

Home is Where the Work is
Women, Direct Sales, and Technologies of Gender
by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how direct selling organizations compel women to believe that direct selling is, among other things, centered on the needs of women. Drawing upon feminist interdisciplinary methodologies, this dissertation brings together qualitative, archival, and ethnographic materials to analyze direct selling through a technologies of gender framework. I argue that multi-level marketing direct selling companies (like Avon, Tupperware, Mary Kay, etc.) are able to turn belief into profits because they strategically tap into gender ideologies. I show that discursive technologies of gender coalesce with race and class discourses and are put to work by direct selling companies to construct a specific type of direct seller.

This dissertation attempts to unpack the complex technologies of gender that direct selling women engage with while constructing their identities as workers and women. I argue that the companies in this study deliberately tap into women's anxieties and desires to blend their perceived gender roles with their need for income. I find that direct selling companies are exceptional at branding their businesses as uniquely suited for women and that this branding hinges upon the construction of a direct sales imaginary. I argue that the direct sales imaginary taps into powerful discourses of race, class, and gender to market the American dream to women who are seeking out a space that is empowering and inclusive. Because the direct selling industry tends to see an increase in profits and recruitment during economic recessions, it is likely that the current economic situation has channeled even more women toward direct sales as a fallback for uncertain economic futures. While some women may be inclined to view direct sales as

an attractive employment alternative it is not a realistic means of supporting families during difficult economic times and this study might help some women make more informed decisions. Furthermore, this study brings to light how gender might be used to organize structural relationships between markets, people, and businesses.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son Devon Lamoreaux. Thank you for giving my life direction.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Business and Belief

When I was a child my mother sold Avon cosmetics while also working a fulltime job. I remember the excitement I would feel when new orders arrived at our home.

Sometimes, when I was good, my mother would allow me to play with her sample case.

To my young eyes this sample case was a treasure trove of tiny lipsticks and single-use blushes. I would carefully examine the various shades of lipstick and attempt to place them in order from lightest to darkest. When I was around ten years old, my mother would have me and my younger brother, who was eight, help her place catalogs into plastic baggies that could be hung onto door knobs. After we had bagged enough catalogs my brother and I would load as many bagged-up brochures we could fit onto the handlebars of our bicycles and ride out of our condominium complex into the nicer neighborhood across the street. In this typical middle-class suburban neighborhood we would toss Avon catalogs onto the carports and front porches of the homes we bicycled passed. We were supposed to hang the bags onto door handles, but left unsupervised, we decided to do things our way.

Memory and perception are funny things when you are a child because in my mind we had to deliver Avon catalogs *all the time* and *I hated delivering those catalogs*. I hated being responsible for my younger brother, I hated crossing the busy street into the nicer neighborhood, and I hated riding my bike for such a long time away from my home. In my mother's recollection we only did this a few times and instead she remembers

driving us kids through the neighborhood while we placed books onto doors. To me Avon was work; work that I did not care to do. My mother, a divorcee struggling to make extra income, likely never thought twice about having her children help. After all, Avon was a family business.

A few years later, when I was around fourteen years old, my mother left Avon to become a Pampered Chef consultant. Now, rather than delivering catalogs, I helped my mother hold home parties at other women's homes. In preparation for a party I would pack up my mother's kit of various cooking tools into our car and unload at the hostess's home. I helped unpack essential items and setup my mother's display, as well as pass around clipboards and pens to party guests. In general, my presence was praised by various women. "What a great assistant you have," they would tell my mother. While my brother and younger sister were left elsewhere, I was my mother's constant companion; I assisted her in parties and I accompanied her to sales meetings. Occasionally, I would even drum up new parties through my friends' mothers.

Flash forward almost fifteen years and I was again accompanying my mother, this time to the 2009 Avon National Leadership Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. As I sat around a large table with some of Avon's top sales executives and corporate employees I watched as nearly ten thousand women filed into the Paris Hotel ballroom. The ballroom was elaborately decorated and setup for a special gala dinner that would include education, entertainment, and inspiration. At one end of the ballroom stood a grand stage flagged by several oversized monitors. As the crowd of guests took their seats, the monitors glowed with the evening's theme and Avon's current slogan: "Now is the Time! Avon, *the* Company for Women!"

The Gala event proceeded with professional musical numbers, special guest speakers, new product and philanthropy promotions, as well as recognition for Avon's highest-earning saleswomen. The audience listened intently when the top-most successful representatives gave advice on setting and reaching high goals. Teary-eyed guests watched short films that described Avon's continued commitment to act as "good corporate citizens" through their donations to Avon's breast cancer foundation and charities to prevent domestic violence. The newest product lines along with their associated sales contests were introduced by corporate executives and representatives were reminded that "they are their own best customers."

Beyond the fanfare, this event helped to pull something out of these women: belief that Avon *is the* company for women. My mother while not uneducated or naïve, believed; she believed that she could be like the successful examples on that stage. She believed that through direct selling she could achieve financial freedom and become empowered. She believed this with Avon, with Jafra, with Pampered Chef, with Tupperware, with Beauty Control, with Gold Canyon Candles, with Premier Designs, and with even more companies than I can recall.

This dissertation, broadly, examines how direct selling organizations compel women to believe that direct selling is, among other things, centered on the needs of women. I argue that, by and large, multi-level marketing direct selling companies are able to turn these beliefs into profits because they strategically tap into gender ideologies. On the surface level, for example, at the Avon Leadership Conference women were encouraged to sample new products, participate in workshops for various skills training, and network with other representatives. Looking deeper, however, it was apparent that

women were engaging with multiple direct sales discourses and negotiating subjectivity as Avon representatives. Deeper still, many women were engaging with technologies of gender that construct what it means to be a modern successful (American) *woman*. Avon, like other direct selling companies, decisively employs various technologies of gender for their own economic ends. In general, this study attempts to unpack the complex technologies of gender that direct selling women engage with while constructing their identities as workers and women.

The Basics of Multi-Level Marketing Direct Sales

Direct selling has been part of both the informal and formal economy for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.¹ Direct selling organizations employ independent contractors who sell products outside of fixed retail locations through catalogs, internet, face-to-face, and/or home party sales. Direct selling allows the consumer to purchase directly from the company, via a distributor/consultant, a technique which reduces overhead costs for companies. In theory this savings is passed onto the consumer. In addition to the savings from general overhead costs, companies save in the form of managerial and employee tax measures because they do not traditionally employ their sales reps. Instead, all recruits are hired as independent contractors and as such they are told that they are “small business owners” in control of their very own franchise.

Another benefit of purchasing from a direct seller, as the story goes, is the ability to do one’s shopping in a comfortable location with the aid of a personal assistant

¹ According to the history of direct sales as written by the Direct Selling Association. See “History of Direct Selling,” direct selling 411, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.directselling411.com/about-direct-selling/history-of-direct-selling/>.

(distributor) who can take time with you, away from the hustle and bustle of retail shopping. One of the better known methods of direct sales is that of the home party. A home party involves the hostess inviting people from her personal network of friends, co-workers, and family members to come to her home for a special “spa treatment,” “fashion show,” or “make over” and so on (depending on the company). At the party the consultant will show the guests how to use their products in some form of hands-on demonstration with the idea that, after a simple demonstration, the guests will be compelled to purchase their goods. The consultant also attempts to book future parties and pitch the business opportunity to any potential new recruits, usually providing testimony about how positive their experiences with the company has been in the process.

All of the companies sampled for in this study follow the network marketing/multi-level marketing model of commission and leadership distribution, but not all direct selling companies are multi-level. Also, with the exception of Avon, all of the companies in this study utilize home party sales as their main sales method. In a multi-level marketing company when a consultant recruits a new person this new person will be “under” the original recruiter. As that new recruit’s most immediate person above them, referred to as their “upline,” they are responsible for ensuring that their new recruit has whatever tools they need for success (as in training, education, etc.). The original recruiter in this scenario might recruit several more people to form a team that they loosely supervise. This group is called their downline. If anyone in this downline group recruits a new person, this new person becomes a second generation downline member to the original recruiter, giving the new recruit two upline levels (a parent and grandparent if you will).

In multi-level marketing, upline consultants will earn commissions based on the amount of retail/wholesale sales volume achieved by their downline networks. Each company is different in how they denote level rankings and commission payouts but, for the sake of illustration, let's pretend that we have consultant X with a two level deep downline. Say that a company granted a 3% commission on any sales at least \$10,000 for the first-generation downline and a 6% commission for the second-generation downline. Assuming both downline levels made exactly \$10,000 each that would mean the company would have to pay consultant X a commission of \$900. Multi-level marketing rewards those who can duplicate themselves through continual downline recruitment.

The payout and organizational structure of multi-level marketing companies resembles that of a family tree in the shape of a pyramid. As we trace the tree upward it becomes narrower because there are fewer and fewer people occupying positions at the top, while the payouts increase exponentially as we move from bottom to top. Multi-level marketing companies deny that they operate as pyramid schemes, but there is a very fine (and vague) distinction between pyramid schemes and multi-level marketing companies (MLMs) that operate within the limits of the law (for further discussion, see Chapter 6).

It is important to keep in mind that home party direct selling operates through various *moral economies*. I define moral economies as relationships of exchange that are governed by cultural/social moral understandings of reciprocity and mutual obligation.² For example, one's idea of how to be a good friend might be governed by one's cultural/social/moral understanding of friendship. How does a moral economy work in

² Aihwa Ong examined moral economies that are based on unequal power and defined moral economy as "a web of unequal relationships of exchanged based on morality of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and protection." See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 199.

direct sales? One aspect of the moral economy in direct selling is party attendance. For example, when a new consultant joins a direct selling business she will hold a “launch” party, typically hosted by one of their friends or family members. At this launch party they will invite many people from their personal networks, urging them to come support their new business endeavor. The host of the party will also be advised to invite people from their own personal networks to help launch the new consultant’s business. Many women are familiar with home party sales and respond to party invites in different ways. I found that people often attend parties out of a sense of obligation and the desire to help their friend (either the hostess or the consultant). Likewise, if a party is booked from the hostess’s party she will likely be invited to her guest’s party and may feel obligated to return the favor of party attendance thereby reinforcing the reciprocal nature of the moral economy.

The second aspect of the moral economy in direct sales is built directly into the structure of parties themselves. To incentivize higher retail sales at home parties, hostesses will earn a discount or a number of “free” products depending on the total retail sales of her party. Consultants will frequently remind guests that the more they purchase the more free products the hostess will receive. Sometimes guests will feel obligated to purchase products that they might otherwise be uninterested in to help their hostess. If a guest does not have the money or is attempting to not make a purchase a consultant will try to convince her to do her own party with similar incentive tactics (i.e. getting free products, helping the host, etc.).

A third aspect of the direct sales moral economy that I observed is created between direct sellers of different companies. For example, I noted that sometimes direct

sellers from one company will build relationships with consultants from other companies. These consultants will host parties for each other and sometimes groups of consultants will host larger events at one person's home with several different companies being represented. In this way, consultants form reciprocal relationships with other companies' consultants in an attempt to further their own direct selling efforts. Here, the alliances built between consultants are dependent upon the moral sense of supporting other women in direct sales. These moral economies form the foundation of direct sales that contributes to the continued success of the industry.

Direct Selling Research

Direct selling organizations have drawn women into their ranks for well over a century, largely because most of direct selling labor is casual and can be done (somewhat) from inside of the home. Women's experiences in direct sales likely shares similarities to other types of home-based labor. Although scholars have examined women's experiences with other types of home-based labor (such as housework or piecework/homework), relatively few studies have focused on women working in direct sales.³ One of the few sources on direct selling is the foundational work by organizational

³ For accounts of various types of homework, historical, contemporary, and global see: Eileen Boris, *Home to Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eileen Boris and Cynthia Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); or Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prüggl, *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996). For a good background on women and housework labor see Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), and Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, (New York: Viking, 1989). For some basic information on women working from home in other professions see Debra L. Berke, "Coming Home Again: The Challenges and Rewards of Home-Based Self-Employment," *Journal of Family Issues*, (May 2003), 513-546; Deanna L. Sharpe, Joan M. Hermsen and Jodi Billings, "Gender Differences in Use of Alternative Full-Time Work Arrangements by Married Workers," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 31 (2002): 78-111.

sociologist Nicole Woolsey Biggart in *Charismatic Capitalism*.⁴ Biggart's work was one of the first studies to outline how direct selling organizations used discursive methods of control to manage their workforce and commercialize personal networks. Her study provides a good overview of the development of direct selling at the turn of the twentieth century and illustrates how the managerial logics of direct selling differ from that of traditional bureaucratic firms in that they stress nurturance and cooperation over market rationality.⁵ Importantly, Biggart argues that direct selling frequently relies on the role of a "charismatic leader" to elicit loyalty and labor from independent contractors who believe in the vision and rhetoric of their companies.

Similarly, "belief" and "emotion" in direct selling are the focus of a recent publication by sociologists Jamie L. Mullaney and Janet Hinson Shope, *Paid to Party: Working Time and Emotion in Direct Home Sales*.⁶ Mullaney and Shope examine how direct selling continues to grow and attract women, focusing on the tensions (and appeasement) of emotional labor and work/family balance. Through the use of their concept "emoting time," Mullaney and Shope determine that direct selling "attempts to transform the relationship between work and family through its reconfiguration of time and emotion."⁷ They conclude that direct selling continues to grow because of the

⁴ Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

⁵ Biggart suggests that direct selling organizational methods are "feminine" when compared to the economic rationality of other firms that would be cast as "masculine." See Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 91.

⁶ Jamie L. Mullaney and Janet Hinson Shope, *Paid to Party: Working Time and Emotion in Direct Home Sales* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

⁷ Mullaney and Shope, *Paid to Party*, 14.

industry's ability "to present both a narrative and a work model that tap into serious issues of work and family."⁸ Their study, however, does not delve into the discourses that construct such a narrative. Nor do they address the race, class, and gendered implications found within such discourses.

Historian Alison Clarke analyzes the history of Tupperware and the Tupperware Party within the context of modernity and consumerism.⁹ Clarke argues that gendered notions of hospitality drove the development and ultimate success of the direct selling companies like Tupperware. The direct selling industry believed that women would be more receptive to purchasing products from within the home from a sales person playing the role of a friend rather than that of a stranger. These companies were able to tap into already existent social networks and embedded markets and "thrived on the social obligation generated by women's networks and the impetus toward reciprocity."¹⁰

Clarke's nuanced approach to Tupperware's history adds complexity to an understanding of the shifting gender and class relations during the post-war era. Some have argued that during the late 1950s Tupperware became a symbol of a white middle-class domestic modernity. Clarke, however, argues that Tupperware also represented an escape from domesticity for some and flexible employment for others. In fact, Clarke suggests that home party sales were an empowering outlet for women because they

⁸ Mullaney and Shope, *Paid to Party*, 7.

⁹ Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Clarke, *Tupperware*, 83.

challenged prevalent gendered ideas of women's abilities as discerning consumers and as sales people. As Clarke noted:

Indeed the hostess party effectively inverted conventional sales wisdom, which posited the woman as a passive receptor of newly marketed merchandise. Instead it acknowledged housewives as capable sales recruits and discerning, powerful consumers, keen to explore an expanding array of modern consumer goods.¹¹

Rather than being dupes of fast-talking traveling salesmen, women could use their consumer knowledge to save money for their families through purchasing domestic necessities offered by Tupperware.

In Clarke's attempt to paint Tupperware as more than just a symbol for middle-class white suburban culture, she also suggests that Tupperware held transgressive potential because it afforded women of color, single mothers, and/or divorcees the ability to work at a time when their employment options were limited. However, anthropologist Susan Vincent found Clarke's evidence for the transgressive aspects of Tupperware less than convincing.¹² Directly contrasting Clarke, Vincent argues that today Tupperware is indeed a symbol of a "white, middle-class domestic femininity." Vincent situates her research on Tupperware between political economy and popular culture to evaluate the experiences of distributors. She finds that Tupperware's success lies in its liminal location between formal and informal market economies. Accordingly, Vincent warns

¹¹ Clarke, *Tupperware*, 85.

¹² She describes her doubts in the footnotes (14-16) noting that Clarke's examples do not necessarily prove what she is claiming. See Susan Vincent, "Preserving Domesticity: Reading Tupperware in Women's Changing Domestic, Social and Economic Roles," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40 (2003): 171-196.

that although Tupperware might offer a path into the workforce for some women it “can also facilitate their movement back into the domestic sphere.”¹³

Historian Beth Kreydatus interrogates the role of gender and feminism in the historical development of the Mary Kay cosmetic company.¹⁴ Kreydatus illustrates how the founder Mary Kay Ash created a company and corporate philosophy around the standards of a middle-class evangelical Christian femininity that “selectively appropriated and rejected elements of feminism.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Kreydatus argues that Mary Kay Ash’s business philosophy and practice “glorified rather than challenged gender norms.”¹⁶ In contrast, performance theorist Catherine Egley Waggoner theorizes that Mary Kay cosmetics is a representation of a feminine masquerade that holds some emancipatory potential for women through the aesthetic of excess.¹⁷

Some exceptional studies have examined the historical development of the beauty company Avon. For example, business historian Katina Lee Manko traces Avon’s trajectory from the late nineteenth century through the 1950s.¹⁸ Manko examines how Avon representatives and managers created a unique business that would shape the

¹³ Vincent, “Preserving Domesticity, 192.

¹⁴ Beth Kreydatus, ““Enriching Women’s Lives”: The Mary Kay Approach to Beauty, Business, and Feminism,” *Business and Economic History On-Line* 3 (2005), accessed March 3, 2009, <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2005/kreydatus.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁷ Catherine Egley Waggoner, “The Emancipatory Potential of Feminine Masquerade in Mary Kay Cosmetics,” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, (1999), 256-272.

¹⁸ Katina Lee Manko, ““Ding Dong! Avon Calling!”: Gender, Business, and Door-to-Door Selling, 1890-1955,” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2001), accessed October 15, 2012, <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/304690961?accountid=4485>.

culture of direct selling. Manko's detailed analysis of Avon reveals a reciprocal relationship between gender and business. Likewise, the work of Lindsey Feitz examines the history of Avon from 1954-2010. Feitz focuses on the global expansion of Avon and the marketing of United States domestic and gender ideologies abroad.¹⁹ Ara Wilson has also addressed women selling Avon in transnational locales and looks at Avon's entrance and spread inside Thailand. Wilson argues that Avon, like other direct sellers, "can serve to articulate goals and desires and narrate the possibilities for self-refashioning."²⁰ Ultimately Wilson outlines how direct selling companies mobilize the enthusiasm for entrepreneurship and tie it into women's empowerment discourses, self-help discourses, and neo-liberal discourses to frame direct sales work as a highly valued type of employment preferable to women.

Most of the available literature illustrates the various gendered aspects of direct selling. For example, a recent anthology edited by sociologists L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller brings together historical and contemporary research on what the authors call various types of "gender parties."²¹ This edited volume includes case studies ranging from Indian "kitty parties," to Mary Kay or Pampered Chef parties, to illegal counterfeit purse parties to examine links between labor, gender, and power. Throughout

¹⁹ Lindsey Feitz, "Democratizing Beauty: Avon's Global Beauty Ambassadors and the Transnational Marketing of Femininity, 1954-2010," (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2010), accessed September 5, 2013, <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/815403705?accountid=4485>. (815403705).

²⁰ See Ara Wilson, "The Empire of Direct Sales and the Marking of Thai Entrepreneurs," *Critique of Anthropology* 19 (1999): 401-422. And also Ara Wilson. *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

²¹ L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller, *Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011).

their work the authors emphasize that the party plan mutes women's labor and in some cases exploits women outright. Finally, Williams and Bemiller conclude with suggested ways that women can party with purpose or, rather, turn gender parties into gender activism because they are well suited for consciousness-raising.

Additionally, some studies have centered on the home party sales of adult sex-toy products and romance products. Martha McCaughey and Christina French examined the growth of the sex-toy party and explored the significance of the home party as it related to sexuality and sexual pleasure.²² With the exception of the product being sold, McCaughey and French found very little difference on the business-side of doing home party sales for sex-toys and other home party sales. They find, however, that the party itself and the presentation around women's sexuality are completely couched in discourses of heterosexual romance, which contribute to heteronormative ideas of sexuality and women's pleasure. Likewise, Dawn Heinecken examines the promotional materials related to sex-toy home parties. She notes that adult novelty marketing companies frequently use empowerment discourses, both sexual and economic, in recruiting and retaining distributors. Heinecken also observes that the discourses of empowerment are framed within heterosexual relationships and childbearing. Thus, Heinecken concludes that "rather than signaling the widespread acceptance of feminist

²² Martha McCaughey and Christina French, "Women's Sex-Toy Parties: Technology, Orgasm, and Commodification," *Sexuality & Culture* 5 (2001): 77-96.

values within larger culture [this discourse] actually helps to normalize women's subordinate status at home and in the public work sphere."²³

Overall, although the literature on direct selling covers many different topics, studies often focus either on single companies or they lack qualitative accounts of women's experience as direct sellers. Additionally, only a few of these examples even address race and class, and most overlook the significance of whiteness in shaping women's experiences in direct sales. Furthermore, while some of the literature acknowledges the role that discourse plays in advertising direct sales, few have looked deeper to extrapolate how these discourses might be shaping women's lives beyond recruitment. These gaps illustrate the salience of my research, which examines the role of discourse in shaping the experience of women in direct sales, shaping how women see themselves as workers, and shaping how women see the direct selling industry.

The direct selling industry has remained a successful business model for over a century and continues to expand into various global localities. As of 2007 the industry reported 30.8 billion dollars in retail sales with a sales force of 15.2 million in the United States and 68 million worldwide.²⁴ The direct selling industry tends to increase profits during economic recessions and it is likely that the current economic situation will channel even more women toward direct sales as a fallback for uncertain employment

²³ Dawn Heineken, "Sexed Appeals: Network Marketing Advertising and Adult Home Novelty Parties," *Studies in Popular Culture* 31(2009): 23-44, 24.

²⁴ According to an industry survey compiled in 2009 by the Direct Selling Association. Reported in "Industry Statistics," DSA, accessed March 28, 2011, <http://www.dsa.org/research/industry-statistics>.

futures.²⁵ Without a doubt, numerous upline (or potential upline) supervisors, armed with the promises of limitless income opportunity, freedom and empowerment, stand poised to “share their business” with the next woman who crosses their path. However, while some women may be inclined to view direct sales as an attractive employment alternative it is not a realistic means of supporting families during difficult economic times.²⁶ Thus, the findings in this study are timely and might help some women make more informed decisions about joining or not joining a direct selling organization.

Utilizing interdisciplinary methods I conducted twenty-two interviews with current and former consultants from ten different direct selling companies. I attended sales meetings, recognition events, and numerous home parties – I even hosted a couple of home parties myself. I closely read company websites, promotional literature, and archival sources. I analyzed some of discourses of direct selling through an understanding of technologies of gender. *Technologies* in this sense denotes the disciplining processes that put discourses and ideologies to work for specific purposes. In this research I ask: how are technologies of gender put to work by direct selling companies? How do the discourses of direct selling shape women’s experience of direct sales? How do these same discourses shape their expectation of the direct selling industry? How are technologies of gender implicated in the production and deployment of other discourses of race and class? Do the discourses of direct selling perpetuate gender, race, and class hegemonies? And how do women’s experiences align (or not) with the promises of direct sales?

²⁵ Eilene Zimmerman, "Direct Sales as a Recession Fallback," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2009, BU11.

²⁶ Ibid.

In the following chapters I attempt to answer these questions and explore the themes that emerge from this research. In the following chapter, Chapter 2, I provide the theoretical and methodological framework for this research. I outline how a technologies of gender framework allows me to get at the inner-workings of discourses as tools for managing workers. In this chapter I also go into greater detail about my specific methods. Chapter 3, *Building the Business of Women*, compares the historical development of Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay because these companies laid the foundation for the many companies that would follow. Significantly, I show how these companies not only cast themselves as companies for women but also how “woman” was a referent to white middle-class women. In Chapter 4, *Origin Stories and The Logics of Being Your Own Boss*, I describe the technologies of control that work to organize direct sellers in a way that minimizes the necessity for direct management. This chapter outlines some of the central tenants of the direct sales imaginary. All together, these origin stories shape the ways in which direct sellers think about their roles as consultants in their companies. In Chapter 5, *In the Service of Sales: Gender and the Direct Sales Imaginary*, I discuss the major themes of the direct sales imaginary and how women in the industry are shaped by this discourse. In Chapter 6, *Fantastical Thinking and the (Failed) Promises of Direct Sales*, I examine the fragile space between the myths and realities of the direct sales imaginary. I find that the direct sales imaginary taps into powerful discourses of race, class, and gender to market the American dream to women who are seeking out a space that is empowering and inclusive. Yet, the realities of direct sellers’ experience indicate that potential recruits may need to carefully consider their options before going into the

industry. Lastly, Chapter 7, *Conclusion: Empowering Profits*, explores the overall findings of this dissertation and points to future research.

Chapter 2

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Women are *essential* to the continued success of the direct selling industry as they form the industry's core base of both consumers and distributors. As such, a cursory view of direct selling websites reveals how companies market to women through the use of gender and discourse. However, gender ideologies are never constituted in isolation from race and class, and it is therefore also evident that direct selling organizations make use of specific gender, race, and class ideologies and discourses to market their products and businesses to their base. To approach this complex web of discursive and material relationships I draw upon a foundation of interdisciplinary feminist research from various areas such as technology studies, history, political economy, sociology, and anthropology. Additionally, in this dissertation I utilize interdisciplinary qualitative methods in order to provide additional depth and complexity in my analysis. This chapter provides an outline of my framework and methods.

