

## Charity, Retail or Care?

### Gender and Managerialism in the Charity Retail Sector

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose -**

The purpose of this paper is to explore how gender identity is played out in a particular type of work setting, that of charity retail, and to explore the impacts of increased managerialism on this process of identity construction.

**Design/Methodology/approach** - The paper is informed by interviews with 22 charity shop managers from three UK cities. The narratives of three of these managers are chosen for more in-depth analysis. The paper focuses primarily on understandings of identity as practised, exploring the enactment of a series of conflicting and overlapping 'selves' in the workplace. The practices and discourses surrounding the retail (or businesslike) self, the charitable self and the caring self in particular are discussed.

**Findings** - We find that the process of creeping managerialism in the sector both values and promotes the discourses of 'retail' but marginalises those of 'charity and of 'care'. This presents serious dilemmas of identity for charity shop managers and is a source of considerable stress for them. However we also found that managers were using the discourses of charity and of care to resist this managerial process. Thus we focus on the ways in which gendered identities are constrained and enabled by and through the discourses circulating in organisational life. We also have a series of observations to

make concerning the future possibilities that retail work in particular might offer for identity construction.

**Research limitations/implications** – The analysis is based on a small sample of qualitative interviews, therefore the findings are not meant to be generalisable to the wider population. This ‘vignette’ approach allows us to explore in some depth the relations between identity construction and organisational context.

**Originality/value** – Empirical paper using an alternative lens to analyse gender identity and the impacts of increasing managerialism on processes of identity construction. Highlights in particular the continual struggles over meaning within organisations.

**Key words:** identity; gender; managerialism; retail managers; charity retail

**Paper type** – Research paper

## Introduction

This paper responds to wider calls in the management literature for an exploration of the influence of diverse settings on identity formation (Brown, 2001; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Adib and Guerrier, 2003) and for our understandings of gendered identities to be located in situated discourses and practices (Bruni *et al.* 2004). This paper follows the line of work that attempts to de-couple biological sex and gender and views femininity and female experiences as both linguistic and social constructions, thus viewing femininity as a set of practices learnt and enacted in particular and appropriate circumstances. This view of femininity focuses on the ‘doing’ of gender (Butler 1990, Gheradi 1995, Halford *et al.* 1997, McDowell 1997, West and Zimmerman 1987, Bruni *et al.* 2004). Bruni *et al.* (2004) in their study of doing gender and doing entrepreneurship offer the viewpoint that ‘enactments are not deliberate and motivated performances – even though they may partly be such – but that subjectivity and objectivity are produced together within situated practices. Identity therefore may be seen as the product of a heterogeneous engineering of material and discursive practices’ (2004: 407).

The process of increasing managerialism occurring within the charity retail sector has increasingly invoked a set of discourses surrounding ‘good business practice’ typically drawn from the commercial retail sector. These discourses often jar with the discourses of charity and of care traditionally associated with the sector, stemming from both its charitable status and the strong voluntary culture which it still relies upon. In this sense we see the charity retail workplace as a fruitful yet neglected organisational context for research. In the paper we explore discourses of charity, of retail and of care as resources for the identity work of charity shop managers because in our interviews with

these managers we found these discourses to be particularly pervasive. In exploring the charitable self, the retail (or businesslike) self and the caring self we discuss some of the ways managers position themselves in relation to the organisation, to customers and to volunteers; in some cases embracing the values promoted by managerialism but in many cases resisting them.

### **Gendered identities in charity retail**

Since their inception, charity shops and shopping have consistently been associated with the feminine subject. Explanations for this association can be found in the historical gendering of retail work (Woodward, 1960; Winstanley, 1983; Reekie, 1993; Dowling, 1993; Lancaster, 1995; Domosh, 1996) as well as in the specific voluntary and charitable cultures of charity retail organisations. Further, on a localised level, the identity work of gender is achieved through the day to day practices and processes involved in managing a charity shop. The goods presented for sale in charity shops consist mostly of donated items of clothing, the preparation of which involves washing, steaming and ironing, tasks typically associated with the domestic sphere (and thus it can be argued, associated with femininity). In addition the managers' role as carer and nurturer (which have traditionally been characterised as feminine traits: Spence and Helmreich, 1978; Fondas, 1997) has intensified with the introduction of a broader than ever range of volunteers and work placements in charity shops. Traditionally the volunteer cohort consisted of mostly elderly, retired volunteers, but as volunteer numbers have dwindled (owing to the growth of volunteering activities generally) the workforce has extended to include New Deal work placements, those completing Community Service and a range of volunteers from

projects which aim to ease those with learning difficulties and/or mental ill-health into paid employment (see Maddrell, 2000). For some charities such as Oxfam this is a central strand in their wider strategy to support the local community. In addition, some charities (such as Scope) encourage their beneficiary group to volunteer in their shops.

