

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Selling Thrift: Work Practices in an American Thrift Store

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### **Abstract**

Thrift, in its simplest definition, is the practice of using resources in a considered way. The concept has long been employed as a moral trope to condemn or promote a variety of human practices. In the literature, thrift is addressed as it is played out in consumption in and around the household as a way of preserving and saving resources. Thrift stores form part of a thrift economy and, as the receiver of divested objects from the household and a site for thrifty consumption practices, they present aspects of thrift in a variety of ways. In this article, I look at thrift as it relates to work and organizational practices in an American thrift store. Although often linked to work ethics, thrift has mainly been proposed as a moral concept guiding individual and not organizational practices. In order to explore the value of thrift in the thrift store, I present parts of my ethnographic research on second-hand markets. Examining work practices as “thrifty” shows how economic prudence is paired with material frugality and community concern. This, I argue, has significant effect on the flow of consumer goods, as resources flow through the thrift store and appear to be spent, not saved.

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## Keywords

Thrift, Consumption, Marketing, Second-hand, Business practices.

## Introduction

In the electronics department of a Community Thrift Store in San Francisco, they handle everything from old phones and record players to cookers and coffee makers. The department is located in a warehouse in the Mission District and is one of seven departments handling the donations that people drop off. When someone donates used electronics to be sold to raise money for the thrift store, Rick, who oversees the department, examines the objects thoroughly. He starts by looking them over and cleaning them using a cloth and a can of compressed air. Then, he tests them by turning them on and off and, in the case of CD-players, for example, he connects them to speakers and makes sure they work. Old laptops are wiped off content and computers are connected to monitors. Only after this process are the objects priced and put in the store. Besides the objects waiting to be placed on the shelves in the store, the department is also home to a selection of objects waiting on a shelf for the right spare part to arrive through the donations. Some are missing cords or chargers; others need maintenance or repair. Whenever new donations arrive, Rick makes sure to check if the right spare parts are in the box or crate, so the broken products can finally move on to the sales floor. Making the products ready to sell in the store requires quite a lot of care and time, but is necessary to make the most of the donations received.

Thrift, or perhaps in its simplest definition, “the considered use of resources,” has been employed as a moral trope to condemn or promote a variety of human practices for centuries (Hunter and Yates 2011). *Frugality*, *prudence*, and *growth* have all been described as thrifty, but so has *being stingy*. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thrift has been marginalized as a guiding principle in the process of advancing consumer economies (Strasser 2000). Even beyond the academic interest in thrift (for instance, Podkalicka and Potts 2014; Alexander and Sosna 2022), thrift guides the way in which consumers and organizations perform a variety of everyday practices. Being a means, but also described as an end in itself (Miller 1998), thrift plays a significant role in activities involved in the relationship between people and things. Although historically thrift has often been linked to work ethics, the contemporary literature addresses thrift chiefly as it is played out in consumption in and around the household. In their *Conversations in Colombia*, Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Rivera (1990) describe how thrift plays out in the domestic economy around the household, and thrift has been central to conversations around household economies and consumption over the

following decades. As an analytical concept, it relates to acquisition, possession, consumption, and disposition (Askegaard 2015).

In this article, I explore the concept of thrift in relation to the thrift store, not as a space for consumption, but as a place of work. As the name indicates, a thrift store is a place where thrifty consumption takes place, and thrift and thrift stores have earlier been addressed in literature on shopping and consumption (Miller 1998; Bardhi and Arnould 2005; Horne and Maddrell 2002). Here, however, I will examine thrift as a principle and value in relation to running the thrift store. In other words, my discussion focuses on how thrift affects the business, the marketing of second-hand objects, the flow of goods, and the everyday work practices. In order to explore the value of thrift in the thrift store, I turn to my ethnographic research on second-hand markets. Examining work practices as thrifty demonstrates how economic prudence is paired with material frugality and concern for the community.

The first part of the article presents an overview of the varied understandings of the concept of thrift in everyday use and in existing literature. In particular, I focus on thrift in studies of consumption, as thrift has primarily been explored in the context of the household. Thrift stores, however, form part of a thrift economy as the receiver of divested objects from the household and as a site for thrifty consumption practices, representing the end of conventional consumption flows and an opportunity for a new life for objects in second-hand markets. In the main part of the article, I draw on my ethnographic research on second-hand organizations to extend the focus on thrift beyond the household and the individual.<sup>1</sup> Based on descriptions of the thrift store, I show how organizational practices may be seen as thrifty, and I argue that this has important effects on the flow of consumer goods in that being thrifty appears to direct more products into the market and works as a tool to speed up the flow of goods rather than to slow it down, as the literature describes the effect of thrift in the household. In the final part of the article, I therefore discuss the value of an analytical focus on thrift in business and organizational anthropology which seeks to develop the understanding of the social and cultural dimensions in and around business settings (Moeran 2012; Garsten and Nyqvist 2013).