Gender and Intersectionality

This study is grounded in feminist epistemologies and methodologies. Feminist research is most generally designed around locating and examining various aspects and relationships formed/informed by *gender*.¹ Gender is defined as the learned practices and

¹ In fact, Evelyn Nakano Glenn remarks that gender, as concept and mode of analysis, is “the closest thing we [feminist scholars] have to a unifying concept in feminist studies, cutting across the

activities of everyday life that defines various patterns of social arrangement.² Gender operates at multiple levels: individual, social, institutional, symbolic, and material. Gender ideology, for example, shapes the assumptions that assign value and meaning to the perceived differences between men and women. Such meanings are then fed back into expectations and representations of gender in a self-perpetuating loop. The relationships of gender are not fixed, however. Researchers must analyze the relationships of gender as being constantly in flux and historically constituted and situated. As feminist historian Evelyn Nakano Glenn explains:

[Gender] provides an overarching rubric for looking at historical, cultural, and situational variability in definitions of womanhood and manhood, in meanings of masculinity and femininity, in relationships between men and women, and in the extent of their relative power and political status.³

Furthermore, because gender also organizes relationships of power, feminist research often attempts to deconstruct gender and disrupt its current configurations.⁴

various disciplines and theoretical schools that make up the field.” See Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "The Social Construction and Institutionalization of Gender and Race: An Integrative Framework," In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferre, Judith Lorber and Beth B. Hess (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1999), 5.

² For example, as Nina Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen Mohun outline, gender operates "not only by words and gestures, but also in material ways: by wearing baseball caps or skirts, ties or jewelry; by tinkering with cars or baking cookies; by shaving with particular colors of razors." See Nina Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen Mohun, *Gender & Technology* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press 2003), 4. See also R. W. Connell, *Gender* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002).

³ Glenn, "The Social Construction and Institutionalization of Gender and Race," 5.

⁴Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber describes feminist research as disruptive in that it challenges the "knowledge claims by those who occupy privilege positions." See Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, "Feminist Research: Exploring the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method," in *Handbook of Feminist Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 1-26, 3.

Gender relationships build upon and affect the relationships constituted by race and class. Hence, I find that feminist research is strengthened when it utilizes the analytics of *intersectionality*. Intersectionality is both a methodology and a theory that views race, gender, and class not as discrete categories but as relational markers that work simultaneously to constitute situated standpoints.⁵ Likewise, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins describes intersectional analysis as an approach that begins from a particular point of origin, working its way up to investigate various “connections among what are deemed separate dimensions.”⁶ Furthermore, Glenn adds that race/class/gender are all relational “concepts whose construction involves *both representational and social structural process* in which *power* is a constitutive element.”⁷

Race on the Line, by historian Venus Green, serves as exemplary feminist research that utilizes an intersectional framework.⁸ In this compelling and complex study, Green focuses on the ways in which ideologies of race and gender worked within the development and expansion of telephone companies. The positions available for women within telephone companies during the late nineteenth century were contingent upon the belief that young white women were ideal or model workers because of their docile and civil nature. Green explores the ways that race, class, and gender affected telephone operators differentially. Green notes that the telephone companies hampered women’s

⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139-167.

⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 278.

⁷ Glenn, “The Social Construction and Institutionalization of Gender and Race: An Integrative Framework,” 9.

⁸ Venus Green, *Race on the Line* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

ability to control their labor and working conditions while also reifying ideologies that saw black women as not employable because “the telephone industry constructed an image of white womanhood that excluded black women.” This also, “simultaneously inhibited the development of a feminist working-class consciousness among white women.”⁹ Likewise, Green finds that the white woman as telephone operator “represented an idealization of white women that entailed demure and ‘ladylike’ behavior, commanding only the highest reverence,” adding that at the time it was believed that “black women, of course, could never be revered as ladies.”¹⁰ By excluding black women from this line of work, companies were able to sell an image of telephone work as dignified and not factory-like, appealing towards middle-class aspiring women.

Political Economy and “Home”

Feminist research that addresses questions of political economy provides a useful framework. Feminist political economy scholarship might originate in different disciplines but many examine the interconnections between economics, gender, and labor. As such, a political economy framework examines economics in relation to politics, acknowledging the powerful influence that politics has in “production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.”¹¹ Because economics, from a political economy standpoint, are treatable as a sub-set of society and social relationships, the political organization of a society will determine individuals’ economic roles. For

⁹ Green, *Race on the Line*, 3.

¹⁰ Ibid, 62.

¹¹ See Brian Murphy, “Feminist Political Economy,” *Inter Pares Occasional Paper* 4 (2004): 4.

example, feminist researcher Maria Mies describes the nuclear family as an entity, authorized and enforced via the state (political), which exploits the reproductive work of woman (as housewife). This exploitation is the very foundation for the process of capital accumulation.¹²

A feminist political economy approach attempts to dissolve “the dichotomies between work and family, production and reproduction, and gender and class.”¹³ As such, researchers from this perspective look at the interactions of gender, race, sexuality, and class in addressing the structural, institutional, and social relationships to power. Furthermore, feminist political economy scholarship illustrates the unequal global economic relationships that contribute to gender-based labor and power divisions between and within nations.¹⁴ Importantly, this area of scholarship continues to problematize models and analyses that are based upon separate spheres ideology and/or male breadwinner/female housewife binary because these gendered relationships of labor and power were always historically contextualized by race and class.¹⁵

¹² Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 31.

¹³ See Ellen Mutari, Heather Bousey, and William Fraher, *Gender and Political Economy: Incorporating Diversity into Theory and Policy* (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1997), 9.

¹⁴ See for example, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987); Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*.

¹⁵ See for example, Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

The desire to transcend the (imagined) separate worlds of work and home drives many into direct selling or other home-based labor. While the literature on women as direct sellers is limited, there is a good amount of literature available about women who labor inside the home (mostly as homeworkers).¹⁶ Direct selling is likely to share many characteristics of other types of homework and the discourses surrounding the “home” are comparable. The home is a central figure in my research, both as a conceptual space and a physical space; as such it is important to briefly problematize and historicize the concept of *home*. Many accounts of homework are heavily mediated by Western discourses of home that are founded on a separation of *home* from *work*. It is important to recognize that the separation of the public space of labor “work” from a private place of so-called non-work “home” is neither globally nor historically universal.¹⁷ To assume a division of home and work as non-overlapping spheres also neglects variations of practices along class and racial axes. Colonial as well as neocolonial relationships, aided by globalization, have projected Western images of ‘home’ and ideological divisions of labor onto non-Western localities.¹⁸ In some instances, enforcing Western conceptions of “home” becomes a tool for furthering colonization. Mino Moallem explains that “the concept of home is extremely important in the context of civilizational imperialism and

¹⁶ For accounts of various types of homework, historical, contemporary, and global see: Eileen Boris, *Home to Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eileen Boris and Cynthia Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prügl, *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift* (New York: Viking, 1989).

¹⁷ See Mimi Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women* (Boston: South End Press, 1988); and Eileen Boris, *Home to Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

nation-state building” because it is from this location that new gendered subjects emerge.¹⁹

For the purposes of this study, I adhere to an understanding of home as a site of both production and reproduction that can be either or both public and private. As such, it is necessary to keep in mind that home has always been a site for work, whether it be so-called productive labor (e.g. labor for subsistence, trade, or cash economies) or reproductive labor (e.g. cooking, cleaning, raising children, etc.).²⁰ In the United States, home and work did not signal mutually exclusive gendered domains until late into industrialization.²¹ The romanticized Victorian ideology of separate spheres functioned as an organizing structure for middle-class and upper-class whites but it relied heavily on the labor of lower-class women and women of color.²² In fact, the ability to remove one’s self from “unnecessary labor” by delegating it to people of lower classes was a tool for middle-class and upper-class women to display their (and their husband’s) class status as part of conspicuous consumption.²³ In this sense, even among highly idealized divisions of labor, paid labor is never completely divorced from the home: white homes were the site for other women’s paid labor and piecework. For immigrant women, lower-class

¹⁹ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 49.

²⁰ Boris, *Home to Work*.

²¹ Stephanie Coontz outlines this point excellently in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Also discussed in Abramovitz, *Regulating the Lives of Women*.

²² Abramovitz. See also Mary Ryan. *Cradle of the Middle Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²³ See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912 [1899]).

white women, and women of color, such labor was a strategy to earn a living from inside the home.²⁴

Additionally, reproductive labor, for which women generally bear the responsibility, takes place inside of the home; yet for the most part it is not considered *work*. Because women's reproductive labor has been so devalued vis-a-vis wage labor, a problem arises when women are engaged in paid labor at the location of their home: women's paid labor is conflated with reproductive labor and is treated as such--it is ignored, made invisible, and devalued.²⁵ Hence, it is important to remember that home is and *always will be* a site of work and that neither paid nor unpaid labor is inherently of more value.

As I have noted, homework's invisibility is directly linked to its relationship with other gendered work of the home. For example, Boris and Prügl find that "waged labor at home has shared the invisibility of housework: both have belonged to a larger gendered structuring of employment in which occupations, as well as the processes and places of labor, become designated either male or female."²⁶ Indeed, gender is so inextricably linked with homework that homework might be said to construct gender as much as gender constructs homework. The end result is a situation ripe for exploitation. As Chandra Mohanty comments:

What allows this work to be so fundamentally exploitative as to be invisible as a form of work are ideologies of domesticity, dependency, and (hetero)sexuality,

²⁴ Boris, *Home to Work*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Eileen Boris and Elisabeth Prügl, *Homeworkers in Global Perspective: Invisible No More* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

which designate women . . . as primarily housewives/mothers and men as economic supporters/breadwinners. Homework capitalizes on the equation of home, family, and patriarchal and racial/cultural ideologies of femininity/masculinity with work.²⁷

Homework is acknowledged by feminist scholars as being deeply embedded within gendering processes. For example, Prügl comments that “home-based work provides an ideal terrain for an exploration . . . to shed light on gender, constructions of femininity and masculinity, in the global arena”.²⁸ Similarly, Boris and Daniels observe that homework is a structuring tool, enforcing gender roles both inside and outside of the home. Hence, my study seeks to understand how direct sales, as a type of homework, is implicated in the gendering process and to what ends.

Technologies of Gender

In this research I examine direct selling organizations as using technologies of gender to produce gendered experiences. These gendered experiences, in turn, are crucial to the maintenance of direct sales’ central logics and the direct sales imaginary (described in the following chapter). But *technology* (or technologies) is a complex concept used by scholars to denote a myriad of institutional and social phenomena. In this research, technology is more than tools, machines, or artifacts. Feminist researchers Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert provide a useful definition, suggesting that technology is “an

²⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, 159.

²⁸ Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 19.

integrated system of programmed structures, organized mechanisms of management and control, and processes of production and reproduction.”²⁹ Those who deploy advanced technologies of gender frameworks draw heavily from philosopher Michel Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self.”³⁰ For Foucault, technologies of the self are the processes, techniques, and practices of everyday life through which people police or monitor their behaviors and actions, to present a self that appears fixed and unified. The process of constituting one’s self in this way is made invisible and naturalized through various discursive relationships of power. Building upon this concept, feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis describes technologies of gender as being symbolically representative, but derived from “various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life.”³¹

On the one hand, technologies of gender can be viewed as technologies that are applied to the physical body to produce gender (or rather gendered bodies). For example, feminist science scholar Anne Balsamo illustrates how specific medical technologies have “materially redesigned” bodies to produce (and enhance) gendered bodies.³² Balsamo interrogates the technologies of female body building, reproduction, and internet

²⁹ Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc., 1990).

³¹ Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 2.

³² Anne Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 21.

communications. She finds that in her case studies there are various material and discursive technologies working to construct male and female bodies, which are presented as natural (both the bodies and the technologies). On the other hand, technologies of gender need not describe the use of physical technological equipment (like medical equipment) nor describe specific actions upon a physical body (as in the case of body building). Instead, as sociologist Katherine Luke observes in her study on the relationship between binge-drinking and sexual assault, technologies of gender work as a part of gender scripting for college-age men and women.³³ Luke argues that these technologies of gender are evident in women's dialogues and may influence experiences of sexual violence that are frequently attributed to heavy drinking. Here, technologies of gender shape the ways in which college-age women access their own risk and responsibility through their discursive cultural messages about women.

METHODS

Data Collection: Recruitment

I had originally planned to limit my recruitment to five different companies with the goal of recruiting five consultants from each. However, recruiting several participants within the same organization proved to be difficult. Luckily, my mother suggested that I attend a meeting for a local network marketing group, "SEVEN." SEVEN, which stands for "Supporting and Empowering the Vision of Entrepreneurial Networking," is a group

³³ Katherine Luke, "Sexual Violence Prevention and Technologies of Gender among Heavy-Drinking College Women," *Social Service Review* 83 (2009), 79-109.

that meets once a week at various locations all around the metropolitan Phoenix area.³⁴ Most of its members are direct selling although they do allow/support membership for women from other types of home-based businesses (e.g. real estate, financial planning, etc.). At meetings, members begin with a quick introductory pitch (called a commercial) about the companies they represent and then go into some type of lesson/advice geared mostly toward direct selling.

In an effort to recruit study participants I attended three SEVEN meetings during the time period of July 2011 to October 2011. At the meetings I explained to the attendees that I was doing a study and invited their participation in an interview. I also collected business cards to email the attendees with my official invitation letter. Thankfully, many women at SEVEN were happy to participate in my study. During interviews I would ask if the consultants would also share my invitation for participation with other members of their downline/upline networks. From these initial interviews my recruitment proceeded in a snowball fashion. Although I was originally hesitant to recruit women from too many different companies, I feel that it allowed me get a better base for comparisons across the industry. In fact, one of the most surprising aspects of the interviewing process was the lack of variation among the participants. Regardless of the company that they represented, the uniformity of their narratives about direct selling became one of the driving threads of this research.

³⁴ Information about this group can be found at their website. See “Seven,” accessed September 5 2011, <http://www.s-e-v-e-n.org>.

Interviews

Between July 2011 and February 2013 I conducted twenty-two semi-structured in-depth interviews with women representing ten different direct selling organizations. Interviews usually lasted around two hours. The interview questions were designed to allow women to construct a narrative of their experiences with direct selling. These questions also directed women to describe how they conceptualized direct selling and how they felt about it in relation to other roles that they felt they had. All of the participants were happy to share information about their companies with me and many tried to invite me to other events (such as sales meetings, business opportunity meetings, home parties, etc.). Not surprisingly, a few of my participants made attempts at recruiting me as well.

Most of the interviews took place inside of the participants' homes. To make my participants feel comfortable I took a casual approach to the interview processes and allowed the consultant to guide the direction of the conversation, redirecting back to my questions when necessary. Approaching the interviews in this manner allowed women to attend to other duties if they needed (like childcare) and take their time in telling me about their lives. Additionally, this allowed me to see their workspace (which they would show me during the interview process) as well as see the products that they were selling (because they wanted to show me). Other interviews took place in coffee shops. I took notes during all the interviews in addition to recording them with the participants' permission. These interviews were later transcribed for analysis.

Ethnography

In July of 2009 I attended Avon's National Leadership Conference held in Las Vegas, Nevada. I also attended an Avon President's Club luncheon later that same year. As a guest at these events I simply observed what was taking place and later recorded field notes for my research. I was a guest at a Mary Kay Sales meeting in December of 2012. As a guest I participated in a facial/makeup lesson and then I observed the remainder of the meeting, taking notes the entire time. Growing up in direct sales I have attended countless home parties (and sales meetings) but as part of this research, during the period of July 2011 to July 2012, I attended and participated in five home parties for the following companies: Arbonne, Pampered Chef, Premier Designs, Signature Home Styles, and Miche Bags (in that order). I also hosted a Pampered Chef party at my own home. At home parties I would inform the guests that I was doing research and that I would be taking notes and possibly asking questions, but because my research goals centered on the consultants I did not solicit interviews from party guests. I paid close attention to the physical labor that went into the making of a home party and the scripting that consultants would use during their demonstrations. I took extensive notes based on my observations of how consultants attempted to sell products and recruit others. I also took notes on the catalogs and brochures I could not keep. When I hosted a party I was reflexive in my field notes and tried to record my experience as both researcher and participant.

Archival Research

For this dissertation I was able to analyze data from the digital Avon Historical Archive hosted at the Hagley Museum and Library.³⁵ Although digitized versions of archival material might not satisfy the senses like physical archival materials, I was grateful to have access to these invaluable texts.³⁶ The digital Avon Historical Archive contains downloadable images of both products and scanned documents. These documents include company newsletters, catalogs, and advertisements. The entries in the archive begin in the late 1890s and reach into the 2000s.

I began my research in the archive by reading all of the entries from 1905-1920 and taking notes on what things stood out, paying close attention to how gender was discussed (or not). I found that the CPC/Avon “Outlook” newsletter, which was a monthly newsletter from corporate managers to sales consultants, was the best place to focus my research attention. This newsletter was a space for management to discuss their expectations of their employees by showcasing short stories on successful agents. Management also printed letters that they received from consultants as “Notes from the Field.” These notes, the advertisements, and the articles contained within the newsletters provided a rich source of data for examining the relationship between women and a direct selling company. The newsletters ranged in page length from a few pages to over thirty. I performed a close read on sixty newsletters and examined others when necessary,

³⁵ The Hagley Museum and Library holds several physical and digitized archives. The Avon Historical Archives can be found at <http://www.hagley.org/library/exhibits/avon>.

³⁶ Historian Alexis E. Ramsey finds that “being physically with archived objects allows for a level of intimacy with the collection.” See Alexis E. Ramsey, “Viewing the Archives: The Hidden and the Digital,” in *Working in the Archives*, ed. Alexis E. Ramsey, Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 85.

attempting to read a different month per year where available. I was also reflexive on thinking about the archive as a complete source of data. Archivists make decisions on how much/what to digitize and make available, because digitizing is expensive and time consuming, meaning that it is important to remember that “the digital archive is just as, *if not more*, created than traditional archives.”³⁷ Archived material is a valuable resource for examining patterns and change overtime but the archive itself can only give glimpses into the past.

Texts

According to many participants in this study, their leading source of interaction with their companies is through their websites. Direct selling organizations use their websites to disseminate information about their companies, recruit new consultants, provide training for consultants, and generate product sales. Additionally, companies use their websites as the main method for consultants to place their orders. During the initial stages of this research I examined numerous different direct selling webpages and took notes on any repeated themes.

Another important text featured on many company websites are success stories or testimonials from consultants who have “made it.” Through the use of success stories in promotional materials, companies illustrate potential futures for hopeful consultants. These success stories exemplify company ideals and construct narratives for representatives to emulate. Although companies vary slightly in the success stories they feature, the stories all seem to follow the same formulaic path: a woman is introduced to

³⁷ Ramsey, “Viewing the Archives: The Hidden and the Digital,” 88.

a product/company while attending a home party, she needed flexible work to care for her family obligations, she might have been skeptical at first but took a chance and was amazed at how quickly she was successful, her success helped her reach financial goals, *but most of all* she is grateful for the personal development and friendships that she has gained from her experience.

In the course of this research I was able to obtain eight issues of *Empowering Women* from one of my study participants. *Empowering Women* is a national publication that, according to their website, is “designed to inform, motivate and inspire individuals who are interested in supplementing their income and empowering their lives.”³⁸ It is published by VideoPlus Publishing, a publishing/marketing company that specializes in direct sales marketing, “branding,” and creating promotional DVDs for recruitment purposes. *Empowering Women* focuses on companies that utilize the home party system of sales. Each monthly issue spotlights one direct sales company and provides details about the company’s history, products, incentive programs, philanthropy programs, and portraits of successful representatives. Each issue also contains general articles about the direct selling industry, covering themes such as advice from industry experts, industry (self-help) books of interest, home-office solutions, travel destinations, advice on throwing home parties, and fashion advice.

Population

Over the course of this research I conducted 22 interviews with women who at one point were working in direct sales. Six of the women in this study were no longer

³⁸ “About,” Empowering Women, accessed March 2010, www.empoweringwomen.com.

active with their companies. The participants lived in the general Phoenix area, with most living in the large suburban cities of Mesa or Chandler. The women ranged in age from 24-66 years old with most participants in the range of 28-42. All but five study participants were married and only four of my sample did not have children. Of those who had children, a little over half had children still living at home with many being under the age of ten. Household income ranged widely for the study participants from \$12,000 to \$250,000 a year. Only four the women in this study had household income below \$50,000 with the median income being \$77,500. During the interview process I asked the participants to describe their “race” and asked if they felt they belonged to a class (which one). One of respondents described herself as black while one other described herself as African-American and one other as Hispanic and one as mixed Asian. The rest (18) of my participants described their race as white or Caucasian. The respondent whose household income was \$250,000 described herself as upper class while the rest of the participants answered as being middle class (regardless of their income levels).

The generalizability of this study might be limited by its small sample size. However, I believe that lack of variation in responses does indicate a generalizable pattern of interaction between direct selling discourses and women. Additionally, although this study addresses gender I chose to only interview and examine the experiences of women. Because this dissertation aims at unpacking how direct selling companies market the industry to women specifically, men were excluded from the research design. Men do work in direct selling, although in lower numbers, but it seems that they are funneled into different types of companies that do not use the same sales

methods (home party). While much could be said about the gendering of different companies, those questions are beyond the scope of this research.

Companies

The women in this study represented several different companies. The following is a brief description of the sampled companies:

- Arbonne: is a skincare company that began in 1975 in Switzerland. Arbonne also carries makeup and health supplements which are “botanical based.” Their slogan is “Beauty from the Inside Out.”
- Avon: is a cosmetic and beauty company. Avon’s history will be discussed in detail in the next two chapters. Avon’s slogan is: “Avon, *the* Company for Women.”
- Cabi: is a designer clothing line “sold in a relaxed home environment by a trained style expert.”
- Close to My Heart: is a stamp and scrapbooking company that holds parties in which guests will learn how to make a scrapbook page or memorable card that they can keep.
- Herbalife: is a health and wellness company that provides nutritional supplements. They also specialize in weight-loss shakes.
- Lia Sophia: is a jewelry company that, according to their website, is “dedicated to connecting women to their dreams.”
- Pampered Chef: sells kitchen and cookware. At home parties guests are able to use the kitchen supplies to cook a recipe with their consultant.

- Premiere Designs: is a high fashion jewelry company much like Lia Sophia. Christianity plays an important role in their business as they claim to be founded on “Biblical Principles.”
- Miche: is a purse company. This is a newer multi-level marketing that sells designer quality purses covers that can be used with the same base.
- Mary Kay: is a cosmetic and skincare company whose slogan is “Enriching Women’s Lives.” This company will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

Data Analysis: Situational Analysis and Discourse Analysis

To address the complex relationship between women, direct selling organizations, and discourse, I utilized a grounded theory and situational analysis approach. This approach provided a qualitative means to locate and “represent all of the major discourses related to the situation of interest.”³⁹ Situational analysis works by visually mapping the entire *situation* through situational maps that include abstract situational maps/matrixes, social worlds/arena maps, and positional maps. This process allows the researcher to visually represent the various discursive and material elements that form a constitutive context that situates one’s subject in action. In other words, as Clarke notes, “the fundamental assumption [of situational analysis] is that everything in the situation *both constitutes and affects* most everything else in the situation in some way(s).”⁴⁰

³⁹ Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 175.

⁴⁰ Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis*, 72.

The data for a situational analysis can come from phenomenological sources, but also sites of visual and narrative culture, which allows for the analysis of complex situations. I constructed several situational maps at the beginning stages of my research. These maps served as valuable research aids in drawing out the relationships between various elements. For example, I began by using Clarke's situational matrix (see fig. 2.1) to understand what elements were constitutive of the situation of "recruitment" as well see the relationships between these elements. The situational matrix with "recruiting women into direct sales" at its center reveals that simple answers, such as the notion that women need flexible employment, cannot begin to explain why women join direct selling companies. Instead, as illustrated by the matrix below, several discursive and material elements affect both the reasons that women join and the very way that women are recruited. The table that follows (see table 2.1) is an example of an ordered abstract map that I developed to examine the relationships between the elements from the situational matrix.