Traditionally, charity shops were managed and staffed entirely by volunteers and even though they are now mostly managed by paid managers their philanthropic roots continue to linger. In characterisations of both volunteers and managers the Victorian construct of Lady Bountiful continues to be pervasive. As recently as 1994 Broadbridge and Horne commented that the charity shop volunteer can be typically characterised as an 'older woman with time available to do good works' (1994: 422). Indeed, the blurring of boundaries between the role of volunteer and manager, and between unpaid and paid work in the shops means that this characterisation can be equally applied to volunteers and managers.

However, while our focus is firmly on the construction of charity retail managers' identities we are also aware that we need to consider their structural location within their organisations. Recent work on retail employment observes a marked hierarchical segregation of labour in retailing with males dominating higher paid managerial positions and females dominating in lower paid less secure shop floor positions (Brockbank and Airey 1994, Traves *et al.* 1997, Broadbridge, 2003). A similar segregation is evident in the charity retail sector albeit at a higher level of the hierarchy. Both the volunteer cohort and individual shop managers are overwhelmingly women and managers at higher regional and head office levels tend to be men. A national survey of 826 charity shop managers (carried out as part of this research) found that 94 percent were women.

Research into the constitution of the voluntary cohort in charity shops has found a similar preponderance of women (Broadbridge and Horne 1994). Our task here is not to explore the likely reasons for this segregation, although we do recognise that such segregation is undoubtedly an affect of culturally or socially constructed differences. In sum it is important to note that the post of charity shop manager is much more likely to be held by a woman than a man and that these posts are relatively low paid (an average full time salary of £9,596 - £16,000, Association of Charity Shops, 2007).

### **Managerialism and control in charity retail**

Creeping managerialism in charity retail has involved changes not only to systems of management and control (Broadbridge and Parsons, 2003; Parsons, 2004) but also to the whole purpose and ethos of charity trading (Horne, 2000). Traditionally, charity shops were managed and run on a purely voluntary basis by local branches of the parent charity. Individual shops would be managed by a team of volunteers. However, from a commercial point of view, this style of management had two main drawbacks. Typically there would be no overarching responsibility for the focus and direction for the management of the shop, in addition to which those in charge often had little or no previous retail experience. Consequent restructuring of the sector has involved the payment of shop managers (albeit a minimal salary) and the centralisation of control, with policy making situated at head office. These head office positions (with not so minimal salary structures) have increasingly been filled by male professionals from the commercial retail sector. This has had a significant impact on management practices in the sector (Broadbridge and Parsons, 2003) embracing performance, profit, enterprise and productivity, effects which are underpinned by, and reflect, masculinist norms and

values. These effects are generated and secured through the way in which the operation is talked about and (re)imagined. As Gregson *et al.* argue 'charity retailing has been re-imagined and reworked in head offices' resulting in the reconstitution of charity *shops* as charity *retail* (2002: 1661 our emphasis).

To some extent the changes in charity retail mirror those occurring in the commercial retail sector. The 'up-skilling' of the commercial retail sales force in the 1990s has been accompanied by moves to extend control over shop workers' experiences and identities with retailers looking for certain 'types' of people to sell their goods, with selection criteria embracing appearance, personality and dress sense (Lowe and Crewe, 1996). Thus the identities of shop workers are utilised in the broader project of building a cohesive brand identity and recruitment policies represent a key component of this marketing strategy, although such concerns are not all that new. In Zola's 1883 novel '*Au bonheur des dames*' (closely modelled after the Bon Marche and the Grand Magasins du Louvre) the heroine is only hired at the store 'after the management assured itself of her experience and her *attractiveness*' (McBride 1978: 667, our emphasis). Similarly Dowling (1993: 315) observes of a mid twentieth century department store 'the femininity of both shoppers and salesclerks is actively moulded by retailers like Woodward's in their attempts to create a unique store identity' (see also Broadbridge, 1991). Thus attempts to control shop workers are not limited to appearances only. Workers are subject to a range of policies designed to control and conform their *bodies* in the space of the shop including where and how they should stand, adorn and comport themselves. Thus workers are trained to produce an embodied self which meets the needs of the retail brand exercise. The management of emotion forms a key part of this identity



shaping project, see for example Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on cabin crew working in the airline industry and Martin *et al.*'s (2000) work on shop assistants in a retail context.