### **Thrift, Consumption, and the Household**

Industry is the parent of thrift [. . .] I never knew an early-rising, hard-working, prudent man, careful of his earnings, and strictly honest who complained of bad luck.

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic account draws on my fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation on valuation practices in second-hand markets (Larsen 2015).

Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men on Various Important Subjects* (1844, quoted in Blankenhorn 2008: 21).

Thrift is a multifaceted concept and can be identified in practices in most settings. The overview presented here concerns primarily the Anglo-American context of thrift. This is in part due to the word itself, partly because my own research has focused on thrift stores in the US, and partly because of the particular role of thrift in American consumer cultures.

Terrence H. Witkowski (2010), David Blankenhorn (2008), and James D. Hunter and Joshua J. Yates (2011), the primary sources on the history of thrift, all elaborate on the particular significance of thrift in the US. This significance has had the effect that thrift has taken on a number of specific meanings beyond a moral value. One of them, “to thrift,” refers specifically to “going to the thrift store” or “second-hand shopping,” a meaning that connects consumption with the organizational context of thrift stores. Another specific meaning relates to “thrift societies,” particularly in terms of saving and loans associations, which applies the literal meaning of thrift as saving money. In many ways, thrift is caught between the very practical everyday actions of performing practices in a particular way and the morality indicated in the quote above from Beecher. In shopping or consumption, this morality is essential since appreciating the importance of thrift does not necessarily lead to actually saving money, as Daniel Miller (1998) describes. Thus, thrift is clearly embedded in the social arrangement of lived culture, social and material resources, and meaningful ways of life that make up consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005: 869).

Steve Gudeman (2001) developed thrift as an economic concept in anthropology and described its role in the household, in social relations, and its implications for society. Moreover, thrift has been identified as a value and as a means in a variety of different settings. Fleura Bardhi and Eric J. Arnould (2005) refer to a definition accepted in the marketing literature as a “careful management of resources – careful consumption and saving in the present in order to consume better in the future” (2005: 227). This definition underlines the everyday practice and the investment in the future that thrift often entails. Thus, thrift is rooted in a number of academic discourses, and, in this article, I address thrift in an organizational context mainly through perspectives from anthropology and cultural studies of consumption.

In an effort to assemble various approaches to thrift, Aneta Podkalicka and Jason Potts (2014) argue that the meaning of thrift has changed with growing prosperity and ecological concerns (2014: 277). A greater interest in the motivation or reason for being thrifty has emerged as thrift is not seen as a necessity alone, but more often as a choice. In its simplest form, understood as the considered use of resources, thrift

influences almost all consumption practices. Not being wasteful, like saving leftover food or buying things on sale, can be seen as expressions of thrift, but, in the literature, thriftiness is also often seen as something more specific. In their study of thrift shopping, Bardhi and Arnould (2005) identify a number of different ways in which thrift is practiced by consumers, and they emphasize that thrift is often seen in opposition to hedonism as a form of excessive consumption practice, prompted by the pursuit of gratification or pleasure, but carrying moral implications. As I shall elaborate on below, Miller (1998) also emphasizes these moral implications in his studies of shopping in which he describes thrift as an essential meaningful aspect of household shopping experiences.

According to Podkalicka and Potts (2014), thrift may be positioned between three dimensions: causes of thrift, meaning of thrift, and thrift capital (2014: 230). They point out how the distinction between necessity and choice has dominated understandings of thrift. In the history of divestment and waste practices, this distinction is evident as well. Historical accounts of consumption show that thrift practices around reuse and reselling have been actively marginalized during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her history of waste, Susan Strasser (2000) describes how preserving, mending, and taking care of objects and materials had to be “un-learned” by substituting them with consumption practices more geared towards acquisition to propel industrial production forward. Strasser also describes the influence of advertising and books promoting modernity as the “progressive obsolescence” that helped rid American consumers of their conservative habit of saving and repairing (2000:196). Other examples of this active un-learning of thrift demonstrate how the deliberate discouragement of thrift was carried out on both sides of the Atlantic. Blankenhorn (2008), for example, presents the historical instance when John Maynard Keynes went on air to encourage British housewives to stop saving and start buying (2008: 23-24). Here, thrift is positioned as the enemy of the domestic economy and also as opposed to the luxury of hedonistic consumption. The opposition between necessity and choice as a cause for thrift is, thus, muddled by processes of active un-learning.