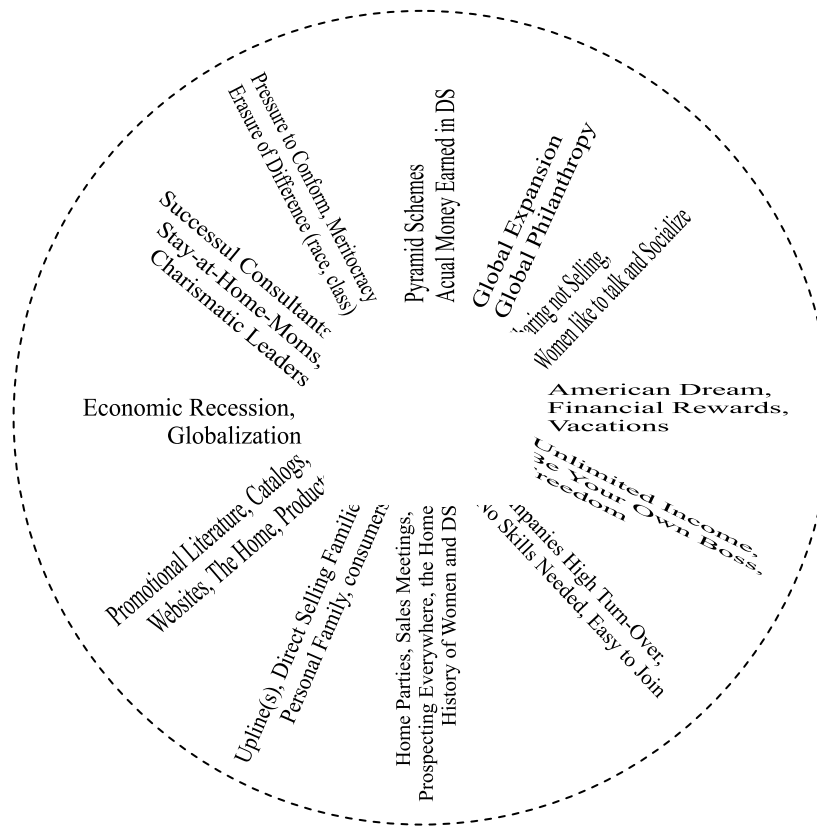


Figure 2.1 Situational Matrix of Recruiting Women into Direct Sales

Table 2.1 Ordered Abstract Situational Map of “Recruiting Women into Direct Sales”

<u>Individual Human Elements/Actors</u> Sales Mangers (Recruiters), Husbands, Women (as Potential Recruits), Direct Sale Founders	<u>Nonhuman Elements/Actants</u> Promotional Literature, Representations of Direct Sellers, Multi-Network Marketing Structure
<u>Collective Human Elements/Actors</u> Uplines/Downlines, Families/Children, Customers, Direct Selling “Families”	<u>Implicated/Silent Actors/Actants</u> Families, Women’s personal networks, Producers of Goods, Global Networks of Distribution
<u>Discursive Constructions of Individual and/or Collective Human Actors</u> Reps as Entrepreneurs/”Business Owners,” “Stay at Home” Moms, Traditional Corporations as Cold and Uncaring, Separation of Work/Home, Charismatic Leaders, Direct Selling Companies As Families, Image of Successful Consultant (White, Middle-Class)	<u>Discursive Constructions of Nonhuman Actants</u> Good Corporate Citizens, Financial Rewards/Unlimited Income, Direct Selling Enriches Women’s Lives, Empowering Women
<u>Political/Economic Elements</u> Recession, Low Investment to Start, Who can Afford to be Direct Sellers, Feminism	<u>Sociocultural/Symbolic Elements</u> The American Dream, Freedom, Be Your Own Boss, Faith/Evangelism
<u>Temporal Elements</u> Direct Sales and Modernity, Origin Stories (changes over time), Women’s Movement, Time Working	<u>Spatial Elements</u> The Home, Working from Everywhere, Conventions, Sales Meetings
<u>Major Issues/Debates</u> Pyramid Schemes? Money Earned (or lost), Husband’s Support?	<u>Related Discourses</u> Women and Work, Domesticity, Women as Caretakers, Naturalization of Failure, Sharing Not Selling
	<u>Other Key Elements</u> Emotional Labor of Parties and Sales Work, Pressures to Conform, Exploitation of Personal Networks, Moral Economies

Another method I utilize for this study is that of discourse analysis. Discourse is defined as a system of ideas, beliefs, and practices which discursively constitute subjects

(and subjectivities).⁴¹ Discourses are temporally and historically situated and build upon themselves generationally even while being dynamic and constantly changing. Discourse can be read in texts or people's utterances, but they are also readable in visual data or physical behaviors/practices. Discourse analysis is also useful for my research because it allows for a critical level of complexity. Gannon and Davies describe discourses as "complex interconnected webs of modes of being, thinking, and acting;" through discourse analysis we are able to – at least momentarily – untangle such webs to illustrate who/where knowledge is being created and for what purpose(s).⁴² Feminists use discourse analysis as a means to restructure "discursive regimes of truth about essential qualities of women."⁴³ Adele Clarke argues that discourse analysis is an invaluable tool because it provides a means to understand how we use "discourses [in] our daily practices of subject making (including the resistant)."⁴⁴ Furthermore, discourse analysis reveals how discourses operate on multiple levels at multiple sites.⁴⁵

Through my discourse analysis I examine questions about knowledge production: Who is creating these discourses? What are the consequences? How are people accommodating this discourse? How are they resisting or perpetuating it? Direct sellers are saturated with the discourses of direct sales from the moment they show interest in

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1977).

⁴² Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies, "Postmodern, Poststructural, and Critical Theories," In *Handbook of Feminist Research*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007): 71-106, 82.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Clarke, *Situational Analysis*, 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 158.

the company. These companies are extremely effective at mobilizing the enthusiasm for entrepreneurship, linking it with women's empowerment discourse, self-help discourses, and neo-liberal discourses in combination with gender ideologies to construct a unique style of marketing strategies and branding. Hence, in this dissertation I apply discourse analysis for unpacking the layers of meaning in complex situations.

Chapter 3

BUILDING THE BUSINESSES OF WOMEN

Our work – every minute of it is appreciated and where we know this, it makes our work easy. It is the only work for women who want to be independent and yet self-respecting and dignified – Mrs. Aurelia Ackley, CPC/Avon Representative, 1921

Introduction

Women constitute 85% of the estimated 15.2 million direct selling distributors worldwide today. Considering that more than half of all American adults have purchased some product or service from a direct sales representative, it is likely that many women have had some experience with direct sales – either as distributors or as consumers.¹ While a large majority of the products sold via direct selling channels are feminine (oriented) products (such as jewelry, cosmetics, skin care, etc.), companies also clearly market their businesses to an envisioned female sales force. Some direct selling organizations deliberately tap into women’s anxieties and desires to blend their perceived gender roles with their need for income, branding not only their products but also their specific style of business as being suited for women.

The iconic images of the Avon Lady traveling door-to-door with her case of miniature lipstick samples or the Tupperware saleswoman surrounded by eager housewives learning to ‘burp’ plastic bowls are forged into our cultural memory.

¹ Dennis L. Duffy notes that 20 percent of the American adults surveyed said that they have worked as direct selling representatives at some point over their lifetimes and that half of American adults have bought goods from a direct selling representative. Dennis L. Duffy, “Direct Selling as the Next Channel,” *The Journal of Consumer Marketing* 22 (2005): 43.

Established through decades of gendered and gendering associations, direct sales companies and their sales forces have become synonymous with *women*. Direct selling organizations continually reify this association through their sales methods, literature, advertisements, and events (meetings, conventions, etc.). Thus, the workers and the consumers of direct selling businesses engage in a cyclical gendering project that is self-perpetuating.

Direct selling organizations, like all organizations, reflect various gendered patterns that are produced by and reproduced via gender regimes. Gender is more than an individual expression and organizations are not blank-slate spaces in which gendered identities simply exist. Instead, as sociologist Raewyn Connell writes, “organisations themselves institutionalise definitions of femininity and masculinity, arrange gender hierarchies, construct gendered cultures, and define gender-appropriate jobs.”² In other words, gender is understood as a structure of social relations as well as a structuring tool for social relations. A gender regime is the overall pattern of gender relations within institutions/organizations and might depart from or reproduce an overall gender order of a specific society.³ Through technologies of gender and other discursive practices, organizations shape, adapt, and/or reshape the constantly changing dynamics of gender relations as part of larger gender orders.

Technologies of gender can be conceptualized as both discursive ideas and practices that enable the expression of a particular gender regime. Before addressing the

² Raewyn Connell, “Advancing Gender Reform in Large-scale Organisations: A New Approach for Practitioners and Researchers,” *Policy and Society* 24 (2005): 1.

³ Raewyn Connell, “Glass Ceilings or Gendered Institutions? Mapping the Gender Regimes of Public Sector Worksites,” *Public Administration Review* 66 (2006): 837-849.

modern examples of technologies of gender within direct selling organizations, it is necessary to historicize key components of direct selling. From its origins in Yankee peddling to the quintessential modern home party, direct selling has seen several shifts in both its sales force and its selling methods – in particular, the shift of a sales force made up primarily of men to one comprised mainly of women.⁴ Three key companies stand out in the history of direct selling; their innovations in the use of gender changed the shape of direct sales for generations to come. In this chapter I argue that companies like Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics used technologies of gender in establishing themselves as being businesses *for* women. However, because technologies of gender incorporate and build upon discourses of race and class, these companies also reified race and class hierarchies and hegemonic femininities.

Background: The “New Woman” Goes to Work

During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century women’s options for employment were predicated on their geographic location, class, race and marital status.⁵ Nevertheless, whether in the formal economy or in the informal economy,

⁴ Historian Katina Manko points out that before World War II “90 % of sales people in the direct selling industry were men; today, about 85% of direct sales people are women” and that the dominant sales method today is the home party system. Katina Manko, “ ‘Now You are in Business for Yourself’: The Independent Contractors of the California Perfume Company, 1886-1938,” *Business and Economic History* 26 (1997): 5.

⁵ On the history of employment for women in the United States, see Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *America’s Working Women: A Documentary History 1600 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995); Julie A. Matthaei, *An Economic History of Women in America: Women’s Work, the Sexual Division of Labor, and the Development of Capitalism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

women have always participated in economic endeavors in some fashion.⁶ In the nineteenth century, in spite of the prevailing ideology of “separate spheres,” gender patterns of employment shifted and some women began moving into more public spaces of work. Around 1880, the “New Woman,” a name for educated young middle-class white women, emerged as a new class of employable professionals.⁷ Working as bookkeepers, stenographers, typists or secretaries, these women represented independence and mobility within sprawling urban spaces. The image of the *New Woman* held contradictory meanings. On the one hand, the *New Woman* was popularized in serial novels and women’s magazines, and utilized in advertisements linking her to a growing consumer culture. On the other hand, the *New Woman* was often depicted as vain, a suffragist, or a woman wearing pants, smoking cigars, or otherwise acting like a man. In other words, she was a threat to the dominant gender regime.⁸

⁶ Feminist historians have aptly brought to light that despite the dominant Victorian ideology of “separate spheres,” which seeks to separate middle-class women and children from work, women have always participated in the economy and work. Beyond the histories of women working in the formal economy, scholars such as Eileen Boris and Cynthia Daniels write extensively on women’s participation in the industrial homeworking fields and Ruth Schwartz Cowan shows that women’s unpaid domestic labor within the home served important economic functions. Karen Manners Smith notes that at the turn of the twentieth century 98 percent of white married women did not work for pay outside of the home but that in addition to their domestic labor they likely sold eggs and butter to earn cash for goods or services. See Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor in at Home* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: the Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Karen Manners Smith, “New Paths to Power 1890-1920,” in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷ On the emergence of the New Woman and the shifting gender patterns of work during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century see Martha H. Patterson, *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008). On the gender constructions of women typists and office work see Kate Boyer, “‘Miss Remington’ Goes to Work: Gender, Space, and Technology at the Dawn of the Information Age,” *The Professional Geographer* 56 (2004): 201; Christopher Keep, “The Cultural Work of the Type-Writer Girl,” *Victorian Studies* 40 (1997): 401.

⁸ Patterson, *The American New Woman*.

The era of the *New Woman* coincided with the height of industrialization, which shifted the household dynamics and the production and distribution of goods. Industrialization also spurred massive migrations of working-class whites and African Americans into growing urban centers; areas that were simultaneously experiencing an influx of immigrant populations.⁹ The growing reliance on the market economy and ready-made goods increased the necessity of cash for households. Consequently, after 1890 many working-class and middle-class women, married or otherwise, sought out paid employment of some sort.¹⁰ Working women, especially white married women, faced harsh criticisms from many different groups. Under the guise of protecting women, both social reformers and union organizers campaigned to halt women's participation in the workforce. Working women were perceived to weaken men's claims to family wages and opponents often argued that work would make women turn away from their "natural" duties of wives and mothers.¹¹ As a means to circumvent criticism or out of necessity, some married women sought paid labor that could be combined with child rearing. Industrial homework, which relied largely on the labor of women of color and immigrant women, was an option for those who lived in urban areas.¹² Because industrial homework was limited geographically, and associated with the working class, immigrant

⁹ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*; Ava Baron, *Work Engendered*; Nancy F. Cott, *No Small Courage*.

¹⁰ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*.

¹¹ Eileen Boris shows that in the case of the homeworker tensions grew between factory wage earners who claimed that homework lowered their wages and social reformers who felt homework was dangerous and women and children should be protected from the dangers of work. This is one example of the complex dialectical struggle for the rights of women as wage earners during the turn of the century. See Eileen Boris and Cynthia R. Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*, 14. On the tensions between women's rights to wages groups and unions, see also Ava Baron, *Work Engendered*.

¹² Boris and Daniels, *Homework: Historical Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home*.

and women of color, white middle-class women in rural areas sought employment elsewhere. One such place was sales.

The CPC Way: Engendering Direct Sales

When David McConnell founded the California Perfume Company (CPC) in 1886, he recruited female agents to peddle his perfumes door-to-door within their local communities. The company and the sales agents faced two challenges: 1) the contentious issues surrounding women's work, and 2) the growing distaste for the traveling salesman. Both of these problems were challenges of gender, and ironically, it was *women's* gender that became the solution. McConnell and CPC management used gender to refashion traveling sales work into something that white women felt was respectable and suitable for them.

From hucksters and peddlers to canvassers and drummers, the traveling sales industry was forced to adapt to a rapidly changing market around the turn of the twentieth century. First, the traveling sales industry was facing immense competition with the introduction of mass advertising and the increasing popularity of mail-order commerce.¹³ Second, by the turn of twentieth century, traveling salesmen were increasingly seen as sweet-talking aggressive middlemen who would convince people into buying more goods than they wanted/needed.¹⁴ To adapt to these changes and the criticisms leveled at traveling salesmen, from both their competitors and their customers, the industry shifted

¹³ Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ On the changing cultural images of the traveling salesman see Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Travelling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

toward professionalization and the then-popular “scientific” management/sales techniques. These techniques included the use of rigidly scripted sales pitches and positive thinking exercises. McConnell, having worked as book peddler for many years, was aware of these issues and attempted to find a different route to sell wares.

In 1880 two-thousand five hundred sales agents were female, compared to the 51,000 that who male. Many of these female peddlers were book agents.¹⁵ McConnell, having come from the book peddling business himself, recruited women and found (intentionally or not) that women served as profitable solutions for the challenges facing the sales industry.¹⁶ To begin with, female agents did not carry the same negative connotations – largely because there had been so few up to that point. Additionally, McConnell shifted from the tradition of sending travelers out to different communities and instead recruited local agents who were given territories within their own communities. Only select “Depot Managers” were appointed to travel around the United States, stopping in towns with railroad stations, to find and recruit new sales agents within various rural regions, thus allowing newly recruited sales agents to canvass the neighborhoods and people they knew the best.

Recruiting female agents granted an advantage for sales and avoided some of the cultural baggage that came along with traveling salesmen. Likewise, CPC management was able to capitalize on women’s already existing networks of family and friends. Even if an agent did not canvass (go door-to-door) *everyone* in their territory, as advised, CPC

¹⁵ According to the census of 1880, as Friedman notes in *Birth of a Salesman*, 34.

¹⁶ It seems likely that McConnell initially recruited women for strategic purposes. Although company folklore has it that he paternalistically wanted to give women the opportunity to work, there seems little evidence to support that it was as simple as that. This is discussed in the following chapter.

could still reap the benefits of the agent's personal product use and sales drummed up from their personal networks. For example, in one *Outlook* newsletter, Miss Kate H. Finch exemplified the expectation. She wrote: "Several of my friends who had goods in my first order have sent for me to come around before sending off my next order."¹⁷ Selling to friends and family allowed CPC to sidestep any social, and sometimes legal, barriers to solicitation.¹⁸

In this way CPC as a company sold two things to women: household products and perfumes, and the business of door-to-door sales. Although having a contracted independent sales force save companies money on overhead and management costs, it also necessitated a different approach to management and training. For the most part, sales businesses at the turn of the century managed, motivated, and trained new recruits via company communications (newsletters, catalogs, letters, etc.). CPC was no exception. CPC agents were given a sales catalog with a description of each product and they were sent monthly newsletters. The *Outlook* newsletters contained motivational articles, information on new products, advice on sales methods, information on sales competitions and prizes, recognition for contest winners and Depot Managers, and even a space in which exemplary agents' letters could be posted. Furthermore, as the company continued to grow into the twentieth century, these newsletters more frequently included photographs and illustrations of products and representatives. These newsletters were a

¹⁷ "CPC Outlook September 1906," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/165>.

¹⁸ Social tensions grew between competitors and the sales industry leading to a call for the banning of solicitors. See Spears, *100 Years on the Road*. See also Nicole Biggart's discussion on the government attempts to control and regulate the direct selling industry in Nicole Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

space for a back and forth exchange between management and field representatives and reveal important clues to the workings of gender within CPC and later Avon. The newsletter illustrates the technologies of gender that worked to inform the image of the ideal CPC agent as a *respectable* middle-class white woman.

To construct CPC as employment that was suitable to women, management discursively refashioned sales into a social act. Several articles in the newsletters focus on “talking up goods” and provide elaborate stories with details about the quality and features of specific goods. Agents were urged to memorize these details and use the knowledge when calling on patrons. The focus on *talking over* strict and standardized sales pitches marks CPC as different from other (male-dominated) direct selling companies of the time. As I previously noted, there was a growing fervor for scientific sales management techniques that emphasized a standardized sales pitch and standardized rejection rebuttals. CPC, by contrast, encouraged sales through socializing. Furthermore, CPC literature placed a higher premium on proper behavior and service of the agent over the selling of goods. The CPC logic was that with proper friendly behavior and good service (from the agent), the high quality of the goods would speak for themselves and therefore require no selling, just showing. For example, an article in the March 1906 *Outlook* advised:

By giving the people as 'good service' as you give them good goods; by pleasantness, politeness, and yet firmness in regard to the superiority of your goods, you will secure their patronage for every article in our extensive line.¹⁹

¹⁹ “CPC Outlook March 1906,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/97>.

In other words, selling was not difficult if women acted properly in accordance with their gender and talked up the goods within their social networks. Or, as Mrs. John V. Farr put it: “anybody could sell them. They sell themselves.”²⁰

The language within the CPC literature shows a distancing of female sales agents from the tarnished reputations of other salespeople. As mentioned above, female CPC agents, because of their gender, did not face the same distrust that traveling salesmen did. However, as white women working outside of the home for pay, female agents would encounter societal resistance—this was especially true of married women. Married women made up 62% of the CPC sales force in the period of 1910-1915.²¹ In fact, CPC recruiting material shows that “CPC managers strongly advocated signing up married women.”²² CPC presented an alluring opportunity to married women, a flexible position that allowed women to work when they chose and as much as they chose. Women, as many agents in the newsletters reveal, found CPC as a preferable choice to the shop floor or other employment available to them; as expressed by one agent: “I like my new job very much. It is better than the shop any time.”²³

As part of CPC’s strategy, literature promoted the idea that sales/canvassing work need not interfere with women’s roles as wives and mothers. Several letters written by

²⁰ “CPC Outlook March 1906,” Avon Historical Archive.

²¹ Katina Lee Manko, “‘Ding Dong! Avon Calling!’: Gender, Business, and Door-to-Door Selling, 1890-1955,” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2001), accessed October 15, 2012, <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/304690961?accountid=4485>, 86.

²² Manko, “‘Ding Dong, Avon Calling!’,” 85.

²³ “Outlook November 1916,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/864>.

agents in *Outlook* highlight CPC's stance on balancing work with domestic duties. It is important to remember that the notes written by agents and printed within newsletters were considered by company editors/management and selected because they expressed a message in-line with the company's philosophy. For example, Mrs. Mary E. Willison wrote that a great part of her work was done "by telephone while cleaning house and other household duties, I have worked this in, and sometimes when entertaining company have also shown the Color Plate Catalog."²⁴ For Mrs. Willison, sales work did not necessitate canvassing because she was able to use her telephone to make calls or to sell to visitors from inside her own home.

The agents' letters included in *Outlook* illustrate how women could earn good commissions through persistence and discipline even while caring for their families. For example, Mrs. M. A. Wright wrote to CPC that

in one year and a half I have made over \$202.00, and I am past 56 years of age. Have cared for my home, five in family, two of them small children, and have been sick. It seems to me that if I had been in good health that I could have done twice as much.²⁵

Similarly, as another agent explained: "I have been working for the Company only since July, 1914, and in six months sold nearly \$500 worth, but lost no time at any time from

²⁴ "Outlook March 1917," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/884>.

²⁵ "Outlook June 1910," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/576>.

my household duties, church work and society.”²⁶ CPC canvassing, as exemplified by agents, would not interfere with women’s other duties. Furthermore, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter implies, CPC work (unlike domestic work presumably) gave women a space to feel valuable.

The letters that CPC chose to include in its newsletters work as a technology of gender because through these texts CPC is constructing what it means to be a good CPC agent and woman. In this way CPC is putting gender to work to produce a specific type of worker: a woman who can fulfill her gender expectations while also working in sales. Another example of how CPC put gender to work is found within the details of its frequent sales competitions. To incentivize higher sales CPC created competitions in which the top earners could win various desirable prizes. Although the initial prizes were bonuses paid in gold, around 1910 the prizes shifted to multiple gendered items. Highlighting the growing link between women and consumption, CPC awarded high earners prizes such as fur shawls, pearl necklaces, and cut-glass serving dishes, to name a few. The prizes represented luxury items that were meant to motivate sales agents. However, CPC did not paint the desire to sales contests as self-indulgent or necessarily competitive. Instead, CPC stressed the value of using these prizes as gifts for others, situating the desire for luxury goods within the realm of self-sacrifice and nurturance, dominant aspects of femininity at the time.

CPC was not the first direct selling organization to use gift-giving as a motivation technique. In the late nineteenth century the Larkin Soap Company, for example, would

²⁶ “Outlook August 1916,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/829>.

give out ‘premiums’ (gifts) for Soap Clubs. A Larkin Soap Club was a group of housewives with an appointed secretary who would pool their money to make larger purchases of soap thereby reducing their overall cost. To incentivize larger soap purchases among the female-run mail-order clubs, different premiums were granted depending on the total number of sales per purchase.²⁷ Similarly, African American entrepreneurs Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J. Walker gave cash rewards, diamonds, and even low-cost mortgages to their sales forces in recognition of their achievements.²⁸

The contributions that Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J. Walker made to the development of African American beauty culture and direct selling should not be overlooked. Developing contemporaneously to CPC, Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J. Walker both pioneered the direct selling of hair and beauty products to African American women primarily in the South and Midwestern regions of the United States. Malone and Walker’s companies both utilized door-to-door sales and home demonstrations to bring their products to consumers. Additionally, these entrepreneurs established specific hair care “beauty methods” that could be taught to hairdressers at beauty schools and then used in salons. Madame C.J. Walker was probably the first direct selling company to implement a multi-level marketing structure similar to those of today, which paid agents commissions for new recruits. Although Walker and Malone’s companies saw successful growth and expansion from 1905-1920, both were edged out

²⁷ See Howard R. Stanger, “The Larkin Clubs of Ten: Consumer Buying Clubs and Mail-Order Commerce, 1890-1940,” *Enterprise and Society* 9 (2008): 125-164.

²⁸ Kathy Peiss provides an excellent analysis of the history and development of the beauty culture. Importantly, Peiss outlines the rise and fall of African American beauty culture and business. See Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 75.

of existence by “aggressive white competitors” and changes in mass advertising by 1930.²⁹

Even though African American women were able to work as door-to-door saleswomen for companies like Walker’s, CPC did not generally recruit black women as sales agents. According to a 1924 District Supervisor guidebook, traveling agents were advised against appointing “colored” representatives unless the agent felt it was necessary because of the demographics of the territory. As a rule CPC believed that “colored workers are not reliable.”³⁰ It is evident from CPC’s newsletters, both within the language and illustrations/photographs, that CPC emphasized the “respectability” of their agents; emphatically, respectability was coded as white. Thus, to ensure the respectability of agents and the image that they would present, CPC favored the recruitment of married white women.

The Avon Way to Loveliness

In the 1930s the format of the *Outlook* newsletter shifted from that of a motivational sales newsletter to that more likened to a woman’s magazine. From the design, language, and content it is clear that these newsletters engaged with CPC agents in specific gendered ways. Along these lines, CPC became part of an overall gendering project as it presented imagery of idealized representatives as well as idealized housewives. For example, the newsletter included more frequent images of women as consumers of products or distributors of products. The illustration below (see fig. 3.1),

²⁹ Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 112.

³⁰ Manko, “ ‘Ding Dong, Avon Calling!’ ” 91-92.

the cover of the November 1936 *Outlook*, features a photograph of a CPC/Avon representative demonstrating her samples to an attentive woman. Both are dressed in fine clothing with the CPC agent wearing a fur stole attesting to their class status; neither woman looks particularly affected by the continuing economic Depression the United States felt during 1936.



Figure 3.1 Cover of Avon Outlook, November 1936, Avon Historical Archives, Hagley Digitized Collection, Hagley Museum and Library

The shift in the structure of the *Outlook* coincides with the rebranding of the California Perfume Company into Avon. In 1939 McConnell changed the name of the business to better reflect the many types of consumer goods and international nature of the company (as they had already expanded into Canada as of 1914). The company took the name of a popular-selling brand of cosmetics and skincare. As Avon, the company continued to sell household goods but with a stronger emphasis on beauty products.

Along with the turn toward beauty, a growing emphasis on the representative's appearance emerged within the pages of the newsletters. CPC literature up to that point had occasionally included advice about the appearance of agents, but more frequently focused on proper behavior and service. In the 1930s and into the 1940s, representatives' use of products and care given to proper appearance became a frequent topic for advice. For example, in the August 1936 *Outlook*, an article advises

Your own well groomed, attractive appearance is of the utmost importance, as we have pointed out before. Your hair should be well taken care of, your hands soft, white and well manicured, your complexion lovely. You are your own best advertisement.³¹

The emphasis on appearance and beauty parallels a general expansion of the beauty market during the 1920s and 30s.³² Likewise, Avon's management turned toward a philosophy that pronounced: "when a woman knows she is looking her prettiest, she is

³¹ "Outlook August 1936," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/4594>.