However the success of senior managers in such attempts (be they conscious or not) might easily be called into question. For example, in her chapter on 'The Clerking Sisterhood' Benson identifies a strong 'saleswoman's work culture' amongst sales staff in department stores at the beginning of the twentieth century. This work culture was evidenced by:

'...the existence of an oppositional set of rules which simultaneously challenged and sustained the functioning of the store. On one hand work culture helped the store to run smoothly by arbitrating intradepartmental conflicts, socializing new members, and fostering selling skill; on the other, it sanctioned the stint and various kinds of insubordination, its influence countering management's authority' (1986: 255-56).

In a similar vein du Gay (1996: 173) explores in-store power relations in a contemporary context, focusing on sales assistants' 'tactics of consumption' finding them to be 'inherently relational or dislocated, being both a structural inversion of and yet ambivalently dependent upon 'official norms''. Gregson *et al.* (2002) couch their analysis firmly within discursive practice noting the instability of charity retailers' (head office) talk, particularly the (in)effectiveness of the translation of this talk into practice or implementation on the shop floor. Likewise we find that the process of creeping managerialism in the sector both values and promotes the discourses of 'retail' but

marginalises those of ‘charity and of ‘care’. By exploring the narratives of three sets of managers below we explore some of the dilemmas this presents to charity shop managers.

## **Methodology**

Given that our aim is to explore discourse as a resource for the shaping of selves we feel it important that we reflect on our own narrative and interpretive practices. While we do not engage explicitly with the difficulties of going beyond dualistic thinking around gender (see Linstead and Brewis, 2004) we do seek to offer and develop interpretations that express and explore fluidity as opposed to fixity in the construction of gendered identities. In developing our interpretations we view research very much as processual and iterative. As Stanley and Wise contend, ‘research and life are not separate and divisible’ (1983: 189). Perhaps it is not surprising then that as life involves much necessary contradiction and messiness, then so too will the methods and ruses we use to try and get a better fix on certain aspects of it. This interfusion of research and life has consequences for the way we conceptualise the theorising process as an ongoing ‘activity’. We have tried to prioritise the experiential in our research affording a particular role for circumstance. While it does not form a central strand of our interpretation in this paper we feel it important to mention that one of the authors spent a period of three years working for one morning a week as a volunteer in a charity shop and therefore brings a degree of background knowledge to the interpretation.

Our interpretations are based on interviews with charity shop managers. We identified charities with trading divisions using the NGO Finance annual charity shops

survey (NGO Finance, 2001). Shop managers were contacted for interview initially by letter, and this was followed up with a telephone call to make an appointment. Ironically perhaps, the structural inequalities in the organisation made our role as researchers significantly easier. The managers we approached appeared almost without exception to be keen to talk to us about their working experiences. For some of them it was a welcome recognition of their (largely hidden) labour, and/or on a more mundane level it may have offered a welcome opportunity to offload some of the stresses and strains of their working lives. The interviews were conducted by both authors. This allowed us to cover topics more rigorously and probe points in more depth than we may have otherwise done independently. It also allowed for open discussion of, and agreement over the interpretation of the data. Although managers could have felt intimidated or outnumbered by the presence of two interviewers, we found that involving three (or four in the four cases where we interviewed two managers together) in the discussion produced a relaxed group dynamic.

Interviews are mutually constructed social events, as such the social organisation of the interview is vital in setting boundaries for meanings to emerge. In a practical sense, the typical layout of a charity shop, with a backroom area for sorting and steaming clothing and sometimes a kitchen for making cups of tea and coffee, lent an ideal informal space for conducting interviews. Managers chose times that would be quiet or where they knew they had adequate volunteer cover to staff the shop floor. The interviews typically lasted one to one and a half hours, were taped, and subsequently transcribed. We used a topic guide to structure our discussion. Broad topic areas included previous work experiences, reasons for coming into charity retail and day to day

experiences of managing a charity shop and managing volunteers. We encouraged managers to elaborate on what they felt were some of the defining features of their experience. As interviewers we expressed an interest in the day to day practices of managing a shop and the personal experiences of the managers, and tried to remain as ‘unknowing’ as possible in order to allow space for the viewpoints and experiences of the managers. We conducted eighteen interviews with charity shop managers from ten different charities. In four of these interviews we spoke to both the manager and their assistant manager therefore in total 22 managers were interviewed. These interviews were conducted in three UK cities.