The varied understandings of thrift relay different meanings, but refer to relatively similar understandings as a way of saving – or the considered use of – resources. However, according to Blankenhorn (2008), there has historically been an even wider variety of understandings. In his book on thrift (2008), he identifies five main understandings of thrift: growing, good fortune, prospering, saving, and hoarding (2008: 12). In part, these understandings describe a historical development from thrift as thriving – a status or a condition – which gives way for thrift as a habit or a set of values (2008:19). The changing nature of thrift has also meant a higher emphasis on the material, economic aspects of thrift as a means to gain prosperity at the expense of growing

and thriving. However, thrift behaviour in consumer culture is much more than just material and economic because it carries a signal, presumably intended to be observed, about the moral qualities of the thrifty agent or household (Podkalicka and Potts 2014: 231).

This emphasis on the moral qualities of thrift is also a significant theme in Miller's (1998) book on shopping in which he views thrift as an important principle in everyday household shopping and, importantly, as part of a form of sacrifice. In Miller's account, when parents are being thrifty in acts of shopping, it is in order to spend, or *sacrifice*, the savings on the family. Miller develops the idea of thrift in the family to include the saving that older members make as a sacrifice to, for instance, the younger grandchildren. He describes this as a "husbanding of resources" (1998: 102). Miller thus describes thrift as a value both for middle-class and working-class consumers, a point that underlines his argument that thrift is rarely just about saving money; it is about restraint, sobriety, and respectability (1998: 56). The moral implications of thrift lead Miller to suggest, in regard to the household, that thrift is an end in itself and not a means. He argues that "[t]hrift itself is the end since thrift is the way in which the other is objectified as a presence" (1998: 202). In this way, thrift is positioned so centrally that it transforms shopping experiences from "the fantasy of spending to the fantasy of saving money" (1998: 137). Thrift, then, can act as a way of condoning spending and consuming if, as Miller contends, that spending is actually a sacrifice.

Developing the concept of thrift from Miller, Benedetta Cappellini and Elizabeth Parsons (2013) add to the ethnographic literature on thrift in the household. They observe that "[p]ractising thrift represents a form of control over the flow of resources in the household, even if this does not equate to a reduction in overall resource usage and/or wastage" (2013: 132). As such, besides the symbolic act of sacrificing, thrift entails a sense of control, of retaining resources, which is further highlighted when Podkalicka and Potts point out that thrift can also amount to frugality through something like "conspicuous conservation" (Campbell in Podkalicka and Potts 2012).

While illustrating a broad variety of aspects of thrift, a key point of the discussion above is that meanings and practices of thrift often relate to the realm of the household and consumption. In that context, second-hand shopping is seen as an expression of thrift because products are cheaper, and as a way to save economic resources in the household and material resources in the wider economy. Although thrift is also considered a work ethic, it is decidedly distinct from industry and sometimes seen as an enemy of prosperity on a societal level, as the Keynes address demonstrates. The question is, then: how does thrift come to dominate the work practices of a second-hand organization dedicated to selling people's unwanted things and raising money for charity? In the following, I zoom in on this question as I now turn to the

context of the thrift store and to my ethnographic account of thrift in practice. The account highlights the situatedness of thrift practices, as well as their conceptual and moral dimensions, as I apply the anthropological approach to thrift as a practical way of managing resources, to imbue a sense of control over the flow of goods that carries moral value and a consideration for the future.

### **Entering an American Thrift Store**

Thrift stores have become a staple in American shopping centers and so has the term “thrift store.” Although not always used in the name of the store, even online second-hand shops are referred to as thrift stores. Modern thrift stores first emerged during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US as consumption spaces that sold used goods to the needy (Le Zotte 2013: 170). The number of second-hand stores and the size of the trade then greatly increased in the 1970s with the emergence of a budding interest in protecting the environment and accelerated by growing prosperity and rise in general consumption. Although few consumers today probably consider the actual meaning of the term “thrift,” it describes a value and a certain type of practice: that of not being wasteful and of having a considered use of resources. As such, the term is related to the thrift societies mentioned earlier urging citizens to use and, more specifically, save their money wisely (Haveman 1997).