³² As historian Kathy Peiss remarks: "In the 1920s and 1930s, cosmetics producers, advertisers, and beauty experts shifted the burden of female identity from an interior self to a personality made manifest by marking and coloring the face: Makeup was a true expression of feminine identity." See Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 166.

at her best.”³³ The lines between consumer, housewife, and distributor continued to be blurred within the pages of *Outlook*. Several examples indicate that Avon work was being equated with housework. One representative discussed her approach to Avon work as being like following a recipe when cooking, while another remarked that “in CPC sales work, just as in the business of homemaking, ‘good luck’ smiles on those who are careful and thorough and have the initiative to go out after orders.”³⁴

Avon disseminated important messages about gender and also race and class to its sales force through company newsletters. For example, during the early 1930s a few of the *Outlook* newsletters contained short serialized fiction stories about an Avon representative. In the stories the heroine was a quick thinking Avon representative who would save the day with her Avon products. For example, in “Avon to the Rescue,” the story begins by explaining that Delia had left her job as a secretary to “be in business for herself” through Avon.³⁵ One day Delia and her mother were drawn into an emergency when a “horde of grimy youngsters” and their mother pounded on their door. The mother, who was described as speaking in broken English and Italian, had brought her children to Delia’s mother (Mrs. Madden) because their school nurse had sent them home due to their improper hygiene and poor dental care. After inspecting all of the children’s mouths, Mrs. Madden scolded the mother: “What have you been thinking of, to neglect these children’s teeth like this? Don’t you know that bad teeth cause tonsillitis,

³³ “Outlook August 1936,” Avon Historical Archive.

³⁴ “Outlook April 1930,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/3415>.

³⁵ “Outlook February 1930,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/3396>.

rheumatism and lots of other troubles?” The mother answered that she had lost the only toothbrush that they had. Luckily for them, however, Delia had her own supply of Avon’s new and modern dental care products—toothbrushes and toothpaste. As Delia helped the children brush their teeth she told the daughter that with the help of Avon products no one would know that they had been sent home from school for eating “garlic for breakfast” and/or smoking (as the oldest boy had been). The Italian mother paid for the products in cash and having been properly educated by Delia and Mrs. Madden she was filled with gratitude and relief. The day was saved because of the Avon products and the smart thinking of Delia and her mother.

This story exemplifies the ways that race, class, and gender were utilized to impart the image of the ideal direct sales worker. First, there are clues about class in this story. For example, Delia was described as wearing a luxurious fur coat, and her mother works as a nurse. Although Delia and her mother might not be middle-class they are represented as being at least of a higher class than the immigrant family. We can guess that Delia and her mother are white women and as white women they were able to use their knowledge and authority to help the Italian immigrant mother and her “gang” of children. The story paints the Italian mother as ignorant of “proper” and modern methods of dental care and sanitation and in need of the compassionate guidance of her white acquaintance. Through the lessons imparted in this story Avon makes very clear statements about race and class while constructing its ideal representative as a respectable white woman.³⁶

³⁶ It bears mention that working class Italian immigrant women were not seen as white (or at least not properly white) at this time.

Through technologies of gender as represented within the images, articles, and letters of the Avon literature, agents were given a model of what a modern Avon woman was supposed to look and act like. By World War II and into the Post-war era, Avon had become a business for white women. Direct sales with Avon effectively blended women's gender roles with work in a way that did not threaten the larger gender order. Avon might have been giving women an opportunity to be in business "for themselves," but they continued to be managed by an exclusively male managerial staff. In some cases, Avon was depicted as a means for women to enhance their roles as mothers by earning an income to financially support their families. For example, one agent praised Avon, noting that "I am mother of four children, and Avon has helped me and my family to live better," while other agents expressed gratitude to Avon for providing work that helped to pay for their children's education.³⁷

By the launch of Avon's first advertising campaign in 1935, they had solidified the image of the "Avon Lady" as a young, fashionable, middle-class white woman. During this period the image of the ideal Avon Lady became much more common within the pages of the *Outlook* newsletters. Agents and consumers, through Avon literature, continued to receive gendered and gendering messages about the roles of women. For example, in explaining why the Avon way of sales (i.e. home shopping) was preferred by women one newsletter read:

We women are like that. We want things that are personal. In fact, if a woman can't see a thing in relation to herself or her own, she just refuses to become

³⁷ "Outlook October 1947," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/8763>.

interested. It is good to bear in mind this little quirk of feminine psychology and turn it to advantage.³⁸

The only clues as to how the gendering discourses delivered by Avon were perceived, accepted/rejected, and/or internalized are found within the letters from representatives. The editors of the newsletter, however, determined which letters to include and likely chose those that reified the company rhetoric and ideal. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the stories and images from the *Avon Newsletters* tell us more about how Avon envisioned itself as serving the needs of women and which women it saw itself serving.

The crowning of the “Queen of Avon” exemplifies an interesting entanglement of gender, race, and class performance for actual successful representatives. As retold in the October 1947 *Outlook*, on August 7th, 1947 Miss Edith Youngblood was welcomed by 92 representatives from her Indiana district at a special banquet given in her honor. Two weeks prior to the big celebration several representatives from Miss Youngblood’s district were notified of the nationwide honor that would be bestowed upon their Manager and they did well by keeping the surprise under-wraps. The day before the banquet Mr. Detweiler, the Divisional Manger, surprised Miss Youngblood with the announcement that she was to be crowned the “Avon Anniversary Queen.” Upon making this momentous announcement, he presented her with a special gift from Avon’s President, a designer gown made just for her to wear during the crowning ceremony. Miss Youngblood was then whisked away to the hairdresser, the manicurist, and a dress fitting to ensure that she looked and felt like a queen on her big day.

³⁸ “Outlook October 1947,” Avon Historical Archive.

Escorted by Mr. Detwiler, Miss Youngblood entered the banquet hall of the Hotel McCurdy in Evansville, Indiana in her one-of-a-kind white chiffon gown. Greeted by smiles and applause Miss Youngblood was seated at the place of honor next to Avon executives Mr. Gregory and Mr. Davis. Throughout the ceremony district representatives stood and paid tribute to their *Queen* with kind words and well wishes. Above all, they celebrated her leadership and friendliness. The official coronation culminated this grand event, when Miss Youngblood's ten year-old niece presented her with a crown of beautiful white roses, which was placed on her head by Mr. Detwiler.³⁹

The elaborately detailed story outlines the ways in which gender, race, and class were not only integral to the image of Avon representatives but also to the performance of being an Avon representative. For example, being able to act in a regal manner, as a Queen, is part of a class performance. Also, the event clearly shares similarities with the traditional debutante ball from the presentation and the costuming of Miss Youngblood (i.e. white gown, gloves, etc.). What is remarkable, however, is the real image of Miss Youngblood juxtaposed with the idealized image of the Avon lady. The figure below (see fig. 3.2) shows a side-by-side comparison of Miss Youngblood in her designer gown (on the right) and the cover of the October 1947 *Outlook* featuring a photograph of three Avon representatives (on the left). All three of the women are wearing conservative dress suits and look ready to embark on a race (the next sales campaign). Although the discursively constructed image of the Avon representative is that of a youthful middle-class white woman, the real representative depicted here is a middle-aged white woman

³⁹ "Outlook October 1947," Avon Historical Archive.

standing with much less confidence. The contrast between the two seems quite remarkable.



Figure 3.2 Cover of October 1947 *Outlook* (on left) and photograph of Miss Edith Youngblood Queen of Avon (on right), Avon Historical Archives, Hagley Digitized Collections, Hagley Museum and Library

By the end of the 1940s Avon had built an army of direct sales agents, but more importantly, it had branded itself as a business for women. Company newsletters printed success stories, notes from representatives, and articles that discursively folded women's

work as sales agents into their gender roles. Avon's success through the Depression set the precedent for several companies to follow. By the Post-War era direct selling was becoming more and more the domain of women and in the late 1940s the industry saw its biggest innovation—the home party.

Domestic Containment in a Tupperware Wonderbowl

During the 1930s, some direct selling organizations began shifting towards the “home party plan” as their main sales method. Home demonstrations had been utilized here and there by various direct selling companies, but historians credit Frank S. Beveridge for formalizing the method. Frank S. Beveridge, while working as a Fuller Brush executive, inquired about one Fuller Brush agent's successful sales figures. He found that his strategy was to have a hostess allow the agent into her home to demonstrate the Fuller line of products to a small group of invited friends. Beveridge, seeing value in this method, implemented the home party plan as the main selling method for his newly founded company, Stanley Home Products, founded in 1932.⁴⁰ Much like the home parties of today, Stanley Home demonstrations included parlor games, gifts, and benefits for the hostess in the form of discounted goods.

The home party system offered several benefits to direct selling organizations. First, it supplemented, or redistributed rather, the labor of the agent onto the hostess – in that they were to provide the space, refreshments, and send out the invitations. Agents could increase their productivity by reaching more people at one time, rather than

⁴⁰ See Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*; Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman*; and Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

canvassing door-to-door. The home party plan tapped into women's social networks and ideas of reciprocity. Also, being invited into a home for a demonstration of products allowed agents and their companies to avoid any legal problems arising from the growing anti-solicitation laws.⁴¹ Although put into formalized practice by Stanley Home Products, it was Tupperware that took the home party plan into the Post-War era and solidified its place in history as a symbolic referent of 1950s domesticity. Part of Tupperware's success, like the success of Avon, was in its explicit use of gender. For Tupperware, gender was the quintessential tool for selling its plastic bowls and modernity.

Tupperware was established in 1946 when Yankee inventor Earl Tupper constructed a line of food containers made out of a refined basic polyethylene described as "a synthetic polymer that was nontoxic, odorless, flexible, and lightweight."⁴² He saw his invention as a miracle in that it was cheap, nearly indestructible, and would allow for more efficient food storing, especially with the lid that could be 'burped' to create an airtight seal. Earl Tupper held high hopes for his new line. Indeed he envisioned the "Tupperization" of American homes with Tupperware taking its place next to china, linen, and silver.⁴³ Despite Tupper's high hopes, however, Tupperware initially sat unsold on the shelves of many department stores and retail carriers.

Retail stores and direct sales agents had both observed that Tupperware sold best when their usefulness and the technique for creating the airtight seal on bowls were

⁴¹ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*.

⁴² Alison J. Clarke's work thoroughly documents the invention of Tupperware and Earl Tupper's personal motivations and desires for innovation. See Clarke, *Tupperware*, 36. On the personal story of Earl Tupper and his relationship to Brownie Wise, see Bob Kealing, *Tupperware Unsealed: Brownie Wise, Earl Tupper, and the Home Party Pioneers* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

⁴³ Clarke, *Tupperware*, 44.

demonstrated to potential consumers. Several direct selling agents had (independently) taken up Tupperware into their lines of goods because they felt that they were the perfect product for home demonstrations. Initially, Tupperware could be purchased from wholesale distributors, thus allowing direct sales agents (of different concerns) to purchase and sell Tupperware along with their other goods. Tupper took note of the successful wholesale distributors only to learn that it was direct selling agents via home demonstrations who were moving his products. Brownie Wise (a divorced single mother) was working for Stanley Home Products when she discovered Tupperware and quickly became one of the most successful distributors. To capitalize on their success, Tupper formed Tupper Home Parties and recruited Brownie Wise as his new Vice President to manage the home party division.

Gender was an important tool for Tupperware, both in the marketing of the products and in the marketing of the business opportunity. When Earl Tupper brought in Brownie Wise as his Vice President of Tupperware Home Parties, she brought her unique business acumen that propelled Tupperware into success. Having already established a strong technique of home party sales through her experience with Stanley Home Products, Wise was able to carve out a niche within the shifting cultural and material practices of American families during the Post-War boom. Wise's home party plan along with her recruiting strategy (mainly recruiting from within the consumer pool) effectively "blurred the theoretical boundaries of several identifying categories such as domesticity and commerce, work and leisure, friend and colleague, consumer and employee."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Clarke, *Tupperware*, 108.

Tupperware's rise to prominence within direct sales, especially the home party method, reflects the turn towards consumerism and domestic containment taking place in the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁵ Tupperware situated itself as a glamorous promise of modernity, as a product sold to housewives, but also as a business opportunity for women, one which did not challenge the bounds of femininity. Tupperware advertisements strategically deployed popular discourses of scientific management that bolstered Tupperware's food storage streamlined efficiency and money saving potential. The home party was billed as the modern way to shop. Beyond these things, however, Tupperware sold an idea of fitting modernity into everyday life – a lifestyle. Sue Zschoche observes that Tupperware represented “multiple expressions of a lifestyle that one could alter by mood or occasion or even time of day.”⁴⁶

For example, one advertisement (see fig. 1.3 below) features a photograph of a large ranch-style kitchen with all of the cabinets open to display the various neatly stacked Tupperware products. Tupperware dishes are set at the kitchen table and a set of four Tupperware coffee cups and coasters are sitting in wait by the percolator. The image is complete with a lovely young woman, presumably a housewife, in a rose-colored dress with pearl necklace and earrings. The text of the image is overt in its use of gender and the role of the housewife by noting “The answer to the Housewife's demand for efficiency – economy – the woman's demand for beauty.” Tupperware situates the role of

⁴⁵ Elaine Tyler May addresses the turn or “return” toward domestication and the home during the 1950s. May shows that after World War II the home symbolized safety or a haven from technology (or the modernity that was associated with the bomb). The family was represented as needing protection from new threats of the bomb, of communism, and the home/family was the place for retreat. See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

⁴⁶ Sue Zschoche, “The Party Plan Economy and the History of American Women,” in *Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond*, ed. L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011), 44.

the housewife as that of the home economist, but separate from the aesthetic desires of the “woman.” Woman, in the case of Tupperware’s advertising, refers to a white middle-class suburban housewife. This clever rhetorical ploy both acknowledges and values the unpaid labor of housewife, enticing them to purchase the products as legitimate consumers. In this sense, woman’s role is fractured but Tupperware provides a means for it to be harmoniously blended.



Figure 3.3 Tupperware Advertisement circa 1957, Ann and Thomas Damigella collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Certainly, the products of many prominent direct selling companies are identifiable as gendered products (cosmetics, household products, jewelry), so using

gender as a rhetorical device to sell gendered products is hardly remarkable. What is remarkable, however, is the way that technologies of gender are infused within the sales techniques and incentives commonly used by direct selling organizations. The home party not only relied on women's social networks, but it also capitalized on women's social sense of reciprocity and gift giving. Historian Alison J. Clarke suggested that the home party "technique thrived on the social obligation generated by women's networks and the impetus toward reciprocity, which the hostess's hospitality would spark and which the dealer could then transform into a successful sale."⁴⁷ The home party and the sense of entertainment reconfigured the role of the distributor to part friend and part congenial educator. Furthermore, even the term of *hostess* "inferred entertainment, conviviality, and increased consumption."⁴⁸ The home party became a space of overlapping desires, with gender serving as one of the main rubrics through which these desires could be organized and deployed.

Like Avon, Tupperware also engaged technologies of gender that were dependent upon racialized constructions of middle-class whiteness through its day-to-day correspondence between managers and distributors, through its process of gift giving, and during special events. The tradition of incentivizing sales with gifts, established by the direct selling companies at the beginning of the twentieth century, was followed by Fuller Brush and Stanley Home Products. Fuller and Stanley extended the tradition to giving small gifts and discounts to the hostess to encourage allowing the demonstration. Tupperware carried through this tradition, rewarding hostesses with discounts, and

⁴⁷ Clarke, *Tupperware*, 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 68.

rewarding high sales achievers with gendered gifts like jewelry and mink stoles. To Brownie Wise turned the modest gift giving into a spectacle of conspicuous consumption.⁴⁹ Under the direction of Wise, distributors could compete in sales campaigns for lucrative gifts ranging from Ford cars to expensive fur coats and even couturier dresses from Wise's own wardrobe. Wise's success as a sales manager, largely aided by an evangelical style of positive thinking popular among sales people, turned her into an inspirational figure for others to emulate. Going from a struggling single mother to a well-off VP living in a home filled with modern appliances and furniture bought by her own earnings, Wise was the model of the middle-class "American Dream." Zschoche notes that, "[Tupperware] in-house publications, written or edited by Wise, made extensive use of her lifestyle as a reference point for what could happen to those who followed her relentlessly enthusiastic creed of self-actualization through positive thinking."⁵⁰

With Wise's direction, Tupperware conflated women with consumption. The work of the distributor was framed as fitting nicely with women's roles as mothers and wives and the practice of gift giving "allowed women to frame their work as an indelibly feminine activity."⁵¹ Gender was put to work by Tupperware and in turn delivered both consumers and distributors to the company. As in the example of the Avon Queen, the relationship between business, distributors, and gender, as illustrated by the "Tupperware Gift Fairy" and the "Wish Party," exemplifies the way that Tupperware blended gender

⁴⁹ Susan Vincent, "Preserving Domesticity: Reading Tupperware in Women's Changing Domestic, Social and Economic Roles," *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie* 40 (2003): 171-196.

⁵⁰ Zschoche, "The Party Plan Economy and the History of American Women," 48.

⁵¹ Ibid.

and consumption. Believing in wishes and making wishes come true were part and parcel of Wise's unique philosophy on positive thinking that was popular among her distributors. Debuted by Wise in 1957, the wish party was part motivational, part sales training with quasi-religious undertones. During the party a young woman dressed in golden tutu, fairy wings, and tiara would enter into the room (see figure 1.4). The fairy was there to present women, as predetermined by Wise, with extravagant "Cinderella" gifts (gifts that they would never buy for themselves, or could not normally afford). Gifts ranged from alligator-skin purses and shoes to complete furniture sets.



Figure 3.4 Tupperware Gift Fairy at Wish Party circa 1957, Brownie Wise Papers, ca. 1938-1968, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Clarke shows that Wise's philosophy was grounded in a sense that caring and nurturing were part of building a successful business and that "she held feminine reciprocity and loyalty as the mainstays of increased productivity."⁵² While Tupperware (and Wise) were able to maneuver gender, or even commodify it, Wise and other representatives put gender to work for their own ends. Clarke argues that Wise's

⁵² Clarke, *Tupperware*, 129.

inclination towards self-help, positive thinking, and domesticity – conservative in origin– were also potentially subversive. Women, many of them housewives, could enter into a fantasy land beyond homemaking through Tupperware and Wise’s association of glamour with femininity (like the color pink) which appealed to a feminine aesthetic and culture popular during this time. The gendered land of home parties potentially gave women income, supportive communities, and social outlets without directly confronting the gender regime of the 1950s that placed women in the need for such outlets. However, it is important to keep in mind that the image of the suburban housewife hosting a Tupperware party is class and race specific as is the image of the Tupperware distributor. Both rely on constructions of middle-class white domesticity. I suggest that women’s participation with Tupperware was part of expressing their racialized identities as white women contributing to the overall hegemony of whiteness as well as a means of enacting their middle-class social status.

Mary Kay: Evangelical Feminism

Mary Kay Ash founded Mary Kay Cosmetics in 1963. Having had 15 years of direct selling and home party experience as a Stanley Home Products distributor, Mary Kay Ash was quite familiar with the methods of motivating a sales force through positive thinking self-development psychology. Ash began her cosmetics company as a direct response to gender discrimination. As Ash recounts in several biographies and sales management books she has authored, she took her life savings to begin a direct selling business after being passed over for promotion several times in favor of men (sometimes men she had trained!). Her driving motivation in founding Mary Kay Cosmetics “was to

establish a company that would give unlimited opportunity to women. It was a period when women were often paid fifty cents on the dollar that men received for the same work. It disturbed me that men were paid more.”⁵³ Combining the methods she developed while at Stanley with methods likely borrowed from other direct selling organizations (including Tupperware), Ash devised a business with the stated aim of empowering women through sales work and beautifying techniques.

Ash created a business and corporate culture that adhered to an essentialist view of gender. In many of Ash’s autobiographies and management books she has described her belief that “women can no more duplicate the male style of management than American businessmen can exactly reproduce the Japanese style.”⁵⁴ In Ash’s view, a feminine style of business is that which prioritizes love over profits and nurturance over competition. Ash’s philosophy on women and work saw women as capable agents for business on the one hand while elevating their essential roles as caretakers and nurturers on the other hand. Interestingly, Ash’s outspoken belief that women were essentially different from men, coupled with her expressed desire to empower women, allowed Ash to co-opt ideas of the feminist movement while retaining a conservative approach to work and family. Ash conceived of empowerment for distributors as granted through the opportunity for flexible employment and the pursuit of self-improvement and personal development based on her principles.

⁵³ Ash, Mary Kay, *The Mary Kay Way: Timeless Principles from America’s Greatest Woman Entrepreneur* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Ash constructed a brand image for her company that was based upon a “code of feminine aesthetics.”⁵⁵ For example, the color pink, as a symbol of femininity, was the main color of Mary Kay Cosmetics and was used in most of their packaging and imagery. Also, Ash’s feminine aesthetic was celebrated through gifts giving and the emphasis on women’s feminine appearance. Consultants’ appearances were of high importance and they were frequently given the message that they were their own best advertisement. Ash insisted that her consultants remain feminine in their appearance and required that they always adhere to the “Mary Kay Look” which included makeup (with Mary Kay makeup), hair, black blazer, white blouse, black skirt, panty hose, and closed-toe heels. Furthermore, the gifts that were given to top-earners represented feminine middle-class desires; these gifts ranged from jewelry and crystal dinnerware to cars. Mary Kay Cosmetics is especially well known for the pink Cadillac. The required codes of behavior and dress within Mary Kay cosmetics represent the technologies of gender that informed consultants how to be women.

In the same way that Avon and Tupperware provided employment for women while not appearing to threaten to the dominant gender order, Mary Kay Cosmetics made it explicit that women’s employment should never come before family. For example, in Ash’s books, seminars, and trainings she stressed that the business/careers of women must always take a back seat to family and God; this was codified in the company motto “God first, family second, and career third.” Ash warned that “worthy advancement does not promote neglect of your husband and children” and cautioned her consultants to

⁵⁵ Kreydatus, “‘Enriching Women’s Lives’: The Mary Kay Approach to Beauty, Business, and Feminism.”

exercise restraint in their business pursuits.⁵⁶ Rather than challenging dominant gender norms Ash espoused and glorified them.

Conclusion: Setting the Stage

Companies like Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics set the stage for numerous other direct selling companies that followed. All of the companies sampled in this dissertation, with the exception of Avon, utilize the home party sales method. Moreover, all of the companies have continued in the tradition of using gendered and gendering imagery to brand their businesses as uniquely suited for women. As illustrated in this chapter, CPC/Avon strategically used the labor of women to gain entrance into markets that were becoming more difficult for the traveling salesman to enter. But in order to utilize women as sales agents, CPC/Avon had to first construct direct selling as type of employment that was suitable for women and non-threatening to the dominant gender order. Within their newsletters CPC/Avon illustrated that CPC/Avon work could be merged with women's other duties and did not need to interfere. And by shifting the nature of sales work into something more akin to socializing, CPC/Avon established the house call as a private way to shop. Tupperware pushed the social aspects of direct selling into the home party sales method. Mary Kay Cosmetics turned the home party into a space for beauty education and established an essentialist feminine brand of corporate culture.

⁵⁶ Jim Underwood, *More than a Pink Cadillac: Mary Kay Inc.'s Nine Leadership Keys to Success* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 139.

All three of these companies utilized various technologies of gender to enable the expression of their organizational gender regimes. These separate organizational gender regimes work as part of a larger overarching gender order of the direct selling industry. Similar to Mary Kay Cosmetics the direct selling industry's gender order is one that sees women as capable (and necessary) consumers and distributors but also as essentially different than men. The technologies of gender work through various discursive and material practices which are informed by race and class, to convey who can be and how to be a *woman* in direct selling. Although direct selling is framed as being for everyone, the discursively constructed image of the direct seller is that of a white putatively middle-class woman.

That direct selling is associated with women is not a mere reflection of gendered products, it came about through strategic deployments of technologies of gender. Gendered discourses in direct selling are constantly being consumed and reproduced through interactions between companies and their consultants. Importantly, these technologies of gender play an vital role in both the management of consultants and the recruitment of new consultants. The legacy of Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics is that their shared methods and practices contributed to the creation (and maintenance) of the *direct sales imaginary*.

Chapter 4

ORIGIN STORIES AND THE LOGICS OF BEING YOUR OWN BOSS

Be Your Own Boss! – Avon

It is an especially good opportunity for women who want more flexibility and control over their lives! – Mary Kay Cosmetics

Premier made it possible for me to stay home with my children! – Premier Designs

Introduction

Part of direct selling organizations' longevity as an industry is their ability to brand direct sales as a business that meets the needs of families looking for a better balance between work and home. Indeed, according to the women in my study, their desire to be a “stay-at-home-mother” ranked as one of the most important motivations for choosing work in direct sales. Despite women's gains in education and employment over the past several decades, gendered expectations of family and domestic work have remained relatively stagnant, leaving women in want of employment solutions that allow them flexibility and control over their schedules.¹ This task is especially salient for women who are caring for young children. As a result, some women leave the professional field altogether, either temporarily or permanently, in favor of working as

¹ Scott Coltrane, "Research on Household Labor: Modeling and Measuring the Social Embeddedness of Routine," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 1208-1233; Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Outsourced Self Intimate Life in Market Times* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012).

stay-at-home mothers.² Other women, allured by the promises of direct sales, find their solution in working from home as distributors for direct selling organizations.

Capitalizing on these desires, direct selling organizations have established a fairly unified discourse informing potential recruits and current distributors that their company is founded upon meeting the needs of women. The discourses of direct sales, including those discourses located within company origin stories, are presented to potential distributors at every turn: through company websites, in promotional literature, at sales meetings and conventions, in sales catalogues, and even from other distributors. Women interested in working in direct sales are inundated with the discourses of direct selling so that, as sociologist Ara Wilson notes, “by the time a potential recruit is deciding to enlist as a direct sales distributor, then, she has engaged to some degree with the images, rhetoric, fantasies and interactions generated by the industry.”³

Many direct selling organizations have carried forward the tradition of direct sales established by companies like Avon, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, as described in the previous chapter. The companies in this study aggressively market their industry to women through the purposeful use of several discourses from entrepreneurship to feminism to evangelism in the construction of a *direct sales imaginary*. The concept of an “imaginary” has been used by feminist scholars to signal the link between an individual’s ideology and their material existence.⁴ An imaginary can be viewed as a set of

² Lisa Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” *The New York Times*, October, 26, 2003, 42.

³ Ara Wilson, “The Empire of Direct Sales and the Making of Thai Entrepreneurs,” *Critique of Anthropology* 19 (1999): 406.