## **Findings**

In a close analysis of all 18 of the interview transcripts we explored managers’ relationships with the organisation, with the volunteer workforce and with customers. Analysis revealed that the managers were drawing from a range of discourses, the most prominent of which appeared to be discourses of retail (or business), of charity and of care. Managers typically emphasised the caring and nurturing elements of their roles alluding to the strong people management skills required to run a shop successfully. These skills have undoubtedly been tested with the introduction of a whole new range of volunteers with a very wide range of needs including New Deal work placements, those completing Community Service and a range of volunteers from projects which aim to ease those with learning difficulties and/or mental ill-health into paid employment. They commented on the difficulties of juggling the needs of this workforce with the growing financial imperatives of the “bottom line” that were imposed by head office. Managers

were also keenly aware of the social role of their shops for their customer base emphasising the importance of lending an ear for some of their regular customers whose motivation in visiting the shops may be just to get out of the house and meet people. In some instances, this was also applicable to their volunteer base. Discourses of charity and of care were thus often used interchangeably. However the key way in which charity was interpreted by managers was as fundraising for the parent organisation. For some managers the charity (as an organisation) gave them a formalised structure through which to express care and altruism and it was clear that their identity as a charitable worker was important to them. For these managers they viewed their job as a charity shop manager as one facet of a wider career as a charity professional. However, owing to the low salaries and poor career prospects of these roles, this in general was unusual. Discourses of retail were both embraced and resisted by the managers. While it was clear that for most ‘the customer’ was central to their work their view of customer service differed quite starkly from the senior managers, being typically a form of ‘tea and sympathy’ approach as opposed to ‘speed and efficiency’ one. To explore these discourses in more depth we elaborate below on three sets of managers. Each used these discourses in quite striking and contrasting ways when positioning themselves in relation to the organisation, to customers and to volunteers.

### *Margaret and Dawn: The Retail Managers*

We interviewed Margaret and Dawn together. Margaret is in her early forties and has been managing her charity shop (charity shop A) for three years, since it opened. Prior to managing the shop Margaret worked at a local monument and tourist attraction, working

in the tea room, the gift shop and on the tour bus. Dawn is in her late twenties and joined Margaret as assistant manager six weeks prior to the interview so Margaret is acting as Dawn's mentor. They work for a national charity retail operation which operates a chain of over four hundred shops across the UK. In the drive to become increasingly competitive the charity has pursued a relatively aggressive approach towards managerialism which has involved a series of policy changes. These changes have involved the standardisation of shop floor procedures particularly in relation to the presentation and pricing of goods. This has been accompanied by an increased focus by those at senior management levels on individual shop sales targets and attendant pressure on shop managers to perform in accordance with these targets. Of course this is not easy when working with the uncertainties of a volunteer workforce and fluctuating levels and quality of donated stock.

In the interview with Margaret and Dawn it became clear that Margaret resented the increased control that these policy changes effected over their day to day activities. While Dawn was less vocal she appeared to agree with Margaret's view points (perhaps because of the perceived power relationship between the two women). Margaret viewed head office policies as unworkable, expressing strong feelings that it was impossible to 'go by the book' and at the same time, meet the required sales targets:

'And I've said to Dawn that we are cutting corners here. I've trained her the (charity A) way. And then I've said to her "now that is the way it should be done, and this is the way I do it, but you will find your own way of doing things" And low and behold she has gone the middle way, because she knows

that you can't go by the book. You can't go by the book, it's impossible to go by the book, I wouldn't make a penny.' (Margaret)

Clearly Margaret has developed her own ways of circumventing head office directives. Parallels can be drawn with the 'tactics of consumption' found by du Gay (1996: 173) in his research on commercial retail managers 'being inherently relational or dislocated, being both a structural inversion of and yet ambivalently dependant on 'official norms'. The official norms in this case are described by Margaret as 'going by the book'. While the two women do go by the book to an extent they 'find their own way of doing things' - a sort of middle ground which is dependant to a degree on official norms but which simultaneously subverts them. As the following extract illustrates this subversion can be very subtle:

'You are only allowed to sell bric-a-brac at a certain price, it's totally bizarre'  
(Dawn)

'You are getting 75p stuff in and you are selling it at 99p' (Margaret)

'So we have little boxes that we hide and only bring out on certain days at cheaper levels so that we can get money in' (Dawn)

Later on in the interview we discover that these 'certain days' are days when Dawn and Margaret are not expecting senior managers to visit the shop. Margaret and Dawn are articulating their ideal (and a more traditional) view of charity shopping as a form of bargain hunting. Their use of 'little boxes' of cheaper items of bric-a-brac encourage these shopping behaviours and hark back to the times when charity shops were much less 'professional' in their approach to selling. In addition Margaret and Dawn seem to firmly

believe that this is what attracts the customers and therefore brings money in. These interpretations of charity shopping jar significantly with senior management's attempts to professionalise the store environment through implementing standardised merchandising and pricing scales. Ironically it suggests that moves by senior management to 'professionalise' in attempts to improve profits are in fact stifling the very cultures which encourage sales in the first place.

This struggle for control over meaning in the shop is undoubtedly a key contributing factor to Margaret's disillusionment. Throughout our interview she made several hints at wanting to leave. She attributed this variously to the wages, the lack of recognition, and the constraints placed on her by head office. She talked about 'sitting back and waiting for the flack' from head office and commented that 'you are at loggerheads all the time' with senior management. Margaret recounted a story of a 22 year old man who was a regular customer in the shop. He had a medical condition associated with the charity's objectives. He died quite suddenly and donated £1000 to the charity (through the shop). To Margaret it was very important that this money went through the books in the shop as opposed to through fundraising channels. She gave two main reasons for this, first she reasoned that money raised in the shops is spent locally whereas money raised through fundraising activity is not allocated to a specific area. However her main argument hinged on the work performed by herself and her staff in building up a relationship with the young man in question, she argued therefore that the shop staff should receive the credit for the donation:



‘People just don’t come into a (charity A) shop and say “I want to donate this” they donate it because of the staff, and that is down to hard work on our part, that is *customer relations*. So why shouldn’t we have it?’ (Margaret)

This interpretation of Margaret’s is a revealing one. First she emphasises the management language of ‘customer relations’ but also says ‘why shouldn’t *we* have it’ clearly her imperative to meet sales targets and thus her identity as a retail professional in this instance takes precedence over her identity as a charitable worker. Her frustration comes from the fact that she feels cheated by senior management and by the organisation as a whole. She feels she has clearly demonstrated good ‘customer relations’, a requirement of senior management. Yet Margaret feels robbed of the reward she feels she should rightly reap through improved sales figures, the basis on which her performance is measured.

### *Moira: The Charity Manager*

Moira is in her early thirties and has been managing her charity shop on a part-time basis for a year (combining it successfully with child care responsibilities). The charity retail operation she works for also operates a large chain of shops but have embraced managerialism to a lesser extent than charity A and with much more sensitivity to the vital voluntary culture of the shops. The charity made moves to restructure its management in 2000, introducing further intermediate tiers between shop managers and head office staff. This introduction of staff also involved the standardisation of shop

floor procedures. However a year into the restructuring process the charity began to reverse this approach, relaxing policies and returning to its previous flattened management structure. Part of the reason for this u-turn was a dramatic drop in profits, but the charity also realised that in effecting these changes they were stifling the voluntary culture so central to the success of their shops. The following comment from Moira is indicative of the way in which charity B have relaxed their approach to management:

‘Another thing we do is, I go through a period every year with my area manager, I will set out my goals, my aims, it doesn’t matter whether they have worked or not worked, it’s the fact that I was trying to do that. And they just take everything on board, they will say that failed, that really doesn’t matter, it’s the fact that I did at least try it. And they are also incredibly good at saying “well do what you want, we want to keep you here”’

The organisation Moira works for exhibits some characteristics of enterprising organisations, which ‘make meaning for people’ by encouraging them to believe that they have control over their own lives; that no matter what position they may hold within an organization that their contribution is vital, not only to the success of the company but to the enterprise of their own lives’ (du Gay and Salamon, 1992: 625).