In the thrift store in which I conducted fieldwork, however, the thrifty principles went far beyond the customers. As part of my doctoral research, I studied practices of valuation in second-hand markets on the West Coast of the United States. I followed old things around global value chains to explore their social lives (Appadurai 1986), which included participant observation in and around second-hand organizations. As I began by exploring all the different stores, markets, and organizations in the area, I came across the Community Thrift Store which had a wide and, I thought, interesting selection of stuff in the store. It was a bit more expensive than most of the Goodwill shops, but not much, and they had a lot of different departments and curious objects in the store. The people who worked there also caught my attention. They appeared to be a diverse group of people who also seemed to have a particular way of communicating with each other in the store. There was a lot of banter and shouting, but in a fun and playful way, it seemed. The store also appeared to attract a large variety of different customers, including people whom I read as Mexican American families, queer people, older people, tourists, and hipsters, as well as locals.

Before I settled on this particular thrift store for my fieldwork, I spent a lot of time visiting second hand stores, flea markets, and charity organizations. I wished to find the best place to study how used things become valuable, and I had initially decided to focus on charity

organizations because they make up such a big part of the industry, but I also wanted to get to know “the field” more broadly. Hence, I talked to people, interviewed owners of antiques stores, and asked almost everyone I met what they knew about reuse or second-hand. They all pointed me to different places. One of the places often suggested to me was Goodwill and their stores around the area, and I visited the Goodwill’s sorting plant in the middle of San Francisco. Another place often suggested was a place called Urban Ore in Berkeley which I found to be a fascinating place that focused on collecting and reselling everything related to furnishing a house: doors, windows, toilets, kitchen utensils, boards, lamps, etc. They also had a small section of vintage clothes, although they mainly focused on building and household components.

In this field of reuse and second-hand places, I ultimately decided that Goodwill would probably be too big and difficult to manoeuvre, and that Urban Ore was too focused on building materials and furnishings. I therefore decided to contact the Community Thrift Store which, like Goodwill, is centrally located in the city and carries all types of products: electronics, art, clothing, housewares, books, and furniture. The Community Thrift Store is a charity, but has paid employees as well as volunteers, and, importantly for my research, the entire operation is run from one large warehouse. Here, the employees and volunteers do everything from accepting donations to selling the objects. After reading more about the charity and the history of the organization, I decided to contact them to see if they would be willing to let me work with them. I thought that the best way to approach an organization like this one would be to go there in person and talk to a manager or a HR representative (if they had one). This had worked well with Goodwill, taking them slightly by surprise, and not getting caught in bureaucracy.

So, on a Wednesday morning, I went down to the Community Thrift Store. I had decided to make my request as simple as possible, so I approached the person behind the register and asked if they had volunteers working there. When he said yes, I asked if they needed more volunteers and how I could apply. I thought that offering my help would be most productive since organizations, especially smaller ones, tend to imagine participating in research to be a lot of work for them. Ryan, as I found out he was called, happened to be an operations manager, and he responded right away that they always needed extra help and that they had a form that I had to fill out. Ryan asked what I was mostly interested in. “Everything, basically,” I said. “I do research on second-hand industries, and I am eager to learn more about how you handle, sort, and resell the donations.” I could not read Ryan’s reaction to what I had just said, so I decided not to explain more about my research at that moment, but just ask if he thought that it would be a problem. He shrugged and said that I could fill out the form and that they would contact me once the manager had looked at my application.



A few days passed and I got a call from Ryan who said that they would be happy to get my help. He also asked how much and for how long I would be able to volunteer. I told him that I would be in San Francisco over the next seven months and that I would like to come in at least two or three times a week. I repeated that I was open to work in any of the departments, but that I would like to get around to different ones. I also repeated that I was doing research and, again, I did not really get a sense of whether this was relevant or a problem. So, we decided that I should come by a couple of days later to talk to the manager and get to know the facility.