⁴ Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Donna J. Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New

overlapping beliefs that organizes the way that individuals think about and relate to structures and/or practices. Imaginaries are taken for granted and unquestioned as they obstruct the recognition of the historical and material conditions of *reality*, which contributes to the hegemony of the imaginary. For example, sociologist Chrys Ingraham identified a heterosexual imaginary as “a way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution.”⁵ The direct sales imaginary, then, is the shared belief that the direct selling industry is specifically good for women because it provides them with, among other things, flexible employment and allows them to work from home.

Company origin stories and philosophies function as a means of validating organizational principles that govern the management of women’s labor. Organizational principles and the imaginary that they contribute to both inform how women negotiate their relationship to their companies and how they view themselves as direct sellers. Hence, in this chapter I demonstrate how some direct selling companies’ origin stories contribute to the authority of the direct sales imaginary.

The Power of Origin Stories

Origin stories, or myths, carry great importance for human relations. Stories from religious origins (creation stories) to political origins (or foundational myths) make claims about the existence and ordering of society. Origin stories are narratives that

York: Psychology Press, 1997); Chela Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World,” *Genders* 10 (1991): 1-24.

⁵ Chrys Ingraham, “The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender,” *Sociological Theory* 12 (1994): 203-219, 203.

naturalize a particular beginning, a way of being, and/or the boundaries of a community. As Joanne Wright notes, “origin myths serve an important function in helping societies organize their ideas about themselves and about the universe.”⁶ Such stories are meant to convey a shared sense of meaning and purpose or establish a common history or identity. These tales hold important clues about gender because “origin stories are also infused with, and driven by, power.”⁷ Deconstructing origin stories can provide a better sense of what is served through the dissemination and repeating of such myths. Many direct selling companies have their own origin story. What do these origin stories tell us about direct sales? What relationships are being organized through their telling and retelling?

Avon: Today's Company for Women

In the previous chapter I briefly outlined the creation and development of cosmetic company Avon. Today Avon sees nearly \$11 billion in annual revenue and is present in over one hundred countries with a sales force of 6 million representatives.⁸ In its beginnings, Avon strategically appropriated the labor of woman and this fact eventually became the main ethos of their company philosophy. Avon's current company slogan is that they are “the company for women.” When I asked Avon representatives why this was the case, they would recite Avon's origin story (or parts of it). As one representative explains:

⁶ Joanne Harriet Wright, *Origin Stories in Political Thought: Discourses on Gender, Power, and Citizenship* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7.

⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁸ “Avon Markets,” About Avon, Avon Company, accessed February 5, 2013, <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/avonmarkets.html>

The reason they set the slogan up that way is because we were hiring women 125 years ago, before they could even vote! So he enabled women to be in the workforce even before that was a thing that women did.⁹

The “he” in the above quote is a reference to the founder of the company, David Hall McConnell. The origin story of Avon is quite fascinating because it has changed and evolved over time. The modern incarnation of Avon’s origin story establishes David McConnell as a paternalistic entrepreneur who created his company with the altruistic aim of helping women.

Through the Avon website potential recruits and current representatives can learn about the company’s founding and David McConnell’s desire to give women an opportunity for employment at a time when their options were limited. As the Avon website outlines:

Avon Founder David H. McConnell offered women a rarity in 19th century America: a chance at financial independence. In 1886, it was practically unheard of for a woman to run her own business. Only about 5 million women in the United States were working outside the home, let alone climbing the ranks of any corporate ladder. That number accounted for just 20% of all women.¹⁰

To emphasize the paternalistic character of McConnell, the origin story explains that McConnell was saving women from the dangerous and/or not glamorous labor in the domestic, manufacturing, or agriculture industry. The website also points out that women were paid lower wages than men during the time Avon’s predecessor the California

⁹ “Barbara,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 1, 2011.

¹⁰ “History,” About Avon, Avon Company, accessed May 1, 2012, Avon, <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/mcconnell.html>.

Perfume Company's (CPC) founding. Luckily for the women of the late nineteenth century McConnell was there to "radically alter that scenario" and give "women the opportunity to create and manage their own business."¹¹

Under the subheading "Origins of an Idea," the Avon website recounts that during his time as a door-to-door salesman McConnell discovered that women were more interested in his perfume samples, which he had made with help from his chemist friend as a means of literally getting his foot in the door, than the books he was peddling. Rather than suggest that McConnell saw this as an opportunity to make profits, the story stresses McConnell's altruism:

McConnell saw women struggling to make ends meet and recognized in many of them natural salespeople who would easily relate to other women and passionately market the products his new company would first sell – perfumes.¹²

This modern retelling of the Avon origin story constructs McConnell and the company he founded as progressive and one of the first to support women in the workplace. Yet this version in its current form reflects more about the current cultural values and less about McConnell's or CPC/Avon's at its founding. This version of the origin story is an important part of Avon's management and recruitment strategy that insists that Avon is *the* company for women and is "a company that believes in every woman's future."¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "History," About Avon, Avon Company, accessed May 1, 2012, Avon, <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/mcconnell.html>.

¹³ This quote is a line from an Avon produced commercial found online. See "Become an Avon Representative," YouTube video, 0:32, posted by "katesateam," January 23, 2012, accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27-qATykoQc>.

Avon's current origin story constructs McConnell as an entrepreneur who saw the value in women as sales people and wanted to help women by giving them (better) jobs. Indeed, when McConnell founded the California Perfume Company in 1886, women's options for employment were limited and predicated on their geographic location, class, race, and marital status.¹⁴ That McConnell hired women, during a time when only 5% of commercial travelers were female, is remarkable, but it does not mean that McConnell's desires were as altruistic as they are portrayed.¹⁵ As discussed in the previous chapter, in his decision to hire women McConnell had to balance societal pressures against women working with the general growing disdain for traveling salesmen. Whether altruistic or not, McConnell's choice in hiring women provided him a means of distancing his company and representatives from other traveling salesmen (because they were women). McConnell also assigned women territories in their home areas, as opposed to traveling from town to town, with the understanding that women would utilize their own social networks to drum up sales. Furthermore, McConnell focused on the respectability of sales agents and tended to recruit older middle-class white women who would have the most clout and access within their communities.¹⁶ It is likely that recruiting women as sales

¹⁴ On the history of employment for women in the United States, see Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *America's Working Women: A Documentary History 1600 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ava Baron, *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, *America's Working Women*. Also, for a detailed analysis of the representatives and their motivations around the time of CPC/Avon's founding see Katina Manko, "'Now You are in business for Yourself': The Independent Contractors of the California Perfume Company, 1886-1938," *Business and Economic History* 26 (1997): 5.

¹⁶ Manko, "'Now You are in business for Yourself.'"

agents represented a calculated decision about creating a direct selling business during a time of social and economic flux.¹⁷

The earliest records of David McConnell indicate that he began CPC with the desire of creating a business that would be more profitable than the book peddling trade, by selling goods that were consumable.¹⁸ He recruited and trained his first agent, Mrs. P.F.E. Albee, who had already been under his supervision peddling books.¹⁹ Mrs. Albee had worked under McConnell for two years and had been one of his most successful sales agents, so he had her experiment with selling his perfumes for six months before officially establishing the California Perfume Company. Mrs. Albee was a middle-class white woman who was married to a former State Senator. She had already been employed as the manager of the general store that they owned and as a book agent. Yet Mrs. Albee is immortalized in the Avon origin story as the first “Avon Lady” and one of the women that McConnell originally supported. The constructed image of Mrs. Albee does not align with her real life as a woman of middle-class standing. Consequently, the Avon website is silent about these aspects of Mrs. Albee’s life. Nevertheless, McConnell did form a business that strategically employed women and the modern version of Avon’s origin story uses this fact in continuing that tradition.

¹⁷ See Chapter 3 for a brief outline of the social and economic changes during the late nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Laura Klepacki, *Avon: Building the World’s Premier Company for Women*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005), 11. See also Vicki E.D. Flanders, “Persis Foster Eames Albee: The First ‘Avon Lady,’” Education, Historical Society of Cheshire County (2007), accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.hscnh.org/educationhp/hp8.cfm>.

Avon: Origin Stories Over Time

Avon's origin story did not always take this exact form. Rather, this story developed and changed over time, growing out of different cultural contexts. The shifts in Avon's origin stories are evident within some of the materials from the Avon Historical Archive. For example, the *Outlook* newsletter was a monthly newsletter that served as the main form of communication between representatives and CPC/Avon's management. A close examination of these newsletters reveals subtle changes over time as to how both representatives and management conceived of their business as being *for* women.

It is quite remarkable that within the *Outlook* newsletters from the early part of the twentieth century, the CPC's origin story, as told today, is not present. Reading through the letters from agents and the listed names of sales contest winners, we can glean that as early as 1906 the majority of CPC's representatives were women. CPC is referred to as only a business that sold the highest quality of goods to people in the convenience of their home (this included goods that could be purchased at a general store like cooking powders and moth killer). That McConnell was mostly recruiting women to sell his goods or that he was creating a business for women is not mentioned in these texts.

Additionally, that CPC's recruiting women of for direct sales work, although significant, was not as unheard of in the early twentieth century as the modern Avon origin story implies. During the period from 1905 to 1920 several "Field Notes," which were letters from female agents reporting on their sales and successes featured in the newsletters, indicate that agents were being offered (and sometimes accepted) sales

positions with other similar companies. This might have been a real concern for a company with little direct management of their employees. For example, an article in the August 1916 issue of *Outlook* warned of the dangers of switching businesses. The article remarked that no other company had the quality of goods carried by CPC. They stated confidently that agents would inevitably return to CPC but cautioned that they would be required to restart at a lower level.²⁰ Furthermore, McConnell makes no mention of his drive to employ women in a 1926 special issue newsletter, “A Short CPC History.” At least up to 1926, the story of McConnell as the paternalistic savior of women had not yet developed in its current form.²¹

In contrast to the origin story told by Avon today, not only did some women have opportunities for work at the early part of the twentieth century, some women had no choice but to work. The type of work available to women largely depended on their class and race.²² Some working-class women might have been in the manufacturing or agriculture fields as described on Avon’s webpage; some women might have been working as domestics in other women’s homes; some might have been taking in laundry or boarders or even doing homework.²³ Middle-class white women might have had access to employment as social workers, clerks, phone operators, or as “shop girls”

²⁰ “CPC Outlook 1916,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15017coll20/id/829/rec/116>.

²¹ “A Short CPC History,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, (1926), accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/2475>.

²² Eileen Boris, *Home to Work*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Alice Kesler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²³ *Ibid.*

depending on the specific date and location.²⁴ Because CPC favored recruiting and marketing in rural areas, middle-class and even working-class white women could have seen CPC work as preferable to the other types of employment available. In fact, by 1921 according to the material found in the newsletters, it appears that CPC might have been thought of as a better choice of employment when compared to other available options. As one agent, Mrs. Aurelia Ackley, writes: “It [CPC] is the only work for women who want to be independent and yet self-respecting and dignified.”²⁵ Although the factors affecting women’s employment at the turn of the century were complex, clearly CPC was not the only company hiring women.

During the 1930s CPC shifted marketing and sales strategies. They began slowly entering urban areas and larger cities and using print advertisements to market their products and their business to women. Also, in 1939 CPC changed their company name to Avon and focused their marketing more on beauty products and less on household goods. Up until this point, at least in what can be ascertained from the newsletters and advertisements within the (digitized) Avon Historical Archive, McConnell had not formalized his company’s origins in terms of creating a business *for* women. However, by 1943, an advertisement indicates the beginning of the Avon origin story taking root. Framed by a layout of illustrations of women (CPC/Avon agents) dressed in different styles and period-specific clothing, entitled “Fashion Through the Ages,” the advertisement read:

²⁴ See also Venus Green, *Race on the Line*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

²⁵ “Outlook June 1921,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/3978>.

Avon's founder, D.H. McConnell, Sr., conceived the idea of giving women work they could carry on from their homes, even before he knew what product he would sell. And the way women have demonstrated their interest in selling from the beginning and the way they have used their time to good advantage, and their fine accomplishments, would fill many a book.²⁶

Not surprisingly, the origin narrative published in the 1940s comes during a time when Avon needed to compete for both consumer business and a sales force, as WWII sent more women into the traditionally male-occupied workforce.²⁷ This 1940s version of Avon's origins accentuates and naturalizes women's selling abilities while underscoring the importance of women having work that they could do from home. Establishing Avon as a contrast to entering "men's jobs," this origin story emphasized the value of women remaining "in the home." Ironically, however, most of an Avon representative's labor would have taken place going door-to-door or into other women's homes and therefore not taken place inside of the home.

The 1940s version of the origin story also highlights a growing importance on the value of time, which in the 1940s *Outlook* newsletters became commonplace as well. Because Avon representatives had no direct supervision they must internalize management techniques like schedules or other forms of time management. The increased use of phrases like "time is money," "there is no time like the present," as well as advice on keeping schedules that appear in the 1940s newsletters reveal how Avon was

²⁶ "Outlook June 1943," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/7618>.

²⁷ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*.

attempting to discursively manage their labor. Through company newsletters Avon encouraged women to spend a good amount of their time working but only around their duties as wives and mothers.

Another important aspect of Avon's origin story concerns Mrs. Albee, described in the previous section. While the company origin story shifted slightly over the years, her story has remained relatively the same. David McConnell deemed her the "Mother of the California Perfume Company" in a 1903 autobiography.²⁸ McConnell does remark more on Mrs. Albee besides crediting her with for being the first agent and recruiting other "fine agents." Although she was not discussed in the early CPC newsletters, Mrs. Albee remained involved with CPC for twenty-five years and passed away in 1914. Today, Mrs. Albee is a celebrated and venerated figure within Avon and her "likeness" is immortalized in the shape of a porcelain figurine that is awarded to representatives for high sales.

The figure below (see fig. 4.1) left to right features a photograph of Mrs. Albee taken around the time that she joined CPC (age 50). The two images that accompany Mrs. Albee's photograph are of two examples of the "Albee Doll" awards given to Avon representatives. This coveted award changes style from year-to-year but is meant to represent the "spirit of the pioneering woman of Avon, Mrs. Albee."²⁹ The contrast between the image of the real Mrs. Albee and the doll is remarkable. The Albee dolls

²⁸ David McConnell, "Great Oak," Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, accessed June 1, 2012, <http://cdm16038.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15017coll20/id/2496>.

²⁹ "History," About Avon, Avon Company, accessed May 1, 2012, Avon, <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/mcconnell.html>.

construct an image of an early CPC/Avon representative as a middle-class, white, young “Victorian Lady.” Indeed, illustrations of early CPC representatives, depicted as a Victorian Lady, are quite common within *Outlook* newsletter after the 1930s and go hand in hand with CPC/Avon’s overall imaging and appeal to “respectable” middle-class white women.³⁰



Figure 4.1 – Photograph of P.F.E. Albee circa 1890s, Albee award 1986, Albee Award 2012

Although the story of Mrs. Albee had been known (at least generally) since McConnell’s book in 1903, the first Albee Awards were not given until 1969.³¹ This begs the question: Why would Avon decide to use an idealized version of Victorian womanhood to reward their representatives at *this* time? Unfortunately I could not find

³⁰ See Chapter 3 for the discussion on CPC/Avon’s marketing of white middle-class femininity.

³¹ Ian Bagley, “Honor Mrs. Albee Fundraiser,” Honor Mrs. Ablee, 2006, accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.honormrsalbee.com>.

any company rationale as to why they decided to create and award Albee dolls. However, this time period is significant for Avon because in 1968 Avon reversed their stance on hiring women of color and other ethnic minorities.³² Although Avon had previously left the decision of hiring women of color up to sales managers, they generally urged against the practice. By the 1940s there is some evidence that African American representatives were recruited but confined to working only in segregated territories.³³

Reflective of the social changes of the late 1960s Avon took a political stance against discriminatory practices. This opened up new markets of consumers to Avon and helped the company construct their image as a socially responsible corporation.³⁴ Throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s Avon became one of the leading cosmetics companies marketing beauty products to women of color.³⁵ By the 1960s Avon had already long established its association with middle-class white femininity in representing its company. However, the timing of the Mrs. Albee award and its association with Victorian womanhood as an award for Avon's highest honors seems a bit suspect. Perhaps the Albee doll not only represented the spirit of Avon, but was also meant to serve as a symbolic reminder that Avon had been the business for white women.

By 1986, when a special centennial celebration brochure entitled "The Greatest Story Ever Told" was released, the current version of the Avon origin story was

³² Manko and Feitz both document Avon/CPC's company policies toward hiring women of color. See Manko, "Ding Dong! Avon Calling," and Lindsey Feitz, "Democratizing Beauty: Avon's Global Beauty Ambassadors and The Transnational Marketing of Femininity, 1954-2010," (Ph.D. diss. University of Kansas, 2010).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Feitz, "Democratizing Beauty," 175.

³⁵ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

cemented; as the brochure read: “From the day our very first Representative knocked on the very first door, Avon has stood for opportunity. We’ve given women all over ways to grow.”³⁶ The current Avon origin story keeps emphasis on their long tradition of seeing the value of hiring women. The Avon origin story has shifted throughout Avon’s one hundred years as a business and generally reflected the needs and the values of the time. It appears that women did not need convincing that Avon was for hiring women during the early parts of Avon’s history. By the 1940s their story highlighted how Avon allowed women to work from home. Today, Avon has effectively branded their business as being a space that rewards and supports women. These beliefs are folded into the direct sales imaginary.

Putting Vision to Work

Like Avon, many of the other successful direct selling organizations infuse their origin stories and philosophy with a deep commitment to entrepreneurialism and meeting the needs of women. This is especially evident in the ‘vision’ from the founders of Premiere Designs. Premiere Designs is a jewelry company that uses the home party sales method. Founded in 1985 by Joan and Andy Horner, a charismatic couple of whom Premiere distributors speak very fondly, Premiere Designs’ website says:

From day one, Joan and Andy’s four reasons for starting Premier Designs were clearly stated: Opportunity for mothers to be able to stay home more with their children; provide encouragement and extra income for single moms; provide a

³⁶ “The Greatest Story Ever Told-Avon’s Centennial,” Avon Historical Archive, Hagley Digital Archives, Hagley Museum and Library, Hagley Digital Archives, (1986), accessed June 1, 2012, <http://digital.hagley.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15017coll20/id/2367/rec/194>.

way for individuals, especially those in full-time Christian work, to meet their financial needs; be a company that would support ministries around the world and in America.³⁷

The website highlights how their company is based upon “Biblical principles” and stresses that they “believe God created every person with value. We believe life’s priorities should be God, Family, and then career. We believe in America and the free enterprise system.”³⁸

The origin story of Premiere Designs and their stated philosophy works to recruit consultants and maintain their current sales force by blending their company with religious belief and behaviors. For example, the Premiere Designs consultants in this study told me that they were motivated to join this company because of the founders’ religious faith and incorporation of that faith into their business. As Nicki remarks:

Our company's philosophy is to honor God, serve people, and enrich lives. Andy and Joan Horner are the founders of the company. They started this company to serve missions all over the world. That's why they started the company. They wanted to get into as many different countries, build schools, churches, and serve needy people. They're very spiritual people . . . and that's what their goal is . . . they personally tithe their profits from what all of us are doing. That's what attracted me to their company.³⁹

³⁷ “Our Vision,” Premiere Designs, accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.premierdesigns.com/our_vision.html.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Nicki,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 1, 2011.

Nicki's retelling of her company's origin story adds the emphasis on doing charitable works. The founders are constructed as benevolent care-takers who established their company that they might use their profits to fund Christian missions in various "needy" countries. Clearly, at least by Nicki's account, the founders of this company have no interest in profits, as they "personally tithed" their profits to fund their projects.

Some consultants are drawn to the blending of Christian faith and practices into the business practices of Premiere Designs. They find the de-secularized aspects of these business practices appealing because religious faith is generally considered personal and or belonging to the private space of home or church. Being able to bring business together with private beliefs encouraged Janet's recruitment into Premiere Designs. According to Janet she felt that the company's use of Biblical principles structured the way that they treated people. She was especially impressed to find her company's openness about prayer while at her company's yearly rally (convention). In elaborating on her fondness for her company and their Biblical foundation Janet notes:

So I'm religious but I'm always afraid to offend people so in my shows I usually tell people that it has a biblical foundation, but I usually tell people that means to me that they just treat people the way they should be treated. Personally, I love it. We go to the rallies and we pray. When we went to the Haven we toured the home office and the home office has a chapel on-site! Like, it's so rare that you see company like that; that has that type of foundation that they are just so open and accepting to it. What job can you have that has a prayer line that you can call in

and ask for people to pray for different things that you might be going through?

That's abnormal!⁴⁰

Nicki and Janet both find it important to work for a company in which they can bring their religious beliefs into the work they do. With Premiere Designs philosophy and the corporate culture that it establishes, consultants find an alternative to the secularized world of business.

Premiere Designs also recruits non-Christians as consultants who might feel less comfortable with the company's strong focus on evangelical Christianity. Teresa, however, a newer recruit to Premiere Designs who is a self-described atheist, told me she has no problem with her company's Christian foundation. As she explains,

it's a Biblical-based company. I don't necessarily believe in that. However I think that the idea of serving and helping others is universal across anybody's religion. I think that everyone should help other people so it doesn't bother me.⁴¹

Even though Teresa does not share her company's Christian beliefs she did tell me that she still promotes their beliefs during home parties, especially if it might help increase her sales.

Premiere Design's philosophy and infusion of Christianity into business is likely directly borrowed from Mary Kay Cosmetics. The origin story of Mary Kay Cosmetics has been solidified by company founder Mary Kay Ash herself in the several books she authored. As it describes on the company website, Mary Kay Ash created her company by accident when she decided to write a "book to help women survive in the male-

⁴⁰ "Janet," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 10, 2011.

⁴¹ "Teresa," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 19, 2011.

dominated business world.”⁴² She began this task by writing a list of things that companies did right and things that she felt they could have done better. When she finished her list she realized that “she had inadvertently created a marketing plan for a dream company—one which would provide women with open-ended potential to achieve personal and financial success.”⁴³ With this, Ash used \$5,000 and the help of her son to launch Mary Kay Cosmetics in 1963.

Ash constructed a corporate culture around evangelical Christian principles. For example, Ash described her business as being built upon the “Golden Rule,” which is the idea that people treat others as they would like to be treated. Additionally, Ash incorporated her philosophy of “God first, family second, and career third” into her business, making this the company motto. Ash created Mary Kay Cosmetics as a company that included evangelical Christian faith and practice. As with Premiere Designs, the culture of Mary Kay Cosmetics includes Christian prayers at sales meetings, and serves as a motivating factor for joining the company for some recruits.⁴⁴

Accordingly, one of the Mary Kay consultants who I interviewed explained to me that she felt the merger of her faith with her work was what *provided* her the work/family balance she had always been seeking. Jennifer frames her experience with Mary Kay Cosmetics as a direct contrast to what women in traditional corporations experience.

⁴² “About Mary Kay Ash,” Company and Founder, Mary Kay Corporate, accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.marykay.com/en-US/About-Mary-Kay/CompanyFounder/Pages/About-Mary-Kay-Ash.aspx>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Beth Kreydatus, ““Enriching Women’s Lives”: The Mary Kay Approach to Beauty, Business, and Feminism,” *Business and Economic History On-Line* 3 (2005), accessed March 3, 2009, <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2005/kreydatus.pdf>.

Through Mary Kay Cosmetics and its guiding religious philosophy Jennifer experiences being able to bridge her role as mother and worker. As Jennifer explains:

So faith first, family second, and career third. I believe that you can pull from this every day. And so I feel like women who have to work in corporate America, for them it is a struggle every day because they want *this* life but they have to go and make this over there. And I'm pretty blessed because I can get up in the morning I can do my Bible study I can take care of my family . . . I'm able to make my dinner, pick up my kids. The most important thing right here is I have always been the mom to take my kids to and from school and [be] there for them. . . And so I feel blessed beyond all belief that Mary Kay fell into my lap like that and so I know God intended that to be. That means to me I can say I have flexibility and freedom . . . I don't worry about being sick or have to worry about who can pick up my son because he was sick last week at school. I love my life and that allows me to put my family there and work my career around that. And still have income to support my family.⁴⁵

For Jennifer, a consultant working with Mary Kay for sixteen years, everything about the company could be brought back to Mary Kay's motto. In this example, the guiding philosophy of Mary Kay Cosmetics structures how consultants experience their relationship to their company as well as structuring consultants' relationships within their families.

Although not all direct selling companies share the same enthusiasm for evangelical Christianity as Mary Kay Cosmetics and Premiere Designs, all of the origin

⁴⁵ "Jennifer," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 3, 2011.

stories for the companies in my sample share the theme of wanting to help women in some way. Some companies use their story to imply that direct sales work will allow women to stay at home. For example, the origin story of the cookware company Pampered Chef notes that it was founded by a school teacher who was looking for a way to continue staying home with her children.⁴⁶ Like Jennifer stressed the means for creating a lifestyle that is not about work *or* home but about *both* together compels many women to join direct selling companies. Other companies' origin stories express their desire to help women through a merger of empowerment and consumerism. For example, the skincare company Arbonne notes that it was founded on women deserving the absolute best skincare and the idea that their business was more than just changing your skin; it was changing your life.⁴⁷ The idea that women are deserving of particular qualities of goods plays with classed notions of empowerment but couches it in consumption. In other words, through Arbonne women can change their life to get what they (truly) deserve, which is high quality skincare products. Empowerment based in consumerism is a repeated theme throughout direct selling discourses.

The evident themes within the origin stories of the companies in this study all work to contribute to an overarching direct sales imaginary. The direct sales imaginary is fluid and amorphous, containing many different and sometimes overlapping or contradictory discourses. The inherent ambiguity of imaginaries is what allows different people to see various desires and expectations fulfilled by what appears to be a complete

⁴⁶ "About Us," Pampered Chef, accessed May 1, 2012, http://www.pamperedchef.com/our_company/company.html.