Moira continually uses the discourse of charity to justify her role and rationalise her commitment. Moira characterises her motivations for joining the charity in very clear

and politically strong terms saying ‘I want to be dedicated, I want to help people fight against poverty’. This is unusual as often when managers mentioned the parent charity it was nearly always in very general terms as ‘doing good work’ or ‘helping the work of the charity’. Moira’s commitment goes beyond merely acting charitably in general terms (towards customers and volunteers); she has clearly internalised the values of the parent charity.

In the interview Moira describes her job in a (charity B) shop in much broader terms than Margaret did in charity A, focusing much more on the bigger picture being able, and wanting, to contemplate the distant (charitable) effects of her labour. Contemplation of these effects offers Moira a moral imperative to work hard and make the most of her time in the shop ‘You have to be able to look at your own time and think “I don’t have time to do this, it’s not making enough money’. She adds ‘If I didn’t love (charity B) I wouldn’t be here’. Moira’s identity is very strongly bound up in her work as ‘charitable fundraising’ and she strongly identifies with charity B as embodying a set of values she wishes to identify with:

‘It will always be (charity B)...I’ve had years thinking “oh my gosh what am I going to do with my life” and never quite finding what it was. So it’s good for my friends to meet me and say “are you going to stay with (charity B) all your days?” I’m sure that is what I’m going to do, and I feel comfortable enough that they [the parent charity] will always try and give me a job.’

Moira holds a firm belief that the ethical rationale surrounding the work of the parent charity will translate into its employment practices, i.e. that they will always try and keep her in employment by finding her work within the charity. Although Moira's work is paid she is aware that this payment is minimal and, in addition, she works extra hours without payment. She feels that as she is investing both her energies and belief in the organisation that they should, and would, value and acknowledge this investment. The discourse of enterprise can also help explain Moira's attachment to the organisation. As Rose asserts 'It now appears that individuals will ally themselves with organizational objectives to the extent that they construe them as both dependent upon and enhancing their own skills of self-realization, self-presentation, self-direction and self-management.' (1992: 154).

Moira does mention that she gets satisfaction from engineering a happy volunteer team, but while this is important to her, it is clear that this is secondary to her charitable fundraising goals. In addition, Moira is sensitive to the subtleties inherent in managing a volunteer team and the need to be flexible and accommodating 'because somebody who has been here for 15 years is not necessarily going to take advice'. She mentions later on that with volunteers 'you have just got to let things go'. As with all of the managers we spoke to, Moira displays a great sensitivity to the paid/unpaid divide in the shops and this difference between herself and her volunteers motivates her to work above and beyond her contracted hours:

'The days off I get I may get three or four phone calls about something, which I don't mind. I think if I said to people "please these are my days off, I don't

want to know anything about the shop” - but you wouldn’t. That’s not fair on them. Because there is a difference that’s always in your mind, “well I am being paid for this”. As long as you never forget that these people are doing it out of the goodness of their heart because they care.’

Here Moira displays evidence of the blurring of the boundaries between work and home, between paid and unpaid work.

*Barbara: The Caring Manager*

Barbara is in her mid fifties and has been managing her charity shop for five years. Prior to this she worked for many years in adult education teaching numeracy and literacy skills, and in this post she progressed to a managerial position. She left this post due to over work, long hours and stress resulting largely from the amount of paperwork involved. Barbara joined the charity initially as a deputy manager on a part time basis working three days a week but this soon developed into a full time management position. The charity Barbara works for might be located in between the two previous charities discussed when it comes to managerialism. The charity has two prongs to its shops operation the first group of shops is managed centrally under a UK trading division (similar to charity A) and the second group is managed at the local level by local support groups. The shop Barbara works in is managed by the UK trading division. Barbara’s shop has been on the verge of closing for the past six months. When we interviewed her she still wasn’t sure exactly when the shop would be closing. When Barbara initially found out the shop would be closing she found a shop management job with another

charity, however when the charity postponed the shop closure she forfeited the new job to stay and ‘see the shop out’:

‘I thought I would like to see the old shop out. You get sentimental about the shop and the volunteers feel the same way. We want to be there when it closes. We want to shut the door and turn the lights off for the last time. I don’t even like the thought of it just sitting here in the darkness and gathering dust until they stick a notice on the window’.