For the next six months, I thus trained and worked in the Community Thrift Store to learn how to value second-hand objects. The training and work formed the main part of an apprentice-type ethnographic fieldwork (Lave 1996) that allowed me to gain first-hand experience of sorting, cleaning, pricing, and selling.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Community Thrift Store**

The Community Thrift Store is a registered charity that divides its profits between more than 200 local charities. The organization was founded in 1982 by a group of bar owners and restaurateurs in the gay community as a response to the AIDS epidemic with the purpose of raising money for victims of the disease. In the beginning, the organization only raised money for HIV and AIDS related charities, but it has since expanded the types of charities to include animal sanctuaries, shelters, healthcare centers, and many others.<sup>3</sup> At the time of my study, the operation was run by 22 paid employees, managers and assistant managers, and an executive director.<sup>4</sup> The store operates like many other charity organizations in the US by collecting and accepting material donations for resale, from which it generates all of its revenue. People donate their unwanted objects – clothes, furniture, kitchenware, art works, CDs, books, etc. – and the staff sort, value, and price the objects before they are re-marketed.<sup>5</sup> As one of many charity-run organizations utilizing discarded household goods as a means of generating profit for charitable causes, the

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<sup>2</sup> For an extended description of the ethnographic fieldwork, see Larsen (2018).

<sup>3</sup> A full roster of the charities can be found here: <http://www.communitythriftsf.org/charities/>

<sup>4</sup> The fieldwork was carried out in 2013 with additional field visits between 2014 and 2016.

<sup>5</sup> In many cases, the objects themselves have captivating biographies and the nature of second-hand objects is an important material aspect of the work that goes into running a thrift store. I have explored aspects of the object's *being* elsewhere in a book chapter on the ontology of second-hand objects (Larsen 2019).

store is inscribed in a history of charity organizations utilizing the surplus of consumer goods created by increasing industrial production. While thrift stores now cater to a wide audience, as Jennifer Le Zotte (2017) notes, the Community Thrift Store is dedicated to serving its local community by offering affordable goods to low-income patrons as well as serving a growing number of affluent newcomers.

The organization is located in a large warehouse in San Francisco where all its activities are housed. The store has a large pink façade towards Valencia Street, one of the most popular streets in the area, with new shops and restaurants opening up regularly. The area has undergone a gentrification process starting in the late 1990s when the area became popular with the tech entrepreneurs. After the so-called burst of the tech-bubble at the end of the millennium, the developments decreased slowly, but took off again in the last decade, positioning the Community Thrift Store in a central and highly coveted retail position. The area is now inhabited and visited by people from varying backgrounds and with very different income levels, something also reflected by the clientele of the store.

When entering the store through the small entrance on Valencia Street, customers are met with bulletins, notices, posters, and free magazines scattered across the windows and shelves. As you walk through the next door, you encounter a long counter stretching almost half of the length of the space that makes up the retail area. Behind the counter, employees are busy helping customers and ringing up purchases. Throughout the store, a broad range of items are displayed, with the more expensive and fragile items placed in the front near or behind the counter and all the other product groups divided into their respective departments. Beyond the counter area, the departments follow from shoes, clothes, and electronics, and then furniture, music, homeware, and books. Within each department, the objects are displayed with varying degrees of order, as some departments have sub-divisions such as in electronics, for example, where the products are divided into lamps, phones, kitchen appliances, musical equipment, and others. Sometimes, products end up in the wrong department, either due to the difficulty of deciding where to put them, or because customers will often pick up things from one section and then put them down somewhere else. As the employees and volunteers are busy accepting, sorting, filling up, or servicing customers, not much time is allocated daily to clearing up the disorder. In every department, shelves and racks are positioned close together and packed with stuff, so that the store can easily hold thousands of items at any given time. While this retail area makes up about two-thirds of the warehouse, the rest is the back area where only employees and volunteers are allowed. In a sense, this back area constitutes the “heart” of the facility as this is where people drop off donations and objects are received, sorted, and priced.

Importantly, working in a thrift store is hard work. From the first day, I was told that I should wear clothes that I would not mind getting dirty, and even though the store front has bright colors and the store has big bright signs, it is still a functioning warehouse. The front of the store has a gate that opens so new furniture donations can be unloaded directly onto the shop floor, and most of the shelves are made from heavy metal posts and rough wooden boards. Throughout the day, the employees are bringing out crates of new products, dragging around large pieces of furniture, removing products that have not sold, and clearing the aisles of products that customers have left or dropped.