⁴⁷ "The Arbonne Opportunity," About Arbonne, Arbonne, accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.arbonne.com/opportunity.asp>.

or singular idea. Thus, the direct sales imaginary is a belief that direct selling is specifically good for women because: it dissolves the perceived boundaries between the public/private and the home/work spheres; it offers women empowerment; it provides women with unlimited financial rewards; it offers women friendship and fun; it is a feminist or at least a woman-centered industry; it is an industry that values the traditional “natural” roles of women; it offers women “freedom.” The question then becomes: What is freedom in direct sales?

Bridging the Divide: Freedom and Working from Home

The most important and repeated motivation for entering into direct sales given by women in my study was the desire to be stay-at-home mothers –to have *freedom*.

According to the Direct Selling Association, the majority of direct sales distributors are married women and half of these women have young children.⁴⁸ Direct selling companies offer an alluring promise to mothers that direct sales can easily merge their direct sales work with the work of motherhood. Aspiring to freedom in this sense means being able to have choices in the way women spend their time; as one distributor told me she “just love[s] the freedom and the flexibility and being my own boss and waking up every day and saying I can do whatever I want to do.”⁴⁹ For some, direct selling provides meaningful employment for those who have remained outside of waged labor. For example, Olivia explains that she has never been a traditional employee and being able to create her own schedule is what she is most comfortable with: “I haven’t [ever] worked,

⁴⁸According to personal communication with the Director of Marketing & Publication Services at the Direct Selling Association, “the majority” of the distributors in a 2008 were married women and half of those women had young children. Karen E. T. Garrett, email message to author, January 23, 2013.

⁴⁹ “Nicki,” August 1, 2011.

I've always been a stay-at-home mom and homeschooled and so direct sales falls right into that getting to set my own schedule."⁵⁰ Work, for Olivia, did not include the work of parenting or the work of educating her children; instead work was only defined by payment. Other women in this study explained that they sought out new career goals after they had children. For instance, Janet had been working on getting her real-estate license when she out that she was pregnant with her third child. At this point her goals "kind of shifted to be able to stay home with my kids again."⁵¹

Indeed, direct selling can provide women with a schedule that is workable around their needs and allows them to do most of the work "from home." What struck me as interesting, however, is that although most of the women in my study reported "working their business" relatively few hours, most of the women also described "prospecting" while going through their normal day. Prospecting refers to activities of seeking out new recruits for the business or potential hostesses and customers. Most of the companies in this study push their consultants to wear their company's products at all times and use them to begin conversations with anyone they come across anywhere. For example, a Mary Kay consultant told me that if she sees a woman while out doing her daily routine she will compliment something about her appearance and tell her how much she would love to give her a "facial" (a Mary Kay home party). At other times she will approach a woman telling her that she would perfect for her business opportunity.

The process of prospecting everyone-everywhere is also referred to as "lifestyling" and is taught by upline supervisors to new recruits. Nicki explained to me

⁵⁰ "Olivia," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 15, 2011.

⁵¹ "Janet," August 20, 2011.

that she used lifestyling to gain entrance into new networks when she moved into a new area:

Well I moved here and I didn't know anybody. So I just started living my life, joining a church, going shopping, people from the bank, the post, there's people everywhere that are willing, who want to get free jewelry. So I just wore my jewelry out and about, lifestyling, and I would compliment people on their jewelry or their sun glasses or something. Or I would be shopping for clothes and going, 'I'm looking for the perfect clothes for this convention' and I would just start up a conversation about what I did. And they're like, 'What do you do?' and I'm like, 'I give jewelry away for free!' And they're like, 'what do you mean?' I go, 'I have a business and that's what I do is try to show women and a couple of girlfriends a really good time, teach them about fashion and then they get free jewelry for having me over'.⁵²

As women would go through their daily lives they looked for opportunities to discuss their business with others. To Rebecca, direct selling is about meeting new people and making connections everywhere she goes; she explained that,

it's the numbers, it's all about the numbers. So you're always, you know, in the back of your mind, you need to be talking to people while sitting on an airplane waiting or at a doctor's office, you need to be bold enough at times to connect with people.⁵³

⁵² "Nicki," August 1, 2011.

⁵³ "Rebecca," interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 2, 2011.

For Rebecca, making connections meant new customers but it requires self-confidence and she felt that one had to develop a thick skin to handle rejection. Nevertheless, all of the women in this study stressed how important talking about their business to anyone they met was to their success. Many of the consultants I interviewed described booking a home party from someone they had just met in line somewhere. Some women even go so far as joining new church groups or activity groups in the hopes of meeting new people to prospect.

As I noted, the ability to work at home was the most frequently cited motivation for the women in this study to enter into direct sales. However, I found that lifestyling and prospecting did not make it into women's accounts of their time spent working; also, this type of work did not take place in the home. Instead, women who consider themselves as working from home are often-times really working in public spaces. I was surprised as to learn that whether women were prospecting at church, giving samples out at the gym, or meeting with a new representative at a coffee shop, very little working "from home" actually took place inside the physical home. As a consequence, I find that *the home* in this case functions as a symbolic and portable object.⁵⁴ The home, then, is a concept that women carry with them to all the spaces that they work; it symbolizes an informal and fluid relationship between space and labor as a contrast to the formalized relationship of working an office. In direct sales women can work from home—anywhere.

⁵⁴ Krishan Kumar and Ekaterina Makarova argue that 'the home' is becoming an increasingly portable object with the uses of new media technologies. They observe that people "no longer, or with such a firm sense of difference, separate home from nonhome attitudes and activities. Instead, we carry our home, or at least what we previously had reserved for the privacy of the home, into the public sphere. The home becomes eminently portable: have home, will travel." Krishan Kumar and Ekaterina Makarova, "The Portable Home: The Domestication of Public Space," *Sociological Theory* 26 (2008), 332.

Another idea that is part of the direct selling imaginary is that direct selling supports families and can become a family business. All of the women in my study talked about how they incorporated their children into different parts of their direct selling labor. For example, Elizabeth described having her young daughter and son help put labels on her paperwork, or sometimes even pass out items at shows.⁵⁵ Barbara, an Avon representative, explained how her children would help her pack orders and deliver brochures.⁵⁶ Barbara would always incentivize her children's help with products from the company or a little treat. Similarly, Olivia told me that she paid her teenage daughter a percentage of her commission to help load demonstration equipment and do administrative tasks.

Business sociologist Nichole Biggart has observed that some direct selling businesses co-opt distributors' children to elicit company loyalty by establishing a corporate ideology that sees a value in "teaching their children the moral principles of capitalist enterprise."⁵⁷ Indeed, in this study some women described themselves as running a family business that would set a long lasting example for their children. For example, Nicki felt that the ability to work with children drew women into direct sales and taught the children important lessons about business, explaining that "women love that. They loved the fact that we could earn money and incorporate children into that. So that's probably why Adam [my son] probably wants to be an entrepreneur or he wants to

⁵⁵ "Elizabeth," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 18, 2011.

⁵⁶ "Barbara," September 1, 2011.

⁵⁷ Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 83.

create something for himself.”⁵⁸ Although this work is not necessarily harmful, as far as child labor goes, the women in my study do not define it as really putting their children to work. Nor do they count this labor as part of their reckoning of hours spent.

Not only do consultants employ the labor of their families and children but they also enlist the labor of home party hostesses. As outlined in Chapter 1, when a hostess agrees to hold a home party she is first asked to invite a lot of many people from her personal network of friends and family to attend via emails, written invitations, or phone calls. On the day of the party a hostess is expected to have a clean space available in her home and a spread of light refreshments. It is also suggested that hostesses attempt to solicit orders from guests who did not attend the party. Hostesses are given a free gift or a discount toward their own purchases in exchange for opening up their homes to consultants. In a sense, hostesses are sharing in the labor of sales through their efforts, but this labor is obscured by the social act of the party. Although a home party is in fact an economic activity, because it takes place inside the informal space of home the labor required for its success is made less visible.

The Logics of Being Your Own Boss

All corporations/organizations are structured around their own central logic. This logic might be described as organizing principles or an institutional world-view that also provides a vocabulary for social actors to create a sense of self.⁵⁹ For social actors within a particular institution this might mean understanding, accepting, and internalizing

⁵⁸ “Nicki,” August 1, 2011.

⁵⁹ Patricia H. Thornton and William Ocasio, “Institutional Logics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*, ed. Kerstin Sahlin-Andersson et al. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008).

particular rules and regulations as being good for the company –and thereby good for themselves. These governing principles also dictate the techniques used by companies to manage employees. The direct selling industry presents itself as an industry that is unfettered by traditional managerial constraints like schedules and supervisors. While on the surface it might appear that direct selling workers are not a managed workforce, consultants are managed through various internalized logics and techniques of self-surveillance. These logics are evident within company origins stories that contribute to the overall direct sales imaginary.

The central logic of direct selling that is evident within the direct sales imaginary is that consultants are their “own boss.” Many of the origin stories outlined in this chapter demonstrate the influence and importance of an entrepreneurial ideology that frames direct sales as small business ownership. Entrepreneurial ideology is comprised of ideas about self-reliance and free enterprise.⁶⁰ I asked consultants how they defined entrepreneurship and if they identified as an entrepreneur. The majority of the consultants in this study answered that they did self-identify as entrepreneurs and as small business owners. For example, Janet identified herself as an entrepreneur and defines this as “somebody that has the desire to succeed and their own line of work. You know...somebody that has that drive.”⁶¹ Similarly, Nicki notes that entrepreneurs are those who can follow their vision to reach their goals: “[An entrepreneur] is somebody who has a plan for life. A vision, a dream, a lifestyle, a goal...and how they went about

⁶⁰ Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism*, 107.

⁶¹ “Janet,” August 20, 2011.

their life and they do their work and they do whatever it takes to get there.”⁶² Mary finds that being an entrepreneur simply means that she is not controlled by a boss, noting that an entrepreneur is “someone who works independently of someone telling them what they must do.”⁶³

Working in direct sales requires that people manage their labor themselves. This *is* the central organizing logic of direct sales. Defining consultants as entrepreneurs makes the onus of success or failure fall onto the consultant. Direct sellers internalize the rhetoric of entrepreneurship as espoused in company origin stories and the direct sales imaginary. Through this logic direct selling companies are able to exact labor and profits without applying direct management techniques. Furthermore, direct selling companies reap the benefits of having a sales force without having to attend to their employees’ work environments (because they work at home), disputes over salaries (because salaries are said to solely reflect the effort of consultants), or even overhead. When there are problems with sales, women blame themselves. *Not a single woman in this study said anything disparaging about their companies.*⁶⁴

When consultants are struggling in their direct sales work, especially in terms of self-management, they do not find fault within the products, companies, or methods of direct sales. Instead, as evidence of the internalization of the entrepreneurship ideology, they believe their biggest struggles are with their own attitudes and motivation. Some

⁶² “Nicki,” August 1, 2011.

⁶³ “Mary,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 28, 2012.

⁶⁴ The disparaging comments quoted in this study all come from disillusioned former direct sales workers.

women explain that because direct selling requires them to ‘put themselves out there’ they need to develop self-confidence and skills to handle rejection. Nicki told me that her biggest obstacle was her own mindset:

Mindset is huge in this business. The one thing that I tell people is that you have to be flexible, you have to be positive, and you have to let things roll off your back quickly if something disappoints you because that will drag you down.⁶⁵

Other consultants found that it was sometimes difficult to remain motivated. For example, Serena told me her biggest obstacle was finding the motivation to sit down and make phone calls to drum up business. She notes that she finds herself putting it off “because you know what when you are at home, you’re like oh I got to go put that laundry, or start that chicken, you can find a jillion other things to do before you sit down. It’s just sitting down and doing it – it’s making those calls to get people on your calendar.”⁶⁶ Likewise, Olivia explained to me that self-discipline was hard to maintain knowing that her sales status could easily slip down. She finds that in direct sales you are always one step away from failure.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Today, companies like Avon and Mary Kay Cosmetics claim that they enrich women’s lives or that they are *the* companies for women. Within their origin stories reveal clues to the strategic deployment of coded messages about women and work, which were used for the recruitment and retention of their sales forces. Today, these

⁶⁵ “Nicki,” August 1, 2011.

⁶⁶ “Serena,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 20, 2011.

⁶⁷ “Olivia,” August 15, 2011.

origin stories inform the construction of a direct sales imaginary. The direct sales imaginary is circulated through the direct selling industry's promotional literature, on company websites, at home parties, at meetings and at conventions, and becomes internalized within the narratives of consultants themselves. The direct sales imaginary is illustrated in a list from the magazine *Empowering Women*, which answers the question, "Why Direct Selling Works for Women," with the following: "freedom and flexibility, financial security and control, tax benefits, recognition, personal growth, social aspect, and no limits."⁶⁸ Hence, this imaginary requires that women accept their company as serving the needs of, as defined by the direct selling industry, "women."

The direct sales imaginary deploys an ideology of entrepreneurialism that structures women's relationship with businesses—not as employees but as independent small business owners. Yet, imaginaries are able to contain contradictory messages while remaining to appear unified, allowing people with different expectations or desires to see what they want while ignoring contradictions. One of the contradictions is in how consultants conceptualize "work." For example, most of the women in this study kept poor track of the hours that they worked. Even though companies stress the importance of self-discipline and time management, the ideology that sees consultants as small business owners discourages women from *logging* the time that they work. As business owners their time 'belongs' to them, it is not recorded for billing purposes. However, when women expressed their struggles with directly selling they told me that to succeed they

⁶⁸ "Why Direct Selling Works for Women," *Empowering Women*, 1, November, 2006, 11.

would need to “work it like a business,” meaning adding schedules and accountability measures to their goals.

Likewise, how *work* and *home* are defined represent interesting contradictions inherent in the direct sales imaginary. As illustrated in this chapter, the desire to work from home was one of the main motivations to join a direct selling company for the women in this study. The ability to work from home gave women the flexibility to work around their children’s schedules. However, with lifestyling and prospecting, working from home could mean working assiduously throughout one’s day wherever one goes. These activities are not considered as work by many in my study. The direct selling imaginary and the discourses of gender that are inherent therein structure how women define work and define themselves as workers. The direct sales imaginary, however, also naturalizes specific gender structures and naturalizes failure, thereby disavowing potential critiques of gender regimes and the direct selling industry.

Chapter 5

IN THE SERVICE OF SALES: GENDER AND THE DIRECT SALES IMAGINARY

Introduction

For more than fifteen years I have watched as my mother signs up to be representative of various direct selling organizations. She has sold everything from cosmetics to cookware to scrapbooking supplies. With each new company her experience is nearly the same. First, my mother learns about a product and company that she likes and when the “starter-kit” arrives she is filled with excitement and motivation. After signing up she might hold a home party or do a vendor event but eventually her motivation and drive to find and hold parties will wane and she will become discouraged about her potential success. Just when she has lost interest in one company she finds another and begins the cycle anew. The direct sales imaginary drives my mother to repeat this cycle over and over again; it is something my mother wholeheartedly believes in. The direct sales imaginary is what she is describing when she repeatedly tells me that direct selling is an industry that truly supports women and encourages them to be empowered in a way she feels that corporate culture does not. Above all else, she believes that direct selling will bring her what she has always desired—financial freedom. Yet, when she is unable to “work the business” as it is modeled to her, she blames herself for her failures. In the meantime, numerous boxes from various companies (with which she remains active) pile up around her home and my mother continues to lose more money than she will ever see in return.

My mother's story represents one way that some women experience direct selling. The narratives and discourses, like those articulated in company origin stories, construct a direct sales imaginary that is communicated to all prospective and current direct selling consultants. This imaginary relies on historical definitions of femininity and a hegemonic system of whiteness to transform direct selling labor into something more than a job – it is a lifestyle. As a lifestyle, the mechanisms of controlling and organizing labor are integrated into one's personality. For many women, direct selling becomes *who they are* rather than *what they do*. It is from this junction between the so-called public world of work and the so-called private world of identity that emerges a unique space for examining how gender can discursively be put to work by organizations.

What are the narratives and subjectivities presented through direct selling discourses? How do real consultants make sense of these narratives and integrate them into their own identities and discourses about direct sales? What story about gender, race, and class is being told through direct selling discourses and how do women navigate this story to create their own subject positions? In this chapter I explore how women are influenced and/or compelled by the most prominent themes found within the direct selling industry. The direct selling industry tells stories to women about finding better work/home balance, about building relationships and having fun, about empowerment, about financial freedom, and about meritocracy. This same story, I argue, blends the lines between consumer and distributor, keeping women's labor invisible and exploitable, enforces the naturalization of gender essentialisms, perpetuates a system of whiteness, negates potential critiques of hegemonic gender roles, and minimizes the opportunity for

worker solidarity. This story is about belief in the direct selling imaginary and how women strive to make it real.

A Foot in Both Worlds: Direct Selling and Home/Work Balance

One of the most prominent messages within the direct selling discourse is that direct selling provides *women* a better balance between work and home. Through testimonials and success stories alike, potential recruits and consultants learn that corporate employment is incompatible with the demands of caring for a family. It is taken for granted that women are more frequently responsible for unpaid care work (e.g. parenting or caring for other family members) even while employed.¹ Rather than question the gendered division of labor or the structures of corporate organizations that make it difficult to find a balance between work and home, the direct selling industry claims that their environment is uniquely supportive of women and families and is the solution for a better balance between the two. Through direct selling, as the narrative established via the imaginary goes, women can find a means to earning an income while caring for their families. This narrative affirms the role of women as caretakers and blends the gendered characteristics of care work into the characteristics of an ideal direct sales worker.

¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung illustrated that despite changes in family and gender dynamics within households, women remain more responsible for domestic labor than do men, even when also working full-time hours. See Arlie Russell Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). Since Hochschild and Machung's study, although there has been a slight increase in men's participation, the gendered division of domestic labor remains relatively intact. See Nancy Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids?: Gender and the Structures of Constraint* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

To relay the message that the direct selling industry is supportive of families and women caring for children the industry saturates promotional literature with photographs and images of women with their families or working with/alongside their children. For example, many success stories are accompanied by images of successful representatives looking happy while engaged in an activity with their family. Another commonly used image features a woman working on a laptop or computer with her children nearby or even sitting on the woman's lap. A photograph that accompanied an article from the magazine *Empowering Women* (see fig. 5.1 below) exemplifies this trope. The photograph depicts a white middle-class (looking) woman (presumably a mother) sitting in front of her computer with a young boy and girl (presumably her children). All three of them have their fingers on the keyboard and smiles on their faces. This photograph was positioned adjacent to text that reads: "Entire industries, like direct selling, are growing by leaps and bounds through the opportunity they offer women to combine family life with business."² The message is clear, direct selling allows women to blend their roles as workers and as mothers in a harmonious fusion. Images like these construct a narrative that direct sales work is easily incorporated into a family routine and childcare and bridges the divide between working and parenting.

² Bridget Brennan, "Women: We're the Engine of the Global Economy," *Empowering Women*, March, 2009, 83.



Figure 5.1 Photograph featuring a woman working with children from *Empowering Women*, March, 2009, 83.

The image of a woman working with her children on her lap or in arm's reach is quite common within the pages of *Empowering Women*. For anyone who has worked anywhere near children, such images appear rather idealistic. Yet, what I found most fascinating about these images is their utter divergence from another type of imagery that commonly associated with working mothers and their challenges in finding a better home/work balance. For example, a recent headline story featured on the cover of *The Atlantic*, entitled "Why Women Still Can't Have it All," described the challenges of the

corporate workplace that (educated) women in the United States face.³ The cover image, as seen below, portrays that of a not-so-happy looking baby being held in a brief case by a business woman (we only see her from the waist down) (see fig. 5.2). A similar photograph accompanied the article as well, this time with the baby shown alone in the briefcase looking sadly upward (see fig. 5.2 below on right). These photographs convey, at least on the surface, the message that children suffer when their mothers go into the workforce.



Figure 5.2 Cover art featured in *The Atlantic* with the article “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All.”

³ Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All,” *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2012, accessed October 3, 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/>.

Every few years the popular media takes on this sensationalistic topic of working women and their difficulties in balancing motherhood with career.⁴ As part of the hype, this type of over-used image of the mother and child is both an emotional ploy and a warning. In fact, feminist author Jessica Valenti deems this particular trope, “sad white babies with mean feminist mommies,” because the art accompanying such pieces usually show a “mean/frazzled/distracted working white mom...who has been fooled into thinking she can have it all by feminism.”⁵ The implied message: motherhood is a zero-sum game that is not compatible with working and feminism got it wrong. As Valenti points out, women of color and working-class white women are not part of the narrative constructed through such images, because it is expected that they must work regardless of whether they have children or not. The debate about working mothers and their options remains, in the popular media, a debate tightly focused on white middle-class straight women and their families. Likewise, the direct selling industry has historically relied on the imagery of whiteness to frame middle-class femininity.

The “alternative” image found within direct selling, the image of the happy mother working with happy children, produces a different kind of narrative about motherhood and work. The imagery and narratives of the direct selling industry imply that direct sales offers women what corporate employment cannot. For example, the

⁴ Some of most recent sensationalized topics include the “Opt-out Revolution,” which claimed that educated high-level corporate business women were leaving their careers to become stay at home mothers because of the failings of the business world. See Lisa Belkin, “The Opt-Out Revolution,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2003. The so-called “Mommy Wars,” is another such topic which reported that women who were choosing to stay-at-home with their children were feuding with working mothers, with either side judging the other. See Leslie Morgan Steiner, *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2007).

⁵ To see a compilation of similar images see Jessica Valenti, “Sad White Babies with Mean Feminist Mommies,” Jessica Valenti, Tumblr, July, 2012, accessed Oct 3, 2012, <http://jessicavalenti.tumblr.com/post/25465502300/sad-white-babies-with-mean-feminist-mommies-the>.

“Lifestyle Portraits” (success stories) of *Empowering Women* frequently recount stories of women who felt trapped in the “rat race” of corporate America. These women, unhappy about not having enough time for their children, turn to direct sales as an opportunity to take control of their lives. As Lisa DeMayo of Arbonne explains, “we had two children in daycare, we were racing the clock for a living. It was non-stop.”⁶ Likewise, Christina Hayford writes that, “because of Arbonne, I get to build a successful business with my children at my feet—and not miss a moment of these crucial years as they grow up.”⁷ Additionally, Analyn Garcia, a Mary Kay independent beauty consultant featured on the company’s website, says that her “Mary Kay business allows me more time for my family. It’s helped me have a better lifestyle without sacrificing quality time with my family.”⁸ From the images showing women working with their children and the stories from successful representatives, direct selling is presented as bringing together motherhood with work in an unproblematic way.

The narrative of finding better work/home balance found within the imagery and success stories never questions the gender division of labor that places women in the role of caretakers. The stories and images of married women also dominate this narrative, which leaves out unmarried women with children, and homosexual couples with children. Furthermore, this narrative represents middle-class experiences that do not take into account that many families require the income from two fulltime working adults and

⁶ K.C. Barlow, “The Power of Choice: Lisa DeMayo Discovers success and Satisfaction in Arbonne,” *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 12.

⁷ Wendy Rudman, “Taking Time to Live: Christina Hayford Discovers New Freedoms with Arbonne Success,” *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 42.

⁸ “To Be a Beauty Consultant-Analyn Garcia,” Mary Kay Consultants, accessed Sep 5, 2012, <http://www.marykay.com/en-US/BeABeautyConsultant/Pages/Profiles/MTO-Analyn-Garcia.aspx>.

cannot forgo a steady paycheck in favor of commissions only. Although some success stories and images feature married couples without children, and there is an attempt to feature women of various ethnic backgrounds, the images of white married heterosexual women remain the dominant model.

The direct sales imaginary relies on the hegemony of white middle-class values to structure its narratives and recruit new consultants. However, there are many different types of families that do not fit into this model. These families may also desire finding a balance between work and home. Some direct selling companies make gestures to single-mothers as potential recruits but generally frame direct selling as a means for single-mothers to earn “additional” income; whereas motivation is typically framed in terms of being able to stay-at-home or spend more time with family. This could indicate that the industry acknowledges the inherent limits to the potential earnings of direct sellers, but they make no distinction between those who can obtain the promised “unlimited income” and those who cannot. This makes it unclear as to whether or not the industry sees itself as addressing a diverse audience or just a *discursively constructed audience* of white middle-class married potentials who are looking to fit flexible work in with caretaking. Nevertheless, according to a recent industry survey, the majority of direct selling representatives are married and it is likely that being married is a contributing factor to the success of representatives. Rather than challenge the structures that make it difficult for women to balance work with home, or question why it is married white women make up a majority of representatives, the discourses of direct selling focus on the gendered characteristics of women and perpetuate gendered essentialisms.

At any rate, many women do desire a way to care for their families while earning an income. The narrative put forth by the direct selling industry captures this desire and incorporates it into their recruiting strategy. In fact, many women in this study ranked finding such balance as the most important reason for joining a direct sales organization. Just like the narratives and imagery of the direct selling materials, most of the women in this study did not question that it was their role to provide domestic labor for their households. Serena, for example, explains that she decided to join a direct selling organization to make her own money in a way that would work with her family's schedule, noting that

I like my freedom, I like being a stay-at-home mom, I have been a stay-at-home mom for eleven years and I didn't want to lose my freedom, my flexibility of working out, going to have lunch and shopping with my girlfriends when I wanted to. And if I went to work retail I was going to get stuck, I was going to lose my days. And I needed to be home when my kids get off the bus...there was nothing else that was going to give me the flexibility.⁹

Serena's husband traveled frequently for his employment, which left Serena responsible for the domestic duties of childcare, taking the children to their daily after-school activities, as well as the cooking and cleaning. Serena, who lived comfortably in a 5,000 square foot home, spent several hours a day cleaning (she estimated that she spent over 40 hours a week on domestic work). She hoped that the money she earned from direct sales would help her pay for a maid service to take this duty off her shoulders. Although her husband made more than enough income to provide for a maid service, Serena felt it

⁹ Serena," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 20, 2011.

was her job to care for the home -- either through her own labor or through her ability to purchase that labor from another (woman). Joining a direct sales organization affirmed, rather than challenged, Serena's beliefs about the gendered division of labor.

