signs should be taken as an opening of bargaining by the seller. However, most shoppers appear to follow their personal patterns; the presence of such a sign does not seem to increase the amount of bargaining among men or women.

PRIDE, PERFORMANCE, PERQUISITES AND BARGAINING

Bargaining carries a psychological reward, beyond the obvious pecuniary one, for participants. Many shoppers are particularly proud of purchases for which they have bargained because it allows them to put something of themselves into their acquisition. It "singularizes" (Kopytoff 1986) otherwise fungible, mass-produced items sold in the contemporary United States. Tammy Smith, a black woman in her sixties, is a good example of someone who will bargain under almost any circumstances and who is justifiably proud of her ability to do so:

I'll bargain anytime. You don't expect people to come down much in the first hour, but it doesn't hurt to ask. When we were over at the [big] sale over at Eastern
Heights, there was another little sale down the road. He had a beautiful screen, bamboo screen. He wanted $8 for it. He and his wife were sitting down there by themselves nobody else was there. Everybody was up to the other place. I walked around and asked him the price on it. I seen the price. He said, "$8." So, I didn't say nothing. I walked around. I started back to the car and stopped and said, "I'll give you $5 for it." She said, "Okay." Just like that. One thing you never do is act anxious for anything. You never run to anything and say, "Ooh! -- Get this! It's just what I want." You pick it up, put it down, think it over. Draw attention to something else. You know, "What do you want for this?" "Well, what do you want for that?" Already they think they're going to lose and their hearts go down. Then they figure it out: "Give me $2.50 for it and you can have it." That's the fun of it--trying to see the deals you can get. That's the fun of bargaining. And you'll find some people stand up and argue straight on down. And they don't care whether they pay $5 or $10 for it. They can afford it. It's just fun.

Tammy always boasts of the money she saves by dickering over the prices of her garage sale purchases.

Bargaining can also create richer, more personal social relations in the interactions between shopper and seller. Because of the individualized contributions, the transactions often become more "gift-like" than "commodity-like" (Herrmann 1996, 1997). The bargaining process provides the opportunity for the buyer to contribute something uniquely personal to the transaction, if only the satisfaction of having negotiated a better price. In other instances, the buyer may provide a piece of his or her personal life in exchange for a lower price, although, during the process of negotiation, neither buyer nor seller would necessarily view it that way. At one sale a student of about twenty asked the woman seller if she would take $3 instead of the $5 marked on a framed print, since, the shopper said, "It's perfect. I have a mug with just the same picture on it in my room." The seller, who was otherwise not inclined to bargain, accepted the offer. The buyer had proffered some personal piece of her life in exchange for $2 of monetary payment, a gift-like reduction, especially since it is involved with personal sentiments that have been shared.

Women, more than men, express an interest in the interpersonal components and emotional attachment related to objects (e.g. Dittmar 1991) and as sellers want to see things "go to a good home." One woman shopper of about forty spoke of how she responded to others when she held her sale:

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 for the robe, an implicit form of bargaining, because she felt the student was the right person for the robe. But appreciation of sentiments can also work against price reductions. Michael Krantz tried to lower the price of four chairs from $30 to $25, but the woman proprietor refused. "The chairs belonged to my aunt and have sentimental value," she demurred. Michael noted that it was only $5 worth of sentimental value, but the seller would not give way. The $5 represented a margin of value that she would not dissociate from the chairs (or the memories of her aunt). Women involved in the bargaining process, then, are more likely than men to factor sentiments about the objects into the bargaining calculus.
CONCLUSION

Bargaining in the U.S. garage sale reinserts the element of the personal in an economic system otherwise characterized by fixed prices and passive consumption. In the bargaining process, something individual about the participants emerges. For both shoppers and sellers bargaining directly involves their sense of values, their judgment of people and of objects, their negotiating skills and sometimes even emotional bits of participants’ lives. At the same time, shopper and seller must directly interact with one another and the price is mutually created. Participants in bargaining in the garage sale arena have some ability to create what Alexander (1992) refers to as a “just price,” and what I have termed elsewhere as “justice in the marketplace” (Soiffer and Herrmann 1987).

This paper has paid special attention to gendered aspects of bargaining in the garage sale. Men indicate that they bargain more often than do women and they are more likely to do it anytime in the course of the sale. Men are more likely to bargain as a contest of wills to be won than are women, and they bargain more often at the start of a sale. Men are also more likely to absent themselves from the bargaining arena altogether than are women, least they appear to really need the money. In contrast, women are more sensitive to the circumstances of particular bargaining situations, such as the time progressed in a sale, whether the seller wants (or can afford) to bargain and the reasonableness of prices. Because women are often more involved with the sentiments attached to objects than are men, such emotional bits are more likely to enter into their bargaining calculus.

Overall, the main reasons men and women engage in bargaining are very similar. According to the results of my questionnaire men and women haggle for similar reasons (in order of greatest to least frequency): price of a certain item seems too high; it never hurts to ask; for the fun of it; to get a deal on a group of items; and to see how much you can lower the price. Despite the fact that men bargain more for sport, as Bernice Lott (1987) notes, the gender similarities in behavior outweigh the differences. Other categories, including class, age, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation can influence bargaining interactions, as well as individual psychological dispositions (i.e. shyness). While gender is an important variable regarding garage sale bargaining, it is only part of a larger, more complex scenario.

END NOTES

1) I want to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this insight and a number of other thoughtful comments. Due to the space constraints on this paper, I was not able to incorporate all of them here.

2) There is no way to randomly select sites or participants because of the inability to define a universe of sales or of shoppers. Although many sellers advertise their sales in a newspaper, not all do so and some do so in a number of newspapers. I have estimated (Herrmann 1990) that approximately one-third of sales simply put up signs (especially on trafficked roads) or “piggy back” on those advertised sales held nearby. Further, not all sales that are advertised are actually held.

3) I like to refer to journalists as “drive-by” ethnographers. They usually provide brief descriptions of sales and interviews with garage sale participants. Although often providing some insights, they do not devote extensive research to garage sale phenomenon, its context and cultural milieu.
4) I would expect that the number of both men and women who bargain in garage sales would be higher in and around cities where street vending and other marginally regulated selling proliferate and where immigrants settle.

5) The names of the informants have been changed.

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