### **Detecting thrift**

During my fieldwork, it became clear to me that making the most of the resources donated was a dominant principle in organizing the work practices in the Community Thrift Store. The employees and volunteers sorting and selling the goods would go to great length to ensure that everything was put to good use. There are several reasons for this focus on making the most of the donations. First, this is how the organization makes money, as all revenue comes from the donated items. Second, the store relies on donors to trust them with the things they donate. Some only drop off stuff to get rid of it, but there were several examples of how donors trust that the employees and volunteers will turn their donated objects into economic pay-outs to a charity. One of them was a regular donor who dropped off things that he had picked up at garage sales. He told me how he would buy mixed boxes and select the objects he knew that he could make a profit on. As for the rest of the objects, he would drop them off at the Community Thrift Store to raise money for his charity, a local bird sanctuary. In this way, the employees and volunteers turned his leftovers into resources for the sanctuary. This seemingly magical process of transformation required a host of activities, tools, knowledge, and consideration on the relatively low economic value of the objects; in brief, the investment of thrift.

This investment to make the most of the donations and offer them for sale almost at any cost creates trust from the donors. The trust was expressed by many of the patrons and, perhaps, is most clearly expressed by an example of a lack of trust. One day, a donor approached Alma, one of the employees who often worked at the register, to complain about a bowl that she had donated. The bowl, in her opinion, was worth much more than it had been priced, and it should, therefore, also be placed in the "special section" behind the counter, where all the expensive objects were kept. As Drew, who was in charge of the book department and had been working at the Community Thrift Store for more than 20 years, told me, this sometimes happens:

Yes, we do get people in here who spot an object they have donated and disagree with the pricing. Usually, we explain how we price – that we want the objects to be affordable for our customers – to make sure they get sold. But it doesn't happen that often. Usually, people are okay with it.

This trust allows the Community Thrift Store to run its business and, as a value guiding the work practices, thrift serves the purpose of building trust by demonstrating the attention that each object is given by the employees and volunteers. It should be added, however, that thrift is rarely expressed specifically and almost never to customers. In other words, thrift is not conspicuous, but rather a more tacit principle guiding the work. The following excerpt from my notes describes one of the instances where thrift is expressed in practice, but not in words:

One day when I was working at the back door with Scott, I came across some office supplies that were left at the bottom of a box: some pins, a roll of tape, some Post-its, pens, etc. I asked Scott if he ever priced stuff at less than fifty cents, because I had just priced a number of items slightly bigger and more attractive than these at fifty cents. He told me that they did not and said that I should “bundle them together.” Bundling means finding a way to ensure that the items stay together, either by securing them with tape or using one of the various sized bags which they keep for the same reason. I made bundles of ten pens and an eraser for two dollars, and three Post-it blocks or three packets of staples and five pens. I then taped up the bags, priced them, and put them in “office supplies” in the homeware section of the store. This investment of time ensures that the leftover objects become marketable.

In this instance, the rationale is that the bundles serve to offer office or school supplies to low-income patrons. Here, the engagement with the community that the thrift store serves becomes evident.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, the marketing “strategy” is not only guided by economic value, but use value and social value affect decisions as well.

During my time in the Community Thrift Store, I heard the statement that “we just want the stuff to sell” again and again. No one working in the organization prices objects with the expectation that the items will hang around until the right buyer turns up. The objects must “move”; that is, they have to sell in a relatively short period of time. This is an underlying principle, just like the principle that the organization will try to raise as much money as possible from the donations received. The two principles work together, not through extracting maximum profit

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<sup>6</sup> A further examination of the Community Thrift Store's relationship with its community, either the gay community that it originally served or the local community of the Mission District, is certainly relevant, but beyond the scope of this article.

from each individual objects, but by making sure that as many of the donated objects “move” as possible. The principle acts as a way of using up the donated things, but also as a way of making sure that they do not end up on a shelf somewhere. Making things “move” is a jargon also applied in conventional retail encouraging sale staff to sell more and applying attractive pricing, to ensure a good flow of goods that ultimately result in higher economic profit. In the thrift store, making things move also ensured an economic flow. At the same time, it makes room for the constant supply of donations that arrive daily at the back door.

Another way of ensuring room for new stuff could, of course, be to simply get rid of the things that are not easily sellable. It is clear, however, that throwing things out is not easy, even when keeping stuff goes against other principles or regulations. This is clear in another excerpt from my fieldnotes:

Karen, one of the employees in the clothing department, is sorting the linen that comes in. The Community Thrift Store doesn't actually accept linen, which is stated on a sign at the donation drop-off. But once in a while some will come in as wrapping for other items. When I talked to her, she was inspecting an old Star Wars bed sheet from the 1980s. Unfortunately, somebody had cut out a piece of it, but she tells me that it is still something that people like, so they will sell it for 1,75\$ anyway. As she says, “somebody will probably use the fabric for a craft project.” Instead of throwing the cut-up bed sheet away, she comes up with a way for it to be of some use, even if it goes against regulations and it is in less than good condition.