Rebecca, a consultant for Arbonne, says that "flexibility is key for women today" because direct selling organizations allow women to "work around babies and they can work around jobs and husbands."¹⁰ Rebecca's children were grown up and living outside of the home but she had worked off and on as a Mary Kay consultant when her children were younger. She returned to direct selling, this time with Arbonne, when she was unable to keep her fulltime job as an aesthetician because she needed to care for an elderly parent who was in poor health. According to Rebecca, direct selling gave her the ability to balance her familial care obligations with her desire for employment, a situation she could not get from her previous position.

The picture painted by the participants in this study indicated that "better work/family balance" is mainly about having more time to attend to domestic duties typically assigned to women (cleaning, care work, cooking, errands, etc.) regardless of women's employment levels. The majority of women in this study were married and most of their husbands were employed. Each couple divided domestic duties differently. For example, one couple worked together for the same direct selling business. They divided their work by having the husband handle the administrative side of the business while the wife focused on the recruiting, training, and home party sales aspects of the business. Unlike the majority of this study's participants, this couple shared an office and they both worked from home; in turn they divided domestic work evenly. In contrast, a

¹⁰ "Rebecca," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona September 2, 2011.

large number of women in this study remained more responsible for the domestic chores and childcare than their husbands. In fact, a number of women expressed their belief that it was their job to take care of the domestic things, even if they did not enjoy them, because they were “at home”-- regardless of how many hours they counted themselves as working their business. In some cases, women shared duties like cooking and cleaning with their children while their husbands did not participate. Other times, as Sarah jokes, gender dictated the duty—women were responsible for inside chores and men were responsible for outside chores, saying that “it’s like you have to have a vagina and breasts to be able to vacuum!”¹¹

Interestingly, from what I could glean from this study’s participants, better work/family balance meant being able to work *around* children and husband’s schedules rather than necessarily blending work with caretaking. For example, in contrast to the images of women working with children on their laps, many of the women expressed a desire for a work space that was separate from their children. Some women had offices that they could work in, while others had computers set up in a common area of their homes. Many women explained to me that they would do their work (such as ordering products online, paperwork, or phone calls) while their children were either at school or sleeping. One woman joked that she had to sometimes hide in her bedroom to get her work done—she had to hide because she could not lock her bedroom door. Moreover, she sat on the floor with her laptop in her lap because there was no place to sit. Several women indicated that they would prefer to have a larger and more private space to do their work because it was too difficult to focus on working while they were caring for

¹¹ “Sarah,” interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, October 19, 2011.

their children. One Mary Kay (director level) consultant even paid an assistant from her personal earnings to take care of paperwork and administrative items so she could focus on other things and her family. In order to effectively do the job of parenting and direct sales, women had to become extremely organized and manage their time carefully.

Although direct selling organizations construct an image of an industry that is supportive of families, families are not always supportive of women doing direct sales. In fact, some women in this study found that they received very little support for their business – especially from their husbands. For example, Olivia had recently begun as a consultant with Lia Sophia the jewelry business because she enjoyed being around other women. Olivia was in a “traditional” marriage, as she explained, that required her to consult with her husband before making financial decisions:

My husband, he didn't even want me to do this. And so since he didn't want me to sell at all, I wasn't going to go against his wishes and do it. But finally I asked and asked and asked and he said no, no, no, no. And I finally just told him, I gave him a date and said 'I'm signing up on this day.' (*Why did he not support your decision?*) He just would prefer I was home, you know. We just make sure everything is handled when we are gone but he just likes us all home.¹²

Olivia's husband took an obstinate stance toward her direct sales work that required her to take her two daughters with her to home parties as well as having “everything handled.” The tone of Olivia's narrative and her expressed lack of agency within her relationship are troubling; but at the very least, Olivia later told me that her husband was

¹² “Olivia,” interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 15, 2011.

becoming more supportive (as indicated by his bringing catalogs to his work to drum up business).

Sometimes, as the women in this study told me, the trouble is with husbands not seeing direct selling as a “legitimate business.” Serena, having had a bad experience selling Mary Kay cosmetics that left her with a large number of unsalable products and over 10,000 dollars in debt, knew her husband would be resistant. Although he surprised her with being initially supportive he eventually grew impatient and tried to convince her to go into real estate as an alternative. According to Serena, her husband did not feel that direct selling was a “real job” and she suspected he was overwhelmed when he saw her starter-kit arrive in several boxes. Likewise, Barbara felt her husband was her biggest obstacle as an Avon representative because he felt her work was simply a hobby. In the eyes of some husbands, direct selling was a hobby or just women hanging out with their girlfriends, therefore not as valuable as either staying home or having a “real job.” Husbands defined a real job as being a job with a steady paycheck, according to my study participants. Speaking to the values of the dominant gendered division of labor, women’s domestic labor also did not count as having a real job.

Although some husbands were skeptical about direct selling there were other husbands who were supportive and several women in this study said that they received a good amount of family support. Some women described having their whole family take part in various aspects of their work because they considered their direct selling a family business. Similar to the patterns of other types of homework (i.e. piecework), children’s labor was more frequently appropriated in helping with direct sales rather than

husbands'.¹³ This meant having the children help with preparing catalogs or products for delivery, or even having children attend home parties to help with set-up and sales; much like my own experiences with my mother and direct selling. Importantly, because most home parties are done during the evening or weekend hours, some women could rely on their spouses or other family members to care for the children so that they could attend the parties. Some of the women in this study believed that their husbands were not capable of caring for their children without their help, noting that they would have everything prepared before they left to make it easier on them. However, many more women told me that their husbands had no problem caring for their children while their wives were attending home parties or sales meetings. Jennifer extolled her husband as she reminded me that he did not “babysit” because he was their children’s father; watching the children was simply “parenting.”

While many women felt that through their work in direct sales they were legitimate business owners, other women did frequently express the idea that they did not consider what they did as *working*. For many “work” was something that you did not want to do, even if you were paid for it. Some women felt that husbands did not see the value in direct selling because they were impatient to see the results/success of their wives’ businesses. At the same time, however, because women often said that they did their business as a means to socialize with other women or as a fun thing to do that just incidentally earned them some money, it is clear that they themselves hold mixed feelings about how to define direct sales work. The contradictions inherent in their comments

¹³ For accounts of various types of homework historical and contemporary see Eileen Boris, *Home to Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Eileen Boris and Cynthia Daniels, *Homework: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Paid Labor at Home* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

about direct selling are likely the result of the mixed messages about direct selling within the industry's discourse. Direct selling is portrayed as fun, a way to make new friends, but it is also said to be about entrepreneurship and becoming a business owner. Because of these dissonances, many women had difficulties accounting for the amount of time they spent actually working. Most claimed to do direct selling only on a part-time basis but told me that they did not track the hours that they spent working. Furthermore, many women felt that if they "worked the business" more, more time at trainings or prospecting, they believed they could be just as successful as their company's top sales force.

As discussed above, the image projected by the direct selling industry tells representatives that they can have a career while being able to care for their families. Indeed, the women in this study felt that their work with direct sales did allow them to achieve the balance that they were looking for. However, sometimes the reality of working from home in direct sales is different and less harmonious than the image presented within the direct sales imaginary. As Jennifer confesses, "there was a time when I felt guilty because I couldn't do everything...it was me having this perfect idea of what a wife and mother should be."¹⁴ The story that the direct selling industry tells women is that they can *have* it all through direct sales, whereas the story women told me is that they simply *do* it all. Nevertheless, the direct selling industry can tap into women's desires for balance and because the labor of direct selling is often incorporated into women's roles as care takers, direct selling becomes merely an extension of who they are.

¹⁴ "Jennifer," interview with Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 3, 2011.

The Business of Fun: Direct Sales, Relationships, and Caring

Another common message found within the direct selling discourses is that the industry is about building relationships, sharing, caring, and having fun. For example, *Empowering Women* magazine lists expanding “your circle of friends” as number three out of the top six reasons to join a direct selling organization because “direct selling is based on relationships.” As the list notes, “when you become part of a direct selling company, customers, team members and others in your organization quickly become an important and rewarding part of your life.”¹⁵ Although the main purpose for direct selling is *sales*, the act of selling is transformed into an imaginary featuring making new friends, having fun, and caring about other people. This clever marketing sleight of hand disguises the labor of selling as an extension of gender ideologies that sees women as relationship oriented, caretakers, and socializers.

Building relationships rather than garnering sales is emphasized in direct selling promotional literature and on company websites. For example, without ever using the word *sales* Partylite’s website described their business as being “about making connections and building relationships.”¹⁶ Relationship building, according to these sources, is the purview of women. For instance, an article in *Empowering Women* explains:

Relationship marketing certainly isn’t a new trend, but it’s one that the direct selling industry employs very effectively. Women in particular are masters at

¹⁵ John Fleming, “Creating a Life that Works: Follow Your Dreams and Find the Balance Between Career, Home and Family,” *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 10.

¹⁶ “A You-Based Business,” Partylite, accessed December 3, 2012, <http://www.partylite.com/en-us/Default.aspx>.

building relationships—using alliances to create a win-win situation. The direct selling consultant wins because she has a business she can run from home on her own time. Her customers benefit by having the ability to purchase high-quality products without having to load their children in the car or keep them corralled while they shop.¹⁷

On the one hand, this passage highlights the naturalization of women’s gender roles as busy mothers who would prefer to shop at home and as natural relationship builders. Building relationships is described as an essential quality of *women* and the sales work is simply relationship marketing – or using relationships strategically. On the other hand, the distributor/consumer relationship is only described in terms of convenience and economic exchange. While *Empowering Women* codes relationships as perhaps more intimate than the standard retail exchange, the above text does not make this evident. Instead, in this quote the focus is less about the relationship piece of sales than it is about the win-win situation of *helping* each other.

Shifting the focus from sales to “helping others” is another salient discursive element of the direct selling industry. Nearly all of my study participants framed their involvement with their companies as somehow helping would-be customers. While some direct sales organizations refer to home parties as “parties,” many other companies have shifted the language of home parties to denote something educational or otherwise different from a sales demonstration. For example, Premier Designs and Lia Sophia both refer to their parties as “jewelry shows”; Mary Kay does “make-up classes” or “facials”; Arbonne holds “spas”; Pampered Chef throws “cooking shows”; and Close to My Heart

¹⁷ John Fleming, “More Meaningful Than Money: Relationships are the Key to a Booming Business Trend,” *Empowering Women*, September, 2007, 10.

hosts “workshops” or “gatherings.” Even the titles given to distributors reveal the refashioning of sales work, with distributors holding titles such as “jewelers,” “fashion consultants,” or “independent beauty consultants.” Strategically redefining direct sales into an educational, relaxing, or otherwise fun experience allows consultants to distance themselves from negative stereotypes about sales work. This pattern is not just seen in direct selling, as other retail industries have changed titles of sales clerks to denote something of a higher value; Walmart and K-mart and other low-end retailers call their clerks “associates,” for example.¹⁸ Shifting the title of a direct seller to that of a beauty consultant allows distributors to constructing identities as women who are helping other women. Furthermore, this change in language obstructs the sales act and helps legitimize the moral economy of direct selling. The moral economy of direct selling governs the solicitation and enactment of home parties as well as the relationships between distributors and consumers.¹⁹

The desire to help women learn something useful at home parties or through the use of new products was frequently cited by the women in this study. For example, a distributor from Pampered Chef explained to me that she really enjoyed cooking and being able to help other women learn tips on preparing foods quickly and affordably. At her cooking shows, for instance, she does not overtly sell cooking products; instead, guests prepare and cook a recipe with Pampered Chef products. The idea is that upon learning new cooking tips and seeing a demonstration of the various uses for Pampered

¹⁸ This language infiltration has hit the domestic sphere as well. Caryn E. Medved and Erika L. Kirby discuss how stay-home-mothers began using corporate language like “Family CEO” to reconfigure their identities as something with a perceived higher social value. See Caryn E. Medved and Erika L. Kirby, “Family CEOs: A Feminist Analysis of Corporate Mothering Discourses,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 18 (2005): 435-478.

¹⁹ See discussion on moral economies in direct selling in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

Chef's kitchen tools, guests will be compelled to make purchases. Likewise, Nicki from Premier Designs said that she would run her jewelry shows by first asking the hostess if she has

any jewelry at home, that you don't know what to do with, or maybe you have a long necklace and you've always wanted to wear but you don't know you can wear it three different ways, I'm going to show you how you can wear something that you might already own in your own house a different way. I try to teach them [guests/hostesses] about fashion and then accessorizing, without making them think that they have to buy something. It's more like a free fashion class, cause then they are getting something out of it. So I give them a bunch of ideas for like 20 minutes, sometimes I play a game, sometimes I don't, and then I just let them go shopping.²⁰

Nicki frames her role in direct selling as educating women about fashion and rather than selling jewelry. After being taught how to accessorize, Nicki did not have to sell jewelry to guests; the women simply went shopping.

Mary Kay reframes sales into educating and sharing. Jennifer, a Mary Kay beauty consultant, notes that "we are a show, tell, and sell business." She emphasizes that you do not have to be a salesperson to be successful because once you tell someone about your favorite products then they will know what they want. Likewise, when I asked Stephanie from Mary Kay if she considered herself a salesperson she told me that she did not think of her business as sales at all. For Stephanie, her work with Mary Kay was about helping women feel good inside and out. Sharing, rather than selling, is stressed within many of

²⁰ "Nicki," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 1, 2011.

the recruiting materials of Mary Kay. For example, one recruitment brochure reads: “You crave sharing all things Beauty” and “so just imagine filling your day by sharing beauty tips, new looks and trends and by helping others look and feel beautiful.”²¹ Throughout the entire brochure the word “sale” is never mentioned and the entire business is framed as merely sharing and caring for women. Here, *sharing* a beauty product that will *help* a woman feel more confident is part of the Mary Kay motto of “enriching women’s lives.” Again, the concept of sharing was linked to women’s gender roles, as Jennifer explained to me that “women just liked to tell other women where they got a good deal or found a good product, it is what women do.”²²

Helping people, either by sharing direct selling products with other women or by recruiting other women into the direct selling lifestyle, is emphasized within promotional materials and interviews alike. The success story of Lisa DeMayo, an Arbonne consultant, notes that “enjoying Arbonne and sharing it with others has infused her with a new way of living, working, and playing.”²³ She is quoted as saying that Arbonne “is about helping people get what they want and then getting what you want.”²⁴ Another success story is relayed from a consultant for Weekenders (a clothing business): “despite considerable personal success, Brook says her most rewarding achievement has been

²¹ “Love What You Do,” Mary Kay, Electronic Catalog, accessed October 3, 2012, http://ecatalog.marykay.com/us_en-us/GetLatest.aspx?d=www.marykay.com&m=0&t=Be_A_Beauty_Consultant.

²² “Jennifer,” August 3, 2011.

²³ K.C. Barlow, “The Power of Choice: Lisa DeMayo Discovers Success and Satisfaction in Arbonne,” *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

building and working with a team.”²⁵ Personal success is second to helping other women achieve, which casts the work of selling and team building as something more akin to care work. Women’s roles as care takers are naturalized, making direct selling a *natural* fit; as are their roles as shoppers. Donna Versola of Weekenders affirms this: “I think that if you’re truly helping others be their best, it’s win-win, whether it’s working with a customer, a hostess or someone in your family.”²⁶

Promotional literature like *Empowering Women* emphasizes that “the direct selling industry thrives because of its commitment to helping people become their best.”²⁷ The success stories featured within promotional literature and websites consistently value *helping over competition* and exemplify the ways in which the labor of direct selling is transformed into an extension of women’s gender roles. For example, Serena explains that

to me it's not just about like in money. I think that's like an added bonus, this business is how you affect other women. It's just awesome to see how I've seen Cabby change lives and the friendships that come out of it. I love having lots of friends, I love having to do stuff with. I like hanging out with other women and I like being a part of making another woman feel really good. So for me, that's kind of what's it about.²⁸

²⁵ Wendy Rudman, “Packing for Success: The Idea of an Easy-care Wardrobe Drew Brook Friedlander to Weekenders. Unlimited Opportunity Compels Her to Stay,” *Empowering Women*, November, 2006, 39.

²⁶ Beth Douglass Silcox, “Lending a Hand: Donna Versola’s Focus is on Making the Best of Every Situation,” *Empowering Women*, November 2006, 51.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “Serena,” September 20, 2011.

Many women told me that their role in direct selling felt more like socializing and helping women and less like work. Because they view their products as providing some important means of making other women's lives better, their labor is internalized as something different than "work." For the consultants, defining their labor as either socializing or as care work increases the self-perceived value of their work, in other cases this becomes part of their gender performance (how and what they are as women). For direct selling companies, this process maintains a steady supply of cheap workers who are unlikely to make demands.

Building teams, which serves the function of generating higher commission checks for team leaders, becomes about helping other women convert into the direct selling lifestyle. Yet even the act of team building is framed in terms of caring for others or even expanding one's family. For example, sometimes a gendered hierarchy is used in referring to different levels within one's network. Representatives from Premiere Designs told me that their upline networks were referred to as mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers while their downline networks were daughters, granddaughters and so on. For many women, team building is not an easy task; it requires that a consultant recruit other women into their business but also means that they then are responsible for training and motivating their new recruit. Many women receive a meager commission from the sales of their downline networks and it is questionable if they are adequately compensated for their managerial labor.²⁹ Nevertheless, this is not a question that representatives ask, largely because they have incorporated their gender roles as care

²⁹ As outlined in Chapter 1, multi-level marketing pays commissions on the development of downline networks, but only after the network contains a certain number of people and produces certain levels of sales. The details are dependent on the company. In Chapter 6 I address the problems with commissions in multi-level marketing groups.

takers into how they understand their roles as recruiters. The successful framing of direct selling labor as altruistic, as opposed to selfishly ambitious, compels women to bring what they describe as empowerment to other women's lives, even if an impartial observer might label what they do as unpaid educational or administrative labor, or even as a Ponzi scheme.

Empowering Women: Feminist Versus Feminine Approaches to Business

From Mary Kay's slogan of "Enriching Women's Lives" to the title of the promotional industry magazine *Empowering Women*, the direct selling industry promotes itself as an industry that reaches beyond corporate employment to empower women and better their lives. Yet "empowerment" remains only vaguely, if ever, defined and appears to hold a number of different possible meanings. The emphasis on women's empowerment, in particular, might signal that the direct selling industry shares some feminist concerns. As a feminist, I came to this research questioning how the direct selling industry defined empowerment and if the women in this study felt empowered. What I found is that the industry utilizes the term empowerment in a very shallow sense and actually disavows potential challenges to gender structures through the affirmation of the status quo.

Although there are many different feminist definitions and uses of the term empowerment, at its most general, empowerment can be defined as an individual's ability for self-definition, decision making, and access to political and economic structures.³⁰

³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins notes that "self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment." See *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York,

Feminist scholar Jo Rowlands provides a constructive definition of empowerment that operationalizes the term at three different levels. According to Rowlands, the first level is “the personal” with empowerment defined as the development of a sense of self and confidence while undoing “the effects of internalized oppression.”³¹ Rowlands’ second level “close relationships” describes a person’s ability to negotiate and influence the decisions made within and around one’s relationships. Her last level, the “collective level,” denotes individuals working together to achieve some larger goal than would be possible on their own. In essence, empowerment can be defined as the process in which an individual gains entrance to formerly closed-off spaces (political, economic, self-definition/determination, etc.) with an understanding of the structures that kept those spaces previously closed (e.g. oppression), while also perceiving themselves as entitled to occupy such spaces.

The level of women’s empowerment, using variations on the above definition, is sometimes used to measure the gender equality or equity of communities.³² In this sense, although empowerment might be an individualized experience, it holds political meaning and potential political action for various groups of women. However, I find that empowerment in direct selling is completely divorced from political application,

Psychology Press, 2000), 36; Jo Rowlands discusses the concept of empowerment in relation to the concept of power and notes that its meaning “can now be seen to relate to the user’s interpretation of power.” She shows, however, that this general definition is too broad and constructs the feminist definition that I use in the text. See Jo Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” *Development in Practice* 5 (1995): 101-107.

³¹ Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined,” 103.

³² For example, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), as part of “The Millennium Development Goals,” develops and promotes programs that are aimed at promoting “gender equality and empowerment of women” in developing countries. See UNDP “Women’s Empowerment” website, accessed October 4, 2012, <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/womenempowerment/overview.html>.

especially at a collective level. In most examples empowerment seems to simply signify an individual gaining the support to maintain and/or excel in the direct selling business. For example, one success story featured Jennifer from Cookie Lee, a jewelry company, who was able to support herself and her family when her husband and child were seriously ill. According to Jennifer, direct selling (or rather, Cookie Lee) is “about applauding women and empowering them to be the best mom and career woman they can be.”³³ In Jennifer’s definition empowerment was gender specific and direct sales enabled her to be a good mother and direct sales representative.

More often than not, empowerment marked increased self-confidence and personal development that women experienced through their direct sales work. The direct selling industry holds a long history of utilizing self-help psychological tools as part of their motivational and inspirational training. For example, as direct selling motivators extraordinaire, both Mary Kay Ash and Brownie Wise exploited positive thinking techniques and popular psychological methods of gaining self-esteem to produce better sales persons.³⁴ These techniques have changed very little and are an entrenched aspect of the direct selling lifestyle. Examples reveal that personal development, which supposedly leads to empowerment, revolves around becoming comfortable with public speaking (as in selling at a home party), goal setting, positive thinking, and living a “purpose-driven life.”³⁵

³³ Wendy Rudman, “Life Support: During the Most Difficult Circumstances, Jennifer Smith was Buoyed by the Encouragement of her Cookie Lee Family,” *Empowering Women*, September, 2008, 47.

³⁴ See Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999). Nicole Woosley Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³⁵ Rick Warren, “Benefits to Living a Purpose-Driven Life,” *Empowering Women*, (Sep 2007): 51.

Many women in this study felt that direct selling gave them a better outlook on life and higher self-confidence. Interestingly, several participants attributed their increased self-esteem to their personal use of their company's products. They told me that because they were using their company's cosmetics, for instance, they felt more confident about themselves, which granted them the ability to speak to more women comfortably about their business. This in turn, as they explained, would give them more business and therefore more success within their business. Empowerment, in this way, was garnered from a cycle of consumption and distribution, with direct selling always at its center.

During my interview with Jennifer, a Mary Kay consultant, I asked her to define empowerment. Jennifer felt very strongly about empowering other women through the Mary Kay's marketing plan and lifestyle. She explained that empowerment was about teaching women how to look and feel good about themselves both inside and out (sentiment also echoed by other Mary Kay consultants). Jennifer outlined activities that she would include in her sales meetings with her network that were part of the empowerment process. These activities included teaching women how to set and achieve goals, how to improve their personal management styles, and how to become debt-free – all concepts Jennifer took from the principles put forward by Mary Kay's business model. As Jennifer explains, empowerment is about

finding or building a foundation for women's self-esteem or finding those gifts within that person and letting them soar with those gifts. It could be somebody could come to me empowered with more leadership and we just need to give her a

platform. Maybe we just need to show you the marketing plan so you can touch some lives and you can touch these people.³⁶

Jennifer, like others in this study, felt very passionate about helping to better the lives of women. Yet, *bettering* their lives was limited to ways that would create more successful direct selling representatives. This is not to say that the women in this study were not interested in women's lives on other (deeper) levels; they very well may be, but they did not frame it that way during our interviews. In essence, many women in this study truly believed that changing one's lipstick could change one's life in endless ways.

In fact, according to many women in this study, empowerment was indeed as simple as changing one's cosmetics. Whether from the personal income that they earned, the self-confidence that they gained, or the achievement of their personal goals, the women in my study felt that direct selling had a positive effect on their lives. From this perspective, especially as defined by the direct selling industry, these women are achieving some level of empowerment. However, for the women in this study empowerment remained mainly at an individual level and centered on self-confidence. It is also possible that some of the women experience empowerment within their personal relationships because they did feel it was important to have their own income to contribute to the household economics. Certainly, having their own income could potentially grant them more decision-making power within their households; yet the majority of the women did not report experiencing such changes. In fact, some women maintained very little decision making power within their households as previously illustrated by Olivia's narrative.

³⁶ "Jennifer," August 3, 2011.

Empowerment that is centered on the distribution and consumption of products is problematic to say the least. Where empowerment within the direct selling industry comes up short is in its lack of critique of economic and gender structures that motivate women to join direct selling in the first place. For example, in the magazine *Empowering Women*, one article addressed the issue of the gender gap in pay between men and women and thoughtfully acknowledged that women remain responsible for household chores over men, regardless of employment. The answer, according to this author, is direct selling. He writes:

Rather than settling for the inadequacies traditional employment offers, women are changing the way they work and are creating a life that suits them. Direct selling is an industry where women make dollar for dollar what men make because income is not based on one's gender but on personal effort and perseverance.³⁷

Rather than question or attempt to reform the gender roles that relegate women to care work, or reform corporate structures that make working with children difficult, the answer is portrayed as direct selling. A potential feminist critique is quickly nullified and hegemonic gender roles are upheld. Additionally, the lack of acknowledgement of oppression at the personal level makes it difficult to organize at the collective level. Although the direct selling industry may grant empowerment to women in a simple sense, this empowerment is in the service of selling goods.