Barbara’s description of shutting the door and turning the lights off for the last time portrays [?] her sentimental attitude to the shop. Her comments evoke a picture of the shop as ‘home’ or as an old friend, she speaks of seeing the ‘old shop out’. Later on in the interview she refers to the shop, and her work in the shop as ‘therapeutic’. On the one hand this may be because her role as manager keeps her busy and takes her mind off her own problems and worries. But also the shop environment itself provides a restorative or rehabilitative space:

‘I find this shop very therapeutic and the customers say that they find the shop very therapeutic to come into. That is why they like to come in. But I find it as well. I can get up in the morning and feel like nothing on earth, but by the time I have opened the shop door and the customers start to come in, I’m out of that. Whatever it was, it’s gone and I’m into this’.

Barbara strives to emphasise the caring facet of her job in our interview. In Barbara's view customer service extends well beyond the efficient and helpful processing of sales. Her concern and attention to customers goes way beyond what senior managers might mean by 'customer service'. Her 'tea and sympathy' approach towards customers is suggestive of the sort of pastoral care that a counsellor or even social worker might offer their clients:

'We get a lot of bereaved people come in...Hopefully if there is enough people around, if they look distressed, they we'll go up and say "well come and sit down and I'll make you a cup of tea, and if you ring these people, there will be somebody to chat to on the phone who understands how you feel"...Some people look as though they've been through the mill. And it's just your human responses that take over.'

Barbara clearly strives to create a space that is very inclusive and is particularly welcoming to those who she views as potentially marginal to society:

'It's going to sound really weird, but I have quite a few regular customers who are cross dressers. Because they know that they can come in here without being giggled at, without being looked at sideways. I know they are cross dressers. They know that I know. I look out for things for them. Larger ladies shoes and that sort of thing. And the same the other way. I have ladies who come in and want men's shoes in small sizes, and want to buy small sized men's suits. And I

don't judge anybody. They are all welcome to come into the shop. We are user friendly, that is the term I like to put to it'.

Note Barbara's interpretation of customer service as 'user friendly' thus putting the onus not on custom or profit but on the customer *use* of the shop, whether that be to come in for a chat and a cup of tea, or a browse. Barbara feels that the act of buying then may stem from this. When asked what she thought was the most important aspect of running the shop Barbara replied:

'customer service, got to be. If you don't treat them right and make them feel welcome they won't come back. Some customers don't come in for anything in particular. They will come in for a chat and while they're here they'll look around, and they buy. I think sometimes they just don't want anything really, but they feel obliged to buy something while they are here'

Thus in Barbara's interpretation customer service has little to do with the sale itself, but in creating an atmosphere that attracts customers to the shop. The following extract highlights Barbara's identity as a caring manager. In return her customers demonstrate a high degree of loyalty and support. When they hear the shop is closing down and is short of stock they have a clear out at home and bring their unwanted items in:

'They started turning up dragging black bags behind them, telling us "we had a clear out" and it just piled up. It was people just coming into



the shop ‘oh we’ve had some nice things from here in the past’ or ‘charity E were good to my Mum.’ And so they come in and it’s wonderful. You don’t get that anywhere else, and that is what gets you, it’s that contact. Knowing that what you’re doing, although you might go home dog tired, you don’t get paid enough, and the working conditions aren’t ideal, you get a buzz out of it at the end of the day. And that is what keeps you going’.

What appears to keep Barbara going is her knowledge that she is helping those less fortunate than herself, but unlike Moira, these less fortunate are customers as opposed to the charity’s beneficiaries.

## **Discussion**

This exploration of retail (businesslike), charitable and caring selves has highlighted the complex ways in which such discourses intertwine in managers’ personal identity projects. Margaret and Dawn appeared to most fully utilise discourses of retail, this was reflected in their focus on the financial outcomes of their efforts. Their narratives emphasised sales targets and the measurement of the financial success of the shop. They were fiercely defensive of their shop’s income not only because it represented increased funds raised for the parent charity but because it was used by head office as a basis for the measurement of their performance. It became clear that to a degree they had

internalised such measures (for example by using the language of ‘customer service’) but they also demonstrated resistance to them. In this sense they are caught in a double bind. In contrast, Moira drew strongly on discourses of both charity and retail in constructing her identity. Her identity as a charity worker was of paramount importance to her but it was also very important that her charitable work was undertaken as professionally as possible. For Moira charity was largely interpreted as ‘fundraising’ and as such she consistently underlined the perceived benefits that the shop income accrued for the parent charity. However Barbara interpreted charity very much as ‘care’ involving acts limited to the store environs. Her discursive and material practices centred on the welfare of her customers and volunteers. The charitable acts she performs towards her volunteers and regular customers provide her with a much more accessible interpretation of her work. As such her project of identity construction appeared to be the most localised of the three embracing the local (as opposed to distant) results and benefits of her efforts. She demonstrated a keen ambition to create an inclusive space where volunteers and customers would feel happy and relaxed. For Barbara considerations of shop income (or charity as fundraising) appeared to come secondary to these ambitions.