These specific examples describe how thrift is practiced in specific instances. But they are by no means the only instances. Thrift is also expressed in the monthly sales, for example. The price reductions during the sales period ensure that the objects which have been in the store for more than a month get another chance of being sold. It is expressed in the continuous and meticulous repricing of objects that have not sold, in the hope that the reduced price will make the object “move.” In the back area, thrift is also evident in the employees' use of unsellable office supplies in their daily work. Most, if not all, pens and notebooks that are used have arrived in the warehouse through donations. And most of the furniture in the back area also come from donations. Not to mention the distribution of donated perishables like shampoo or canned goods, which cannot be sold in the store, amongst the employees to make sure they are not wasted. Thrift practices are carried out across the organization and are encouraged by management.

### **Getting Rid of Resources**

The accounts above describe how thrift is expressed throughout the process of bringing second-hand objects to market. Although there are many similarities between the values underpinning thrift in the household and in the Community Thrift Store, the accounts suggest that the thrift store turns thrift upside down. In the literature on consumption, Podkalicka and Potts (2014) describe thrift as a form of delayed gratification and savings behavior, and Miller (1998) construes it as saving for the future. Understood as a way of saving and retaining resources, thrift is visualized within a frame of material consumption as a flow of objects, from production through use and finally to divestment. Thrift, then, becomes a way of establishing control by ensuring that some resources and money stay put. It emerges as a form of tactic in Michel de Certeau's terminology (1984); that is, a situated response to a reality of the flow of objects that seems inevitably to flow out the other end of the household. In the Community Thrift Store, however, thrift is employed as a principle to ensure that the flow continues, that things *do not* stay put. In the store, thrift is often at odds with pure economic rationality since the investment of time involved in making objects valuable does not always transform into higher economic output. Being thrifty certainly means to make the most of the donations, but not necessarily in terms of economic gain. Making the best use of the donations includes bundling objects, reducing prices, looking things up, testing, cleaning, and sorting.

One of the primary features of thrift in most definitions is a sense of responsibility, whether by consumers wanting to save money for the future or to save leftovers in the household. What unites the two is the concern for others, whether it be family members or the community. Although Miller (1998) argues that thrift is an end in itself, it can, in the thrift store, also be understood as a means. Miller argues that thrift constitutes "the way in which the other is objectified as a presence" (1998: 102), and while that resonates with the social and even environmental concern of the people working in the Community Thrift Store, thrift practices, in this context, are a means in that they are a way of ensuring that the Community Thrift Store can deliver on its social and economic responsibilities.

### **Choosing to be Thrifty**

Even though, as Podkalicka and Potts (2014) point out, thrift practices are linked to a variety of psychological, economic, social, and cultural factors, saving and frugality is central to a wider understanding of thrift. Besides the practical implications, thrift is also often linked to a moral stance, whether by "signaling cooperation in stewardship of collective resources" (2014: 228) or as a moral resistance to short-term satisfaction. Thrift involves, as such, a concern for the future. And while this concern is for

the community and the future of that community, thrift in the thrift store means the opposite of thrift in consumption: offering as many objects as possible and attempting to “move” objects out of the store. This does not mean, however, that thrift practices, when performed in the store, oppose consumption, not even hedonistic consumption. Customers are encouraged to buy and to spend. The collapse of this seeming contradiction between thrift and hedonism has been explored by Bardhi and Arnould (2005) in the context of thrift shopping. Besides pointing out that there is no necessary opposition between thrift and consumption, they show how thrift shopping can act as treat for customers. In the case of selling thrift, the dialectic between thrift and consumption is expressed in the marketing of goods as well. The thrift store is dependent on consumption and encourages it. And, more specifically, the very qualities of being thrifty are put to use to sell. Making the best use of resources and not being wasteful helps market products. This aspect represents perhaps the most radical diverging from what thrift is usually seen to do. In the context of the store, thrift is put to work as a marketing vehicle. Thrift practices thus underpin consumption and makes products attractive by low prices and regular sales.

The distinction between necessity and choice is also relevant in the thrift store. On various occasions, I heard employees and local residents discuss economic pressures, but not from a larger economic crisis. Rather, the pressure came from the rising rent levels in the local context, often attributed to the influx of high-earning tech employees in the area. So, although the Community Thrift Store may be embedded in a larger context of austerity, locally prosperity is more visible. The prosperity of the urban area as a whole had negative impact on specific residents, which was a great concern for the employees who expressed deep worry for their patrons’ well-being. But for the Community Thrift Store, it also meant a steady supply of attractive donations from other stores that were closing down as they were pushed out by large rent increases. The change in the customer base with new high earning customers (and donors) also resulted in the highest monthly turnover ever in 2016 as Armun, the manager, told me when I returned for a follow-up visit.

Perhaps the distinction between necessity and choice is better understood as dimensions that affect behavior and practices differently at different times. It seems dismissive to describe thrift as a value when saving is born from necessity. At the same time, ignoring the agency of choice even in dire situations is also too simple. In the context of the thrift store, it is easier to identify thrift as a principle or a value since the sense of human necessity is further removed from the organizational context. And although the practice of thrift in the store is not externally advertised, it still carries a moral signaling to the community.

### **The Practice of Thrifty Selling**

In the store, thrift constitutes a business practice that informs marketing, pricing, and selling second-hand objects, and, as such, it unfolds differently than in consumption and the household. This becomes even clearer when re-examining the activities that have been attributed to thrift in the literature: being frugal, preserving, saving, investing, and keeping control over resources. In the thrift store, prices are set to attract patrons as well as wholesale buyers. This means that the prices are deliberately lower than the estimated economic value of the product in the market. When selling, the overarching ambition in the thrift store is to get rid of as many things as possible, as quickly as possible. It is an expression of thrift as the considered use of resources, but frugality, preserving, and saving do not seem to be the aim of thrift in this context. Investing as the purpose of being thrifty, however, seems similar. The way in which thrift is carried out in the thrift store is a form of investing in the future for the community, but it is done by letting resources flow out of the organization instead of keeping them. Thus, investing also has an immediate expression: the investment of time or the investment, even, of thrift. Investing time in sorting and using every donation is in direct opposition to a pure economic rationality. The investment of time allows the organization to fulfil their purpose of transforming donations into marketable goods, but arguably by compromising their purpose of raising money for charity. The employees could be spending their time selling more products instead of investing time in thrift practices. It seems, however, that the investment of thrift is valuable to the organization.

Ultimately, thrift in the context of the store emerges as a distinct value that allows charitable organizations to engage in commercial activities, in encouraging consumption and attracting customers without losing their moral respectability. Thrift imbues their activities with a moral foundation linking the messy and dirty work of handling what otherwise would end up as waste with a higher purpose. Thrift is a practical response to larger circumstances: at times borne out of necessity and scarcity, at other times as a moral act of choice. The circumstances vary, but the response is bound by a concern for preserving or saving resources. Either for family, community, or environmental concerns. In that sense, thrift practices in the thrift store are by all means thrifty, even in selling and marketing objects for consumption. And since thrift is embedded in everyday activities, often unnoticed and very practical, its expressions must be examined in the minutia. Thrift in the workplace reverses the effects of thrift by being a means of increasing the speed of the flow of resources out of the store.

In this article, I have explored how thrift is manifested in the context of a thrift store. I have addressed different understandings and discussed conceptualizations of thrift. The danger of theorizing thrift is to arrive at a place where the quotidian qualities of thrift are overlooked.



Thrift is performed every day, everywhere as part of other practices. Very few people are un-thrifty all the time. So, as part of consumption practices, thrift is one value among other values. The surprising effects of thrift as a principle guiding work practices are that it is a way of getting rid of resources, not saving them. Although thrift can be described as a practical way of managing resources, to imbue a sense of control over the flow of goods that carries moral value and a consideration for the future, the consequences are very different in the household and in the thrift store. While the thrift store works to “move things along,” the aim is to generate resources in the form of profit for the charities they support. There is a clear economic aim, but the aim is pursued through being thrifty. Practicing thrift in the thrift store means making sure that objects move along, that they do not get stuck or left on a shelf. Thrift thus takes on a whole new meaning in the context of a thrift store and reveals a dynamic relationship between the ethical dimension and the practical application of thrift. The perspectives I present here underline the value of pursuing thrift as an analytical concept to reveal the different dimensions of business in practice.

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