We can also discern the very different ways in which the three sets of managers position themselves in relation to the organisation, to the charity and to their volunteers and customers. Moira drew strongly and positively from a set of organisational values as resources for her identity work, identifying closely with the parent charity. Margaret in particular was openly resistive to the organisation in her discursive and material practices. However Barbara perhaps presents the most interesting of the three cases. We

would argue that her reinterpretation of customer service and of charity might be interpreted as significantly subversive forms of resistance to wider processes of managerialism.

## **Conclusions**

While it is possible to discern differences between managers in their various identification with the organisation, volunteers and customers the common thread they share is their continuing negotiation of a range of categories in their identity work (see Adib and Guerrier, 2003). In their day to day working lives the women who manage charity shops frequently find themselves at the intersection of charitable and commercial worlds, of public and private (or domestic) worlds, of paid and unpaid worlds. As such they tread a tightrope of mediation. Such fracturing and juggling of identities is a common source of stress for charity shop managers. It also highlights the permeability of the boundaries of the workplace, as such knowledge and experiences gained outside the workplace combine with those gained at work in the identity projects of managers.

Many of the practices introduced to exert increased control (or governance) over shop floor staff are impacting upon both their purpose and identity, and indeed the identity of the whole organisation. In many senses the creeping managerialism taking place in charity retail organisations is a cause for concern. Evaluation of performance hinges on sales figures (and peripherally on the appearance of the shop floor). Such

managerialist interpretations of, and valuing of, practice renders invisible other interpretations of work, especially the material and discursive practice of ‘acting charitably’ narrated here by Barbara. Indeed we have identified some of the traits associated with feminine management styles across our cohort of charity shop managers, primarily that of the ‘caring manager’ (see Fondas, 1997). Our interviews highlighted managers’ (largely unconscious) attempts to close the hierarchical gap between themselves as managers and their volunteers. Charity shop managers are critically important in creating an appropriate atmosphere for volunteers (see also Whithear, 1999) but also for customers. An atmosphere which is, we would argue, closely connected to their gendered identities, characterised by flexibility, inclusivity and support, and in the case of volunteers of recognition of voluntary effort and sacrifice. Yet this ability to be flexible, create inclusive environments and respond to others’ needs is interpreted and valued through the language of improved customer service and ultimately profitability not leaving room for alternative interpretations of this work. Knights and Kerfoot (2004) might see this as a ‘masculinizing of femininity’. Our research suggests that the skills developed by shop managers are largely grounded in shop-floor practices and performances and are therefore elusive to managerialist techniques of control and evaluation, thus rendering them largely invisible at higher levels within the organisation.

While continued (managerialist) changes to the formation of these organisational spaces do question their scope to continue to act as ‘alternative spaces’ to traditional workplaces we do feel that all is not doom and gloom. While these managers are on relatively low salaries and much of their work appears to have been rendered invisible,

these spaces do offer opportunities for identity construction not offered by more commercial retail spaces. We would point to the continued importance of charity shops in creating spaces for sociality and belonging in the local community, spaces for the expression of social concern and spaces which continue to offer an important alternative to paid-only work environments.

Our research has highlighted the continual struggles over meaning within the organisation and, in this case, the meanings of ‘retail’ and of ‘charity’ which in themselves are highly subjective and contingent. Ironically senior management’s interpretations of what it means to be more professional (i.e. tighter control and standardisation) often serve to debase their very purpose in increasing profits. However, the translation of such head office talk into shop floor practice is problematic. It is our finding that managers and their teams of volunteers enact resistance to ‘head office requirements’ on all sorts of levels, specifically through their day to day shop floor practices but also through their (re)interpretation of the discourses of ‘charity’ and of ‘retail’ that circulate in charity retail organisational life.

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