In a sense, the direct selling industry co-opts a feminist language of empowerment and sisterhood to aid in the maintenance of the direct sales imaginary. This imaginary

³⁷ John Fleming, "Creating a Life that Works; Follow your Dreams and Find the Balance Between Career, Home and Family," *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 9.

claims that direct selling is good for women because it empowers women and supports women's causes. Most direct selling companies work with a selected charity to which they give a portion of the sales of a special promotional product. Many companies choose organizations that support women's causes, such as research for breast cancer or support for domestic violence shelters, and their involvement with the charity becomes part of the recruiting apparatus. In interviews many women frequently cited their company's charity as evidence of their company's special connection with the desires/needs of women. One Mary Kay consultant said that Mary Kay's breast cancer research foundation was one of the reasons she decided to join, because she felt that her company truly supported the lives of women.

Additionally, many women felt that they received significant support from their networks of women in direct selling. Many representatives referred to their colleagues as sisters and the language of a sisterly solidarity is heard frequently at sales meetings and home parties. However, because these meetings and networks reveal an absence of an actual awareness of gender oppression or even worker oppression, these women-centered groups do not build into coalitions for political action. Instead, direct selling grants women a space to create strong bonds with other women but without the threat of a collective feminist critique.

Moreover, the consultants I interviewed did not express an interest in being "political" and denied being feminists. Some believed that being a feminist meant desiring that women have more power than (or also power over) men in society and was therefore antithetical to the "traditional" gender roles that they ascribed to. As outlined in Chapter 4, Mary Kay Ash appropriated feminist concepts and incorporated conservative

values in the creation of her cosmetic company. The blended ideology of Mary Kay Cosmetics may be part of the reason that Jennifer had difficulty in self-identifying as feminist:

Do you consider yourself a feminist? I don't know I've never been asked that question. I don't like to...um... I don't want to empower people against each other maybe that's what I'm thinking a feminist is. I do believe that we can do anything that a man can do, that we have rights and all of that. But I'm traditional too . . . I don't know if I consider myself a feminist. I think I'm empowering your person to be a better person and however that looks like. I do have my religious beliefs on different things . . . Mary Kay was big on equal pay. We need equal pay.³⁸

Jennifer understood that Mary Kay Ash held some feminist beliefs and Jennifer had a sense that empowering women could be considered feminist. However, Jennifer was not sure that her Christian and traditional beliefs could be combined with her idea of what feminism was. I was surprised that so many women in this study held similar stereotypical perceptions of feminism despite their companies' overt engagement with seemingly feminist practices and rhetoric.

In addition to co-opting (some of) the language of feminism the direct selling industry also appropriates feminist iconography and imagery. The exploitation of feminist imagery is best exemplified in the image below (fig. 5.3). The image on the right depicts a woman dressed in a denim shirt with her sleeves rolled up and her arm flexed. With a head scarf covering her hair, bright red lipstick, and a somewhat menacing scowl,

³⁸ "Jennifer," August 3, 2011.

the image attempts to recreate the iconic feminist image of Rosie the Riveter (pictured on the left)—down to the yellow background. This image is from the catalog of the direct selling purse company Gigi Hill Bags. This modern interpretation of Rosie the Riveter holds a large handbag on her arm and is accompanied by the text, “There is Beauty in Strength,” and, “It gets the job done.” Incidentally, the original image was designed to convince white middle-class women who were not already working to step outside of traditional gender roles and head into the factories. Rosie’s strength was highlighted in the image to reassure women that they could do “men’s” jobs during World War II, but her clean face and coiffed hair reassured women that they would maintain their femininity. The modern take on Rosie plays entirely off of the original version, or rather the popular feminist use of this particular image. However, in the modern image, women are not being convinced to head toward factory work; instead the image is designed to sell purses. The phrases associated with the picture reassure prospective buyers that the purse in question is strong and can “get the job done,” while they are also reassured that strong does not mean unattractive.



Figure 5.3 (Left) An image of the popular feminist icon Rosie the Riveter. (Right) An advertisement for a purse from Gigi Handbags sales catalog 2012.

The direct selling industry uses feminist iconography and language to sell products and recruit new sales representatives. In this way, feminism is commodified. A large majority of direct selling workers are women from the ages of 30 to 64, with 37.1 percent ages 30 to 46 years old.³⁹ Thus, the direct selling industry's target demographic for products and recruitment are women who were raised with some understanding of feminism (good or bad). The feminist elements of the direct selling imaginary are one of the main reasons that my mother remains in the industry. My mother, having experienced sexual discrimination in the workplace, is drawn to the direct sales because they are

³⁹ According to the Direct Selling Association's 2010 annual survey. See Direct Selling Association's webpage, "Research Services Center," accessed October 3, 2012, <http://www.dsa.org/research/industry-statistics/?fa=10numbers>.

woman-centered spaces, empower women, recognize women for their achievements, and are (supposedly) based upon meritocratic principles.

Because imaginaries can contain contradictory discourses while maintaining the appearance of being a singular idea, many types of women can see direct sales as offering them what they desire. For example, some women like my mother might be drawn to the feminist-like aspects of direct selling, that it is woman-centered or that it supports women's charities and so on. Other women who might find feminism less appealing, on the other hand, can join an industry that celebrates femininity, but values it as exemplified in an advertisement from a Miche purse catalog: "There is STRENGTH in femininity." Although the industry utilizes feminist-like messaging, the industry does not challenge hegemonic gender roles and instead affirms them as desirable and unproblematic.

Financial Freedom: What Does it Cost?

Along with empowerment the direct selling industry claims to grant women "financial freedom." The narrative ubiquitously put forth through the success stories within promotional materials is similar to a "Cinderella" story. Through direct selling consultants can reach the following financial rewards: they are able to quit working in corporate America, begin savings accounts, buy new houses/cars, pay for children's college expenses, afford family vacations, and pay off debts. Sometimes, these stories even include women becoming the family breadwinner through their direct selling income, allowing their husbands to retire. Financial freedom, within the direct selling

rhetoric, means that there is no organizational limit to the amount of money that can be earned — only a representative can determine how high her salary will be set. Such success stories and their accompanying rhetoric are held up as inspiration for representatives who believe that they can reach similar goals.

The bombastic claims about one’s financial potential in direct selling should be accompanied by a “results not typical” disclaimer. Admittedly, under the list of editors in every issue of *Empowering Women*, there is an easily overlooked disclaimer. It reads:

There are no guarantees regarding income, and the success or failure of each independent consultant, like any other business, depends on your own skills and personal effort. You should not rely on the results of those consultants who provide testimonials in this presentation as an indication of what you should expect to earn.

The disclaimer is positioned, no doubt deliberately, so that it can be easily overlooked. Likewise, many company websites contain similar, but usually much more vaguely written, disclaimers situated away from the site’s main traffic. Instead, potential recruits are more likely to see the prominent message of “limitless income potential.”

Numerous success stories and videos featured on company websites and in catalogs make little or no reference to the fact that the highest financial earnings are seen by very few representatives. For example, while there were women from this study who reported making above \$75,000 a year from their direct sales labor, their experiences were not shared by the majority of my sample. One of the highest earners from this study had a large downline network amassed over fifteen years with her company; it was made up of over 300 representatives and their own downline networks. Another high earner

actually ran and managed a physical retail store-front from which she sold products and held sales meetings for her downline network. These exceptions aside, the majority of the women in this study earned an average of \$10,000 - \$12,000 per year from their direct selling labor.

Some companies provide examples of what income can be earned from home parties. For example, according to the Pampered Chef website, the retail sales from an average cooking show (home party) is \$450.⁴⁰ The commission for Pampered Chef varies depending on the representative's total monthly sales numbers, increasing to the highest at 25% at the level of \$4,000 in total monthly sales. Thus, a representative would need to hold at least nine cooking shows in one month, all averaging \$450 in sales, to earn a total of \$1,012.50 (or \$112.50 per party). This would put a representative's annual income, assuming she could maintain that average throughout a year, at best at \$12,000. These potential earning figures were similar for other companies. Considering that most representatives reported holding two parties a week, at best, the *unlimited* potential income of direct selling must come from elsewhere.

The true source for higher earnings within direct selling is through what the industry refers to as "residual income." Residual income is described as income earned from a team's sales...so in addition to consultants profiting from product sales, many companies also pay commissions to those who attract new consultants to the business. As a consultant's team grows, so does her potential for earning higher commissions based on her team members' sales.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Pampered Chef website, "Earn Extra Income," accessed Oct 2012, <http://www.pamperedchef.com/cooking-party/earn-extra-income.jsp>.

In other words, in order to reach higher levels of income from a direct sales company, a consultant thus would need to focus on the recruitment, training, and motivation of a large downline network. Each representative in any network has the same imperative and one person could potentially be the seed of an ever growing pyramid of representatives. Representatives can earn commission checks along several levels of their downline network and should be able to collect earnings even if they do not make any sales of their own.

The direct selling industry provides two avenues for earning income, personal sales and commissions from network sales. As “business owners” representatives are shown how to make the proper deductions for tax incentives as well. While it is possible that a representative could experience higher than average sales and have a knack for building a team to earn a higher income, it is far more likely that a representative will not. Recruiting, training, and motivating a team of representatives within a downline network requires time and skill, which will make it difficult for some women. Because teams fluctuate, in both membership and sales figures, the income that is gained from a downline network is not always stable. Taking all of these factors into account, I find the direct selling industry’s promise of financial freedom misleading and purposefully manipulative.

For the most part, the income one can earn in direct sales is limited by several factors. One such factor is the initial cost for a ‘start-up kit’ or inventory one needs to purchase. Start-up kits range in price anywhere from \$10 (with Avon) to \$2,500 (with Cabby Fashion). All of the women in this study described their start-up cost as an

⁴¹ Fleming, “Creating a Life that Works,” 11.

investment and many insisted that it was a negligible cost because it would be made back after their initial parties. When I asked them if they believed the initial cost would make it difficult for someone of lesser means to join many responded with sentiments similar to those of Olivia. Olivia did not believe that coming up with money to join would be difficult if it was something they really wanted to do, noting that

I think it's a lot of money when you don't have money. Anything is a lot of money when you don't have money, but usually if there's something you want bad enough you will be able to scrape together \$125 to sign on. And I think a lot is just testing your commitment level to the company. My manager she would tell you she had no money to start so she had a garage sale to get the money and she said "I'm not closing this garage sale till I make \$125 for my kids." So you'll do what it takes. The harder you have to work for something the more you value it.⁴²

Like Olivia, other consultants suggested that recruits could sell things on the internet or save money by not drinking coffee, but none of them believed that someone could not possibly get the money from somewhere. Some of the women interviewed in this study considered that the cost of the kit was to deter people from buying kits for their personal use, as kits contain many products at a largely reduced price. They also believed that the cost was a measure of one's commitment to becoming a business owner, as Olivia noted above. Although they did not offer monetary loans to help new recruits sign-up, many consultants told me that they would allow new recruits to borrow (portions of) their own kits if necessary, or that they might hold a party and use the profits toward the start-up

⁴² "Olivia," August 15, 2011.

costs suggesting that the moral economy of direct selling is also incorporated into recruitment.

Unsurprisingly, 93% of this study's participants were married women with income earning husbands.⁴³ The income that women earned from direct sales was valued as "extra" income for the most part, so these women and their families were not depending on the income from their direct sales labor to survive. Also, many of the women in my study reported working only part-time (although that was problematized in the previous chapter). Historically, women's employment has been framed as being secondary to that of a male breadwinner, especially for white families a fact which worked to keep women's wages low.⁴⁴ The concept of "pin-money," the idea that women work only so they might frivolously consume, continued to shape women's wages well into the twentieth century. I find that most of my study participants conceptualized their income and labor in terms that liken it to the concept of pin-money. In fact, many noted that their earnings were used to either buy their company's products for personal use or for extra spending money for themselves and their children. In other words, their earnings were not contributed to the pooled resources of the household, but contributed to the household nonetheless.

The experience of not *needing* to do direct sales for stable income is possible because of the women's middle-class status with breadwinning husbands. Some of the

⁴³ According to personal communication with the Director of Marketing & Publication Services at the Direct Selling Association, the majority of the women in direct selling are married. Karen E. T. Garrett, email message to author, January 23, 2013.

⁴⁴ Ann Davis, "Class, Gender, and Culture," In *Gender and Political Economy*, ed. Ellen Mutari, Heather Boushey and William Fraher IV (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997): 92-111; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Nancy Fraser, "After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State," *Political Theory* 22 (1994): 591-618.

women I interviewed saw this as a benefit to their work. Olivia, for instance, explained to me that because she was not relying on this income, unlike single mothers (the example she gave), she could maintain a low level of stress and dictate her level of involvement. Other consultants felt that a single mother, or someone who really needed it, could use direct selling income to support her family if *she really needed to and worked hard enough*. Elizabeth, who reported making only about \$12,000 the previous year from direct sales, felt that she could support her family

if something happened to my husband and I suddenly had to make it on my own, I could do it. I know I could do it. But my life is pretty balanced currently. I would probably have to do four or five shows a week. It would be kind of like working a full-time job in the sense that you really want to put in 40 hours to do that many shows in a week, but you put in at least four or five hours a day or maybe more like six. It would take a lot of other things that would have to be neglected.⁴⁵

Although, like Elizabeth, many women in this study acknowledged their privilege within their dual income families, they often did not question the rhetoric of the direct selling industry. The entrenched idea that direct selling financially rewards those who try hard and persevere remained largely unchallenged.

Conclusion: "We're Women, We Like to Try Stuff On!"

Over the course of this research I attended several home-parties for various companies. My mother accompanied me to a few of the parties as she is always on the

⁴⁵ "Elizabeth," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona. September 18, 2011.

look-out for new direct selling opportunities. At home parties I observed direct selling consultants performing gender in a specialized way: they exemplified being a *woman in direct sales*. For example, consultants are expected to embody the values of their company and serve as physical testimonies to the quality of their company's goods. They are also expected to replicate the rhetoric of their companies just as they were trained to do by their uplines; uplines who are literally told to *duplicate* themselves. In their scripted dialogues consultants reproduce the direct sales imaginary for any potential new recruits. They explain how their lives have been transformed through their companies' products and how, through direct selling, they have gained new friends, become empowered, and/or found a means of achieving a better home/work balance. The consultants brought conviction and passion to their performances and it is difficult not to be seduced by the promises of the direct sales imaginary. My mother – who as mentioned above has a history of short flings with many direct sales companies – was yet again seduced by the imaginary and the excitement that new companies bring – she signed up for two different companies.

The direct sales imaginary that is constructed through the discourses and visual narratives of the direct selling industry perpetuates the fantasy that women can achieve anything they set their minds and heart to. This imaginary deploys specific discourses of gender that sees women as naturalized caretakers, socializers, relationship builders, even shoppers. These discourses shape how consultants then view themselves as women and as direct sellers. In turn, consultants reproduce gendered and gendering messages in

direct selling spaces like home parties with the sentiment of: “We’re women, we like to touch and play and have fun and try stuff on!”⁴⁶

The direct selling industry profits from women’s networks and personal relationships and it also capitalizes on the naturalization of elements in the imaginary. For example, discursively situating women as natural shoppers and socializers serves the industry by providing it with a steady stream of consumers. By constructing sales as caretaking or as empowering, the industry authorizes a moral economy of direct selling that governs how consultants view their relationships to their downlines/uplines and governs the practices surrounding parties. This allows the industry to extract cheap management labor from their consultants with downlines and maintain a steady flow of new consumers and recruits. To produce these relationships the direct selling industry deploys various technologies of gender, which are informed by a system of whiteness (that relies on middle class formations), that aid in the construction of the direct sales imaginary. Unfortunately, belief in imaginaries prevents potential critiques of hegemonic structures or even critiques of the imaginary itself. For some true believers, like my mother, belief in the imaginary costs more than they may initially realize.

⁴⁶ This is a direct quote from Megan, said during a Miche home party, Mesa, Arizona, November 3, 2012.

Chapter 6

FANTASTICAL THINKING AND THE (FAILED) PROMISES OF DIRECT SALES

I found that there are a lot of similarities between being in Mary Kay and dating a sociopath. – Leslie

We always had to look over-priced and business dress at all times. They called it ‘Fake it till you make it.’ –Andrea

I was a new hotshot director who was on stage often during the Seminar. But I felt I was a fraud because I knew I had bought many of the honors I was enjoying. – Gloria

INTRODUCTION

For many women, behind the promises of the direct selling industry hides a bitter reality. With a turnover rate of over fifty percent (anywhere from 40% to 80%) it appears that a large majority of consultants stay for less than one year.¹ This means that in order to maintain profits many direct selling organizations require a steady flow of new independent contractors. Multi-level marketing direct selling organizations, like the companies included in this study, benefit greatly from the ever shifting composition of their workforce. The revolving door of new representatives funnels profits from commissions along an upward chain to the most senior consultants. An unequal system of distribution that sees a tiny percentage of individuals at the top retaining the majority of

¹ It is difficult to obtain concise data on the turn-over rates of direct selling organizations. This number is based on a report by Robert L. Fitzpatrick, “The Myth of ‘Income Opportunity’ in Multi-Level Marketing,” 2008, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://www.pyramidschemealert.org>.

profits at the expense of a larger number of individuals at lower levels seems unsustainable at best—unethical at worst. Nevertheless, multi-level marketing direct selling organizations have built successful long lasting businesses based on this system and every year they report increasing profits and increasing numbers of new distributors.

I have been arguing that one of the reasons for the continued success of direct selling organizations is the industry's ability to market the direct sales imaginary. Like other imaginary beliefs, the direct sales imaginary represents a way of thinking that takes the promises of the direct selling industry at face-value and nullifies critical analysis. This imaginary belief is enabled through its reliance upon other dominant discourses of gender, race, class, liberal ideas of work, and even the American dream. Naturally, reality does not always align with expectations held within imagined beliefs. When reality does not match the promises of direct sales there are many who continue to believe, despite evidence to the contrary. In this chapter I examine some of the fissures of the direct sales imaginary. These fissures bring to light the ways in which the direct sales imaginary perpetuates middle-class femininities and consumption for the sake of profits.

Gender Essentialisms and Gender Hierarchies of Direct Sales

As I have discussed throughout this dissertation, many direct selling organizations have a long history of promoting themselves as businesses *for women*. During interviews I asked my study participants if they had any explanations as to why the industry was filled with women. Some women would quickly offer that direct selling was dominated by women simply because the products being sold were feminine (i.e. cosmetics, candles, home decorating, etc.). It is true that some direct selling companies are gendered

depending on the products that they sell. For example, companies that sell certain services directly to the consumer (i.e. communications, utilities, insurance, financial planning, etc.) seem to attract more men than women. But the industry statistics show that around 80% of the entire industry is comprised of women. To explain this gendering some of my respondents parroted back the prominent themes of the direct sales imaginary itself (e.g. women come to direct sales because of empowerment, income potential, fun, etc.) and one consultant even speculated that women are easier to manipulate than men—and better at doing the manipulation required.

In general, the women in this study attempted to rationalize women's involvement in direct sales using gender essentialisms, many of which can be found within direct selling's promotional materials. For example, the most frequently offered rationalization for the gendering of direct sales was that women are natural socializers and home parties are centered on a social act. For instance, Nicki feel that women are drawn to home party sales because

men socially don't bond like women. Women just like to get together to hang out with other women. And they just get excited over products, it's the nature of us. Getting excited and being around each other with anything. Men, not so much. Their whole chemical makeup is different. So for them, to get excited and bond at a home with products, that's just what the women are about.²

Olivia shared similar views. As she explained:

I think that women love other women's company. I love doing parties it's just so much fun to go to them. And I think that we're natural sales people because we

² "Nicki," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 1, 2011.

find something you like, we tell everyone about it. I don't know, I mean guys can be totally successful at it but their personality doesn't lend towards allowing themselves to be silly. They want to be perfect in front of people and I don't know how many times I've had to go home for my bag we'd forgotten and screwed up. And men are not as good at that.³

According to Olivia, women were *natural* sales people because they were more likely to want to have fun and be casual about business than are men. Likewise, Rebecca felt “women are good at direct sales because women talk, it’s a natural characteristic of women; that they like to talk.”⁴

Incidentally, even while explaining why direct selling has more women than men, several participants of this study simultaneously insisted that there *were men* in their company because direct selling was for everybody, not just women. Bridgette, a Mary Kay representative, became very adamant that her business did not only cater to women and that men could be involved and do well if they so chose. Another consultant, Rebecca, explained to me that “the men are very involved” but admitted that when she went to the national convention she was surprised to see “there are many men who are at the vice president level who are in the business.”⁵ Similarly, other women explained to me that they knew of many successful men in the highest ranking levels of their own companies that they had seen at recognition events (such as annual conventions). Some women suspected that men would likely do well because of their novelty. One consultant

³ “Olivia,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 15, 2011.

⁴ “Rebecca,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 2, 2011.

⁵ Ibid.

explained to me that she believed some of the successful male representatives were homosexual and that homosexual men would do well in the business because they were more feminine. Otherwise, as Elizabeth considered: “I think for men to succeed in this they have to have really good follow-up skills and really have more of a feminine side to them. Because making relationships would be hard for a good old boy to do, unless he had a wife who did the follow-up.”⁶ Nevertheless, most of the women expressed their belief that any man who joined direct sales would benefit from the same tools and community that were available to women.

This study did not include male participants and the number of male consultants and their current ranking within various companies is not publically available. It is difficult to even speculate as to how many men might be working as independent contractors and whether or not they are in leadership positions (meaning they have a downline) because men were not featured within the success stories or materials of the direct selling companies within my sample. However, it is evident that men can be found in the uppermost positions of power at the corporate levels of many of this study’s sampled organizations. For example, the table below (see table 6.1) lists (with the exception of Tupperware) the companies that were represented by the consultants in this study. The table compares the number of women and men on each company’s executive board. This table was created by examining executive bios that were available on most company. In some cases the only available data was on that pertaining the company’s CEO or President. As shown in the table below, according to the information available on the Mary Kay website only four out of twelve corporate executive positions are held by women. The Close to My Heart website, which was

⁶ “Elizabeth,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, September 18, 2011.

founded by Jeanette Lynton, marks Lynton as the current CEO of the company.

However, according to the Better Business Bureau, Spencer H. Clawson is the current CEO while Lynton is noted as being the owner.⁷ Tupperware shows only one position of fifteen currently held by a woman. Furthermore, only three of the women in the entire table below are women of color (two from Avon).

⁷ “Close to My Heart, Inc.,” Better Business Bureau Business Review, Better Business Bureau (2013), accessed March, 15, 2013, <http://www.bbb.org/utah/business-reviews/craft-supplies/close-to-my-heart-in-pleasant-grove-ut-2003056>.

Table 6.1

Direct Selling Industry Sample Gender Comparison of Executive Positions

Company	Executive Positions		Executive Positions	
	Held by Women	%	Held by Men	%
Arbonne	5 ✓*	50 %	5	50%
Avon	4 ✓	33%	8	66%
Cabi	?**	?	✓	?
Close to My Heart	2	50%	2✓	50%
Herbalife	0	0%	6 ✓	100%
Lia Sophia	?	?	?	?
Mary Kay Inc.	4	33%	8 ✓	66%
Miche Bag	2	40%	3 ✓	60%
Pampered Chef	✓	?	?	?
Premier Designs	?	?	✓	?
Tupperware	1	7%	14 ✓	93%
Totals	19	28%	48	72%

* ✓ indicates CEO

** ? data unavailable

Although many of the companies listed in the table above specifically claim to be companies devoted to women, it is clear from these examples that women have not reached the highest levels of leadership. In fact, several direct selling companies have a

long tradition of dividing executive management positions from sales positions along lines of gender. In Avon, for example, men held the majority of supervisory positions and all of the home-office corporate positions until late into the twentieth century.⁸

Tupperware frequently recruited husbands to work for executive branches out of husband/wife teams, leaving the sales work to the wife.⁹ Although Mary Kay Ash served as chairman of the board from 1968 into the 1990s, her son (and co-founder) Richard Rogers, took over as president and the de facto head of the company in 1968.¹⁰ The former female president of Arbonne, Rita Davenport, was rumored to be only a figurehead who rarely attended business meetings.¹¹ Without a doubt, as sociologists Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller pointed out, home party direct selling “is dominated by men at the top and women at the bottom [in a] deeply hierarchical and gendered arrangement.”¹²

Not only do men represent a majority of the executive leadership of the direct selling industry but they also seem to play an important role within direct selling affiliate organizations. For example, the direct selling industry’s main trade association and

⁸ Katina Lee Manko, “‘Ding Dong! Avon Calling!’: Gender, Business, and Door-to-Door Selling, 1890-1955,” (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2001), accessed October 15, 2012 <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/docview/304690961?accountid=4485>.

⁹ Nicole Woolsey Biggart, *Charismatic Capitalism: Direct Selling Organizations in America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989). Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware: The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Beth Kreydatus, “‘Enriching Women’s Lives’: The Mary Kay Approach to Beauty, Business, and Feminism,” *Business and Economic History On-Line* 3 (2005), accessed March 3, 2009, <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2005/kreydatus.pdf>.

¹¹ L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller, *Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011), 8.

¹² Williams and Bemiller, *Women at Work*, 8.

lobbying firm is the Direct Selling Association. Here, fairing somewhat better than in the companies represented by the DSA, 40% of the DSA's executive board is comprised of women but only 3 of the total 46 board members were women of color (no men of color).¹³ Men also create (or at least oversee as editors) the messaging that is geared toward women in the shape of articles like those found in *Empowering Women*. For instance, John Fleming (whom I cited throughout the previous chapter) is an editor and author for *Empowering Women*. John Fleming is also the chief editor/CEO of the website and magazine "Direct Selling News."¹⁴ Direct Selling News and its associated website, much like *Empowering Women*, are devoted to informing consumers and potential recruits about the direct selling industry in general while spotlighting different companies.

It is worth noting that both *Empowering Women* and *Direct Selling News* are published by VideoPlus publishing. Judging from VideoPlus's website they are a marketing firm that specializes in producing messaging and branding for various types of companies, including exclusive "industry magazines." However, these are not objective sources aimed at information distribution; they are paid-for marketing tools for direct selling organizations' recruitment and retention. Even though both *Direct Selling News* and *Empowering Women* claim that their magazines deliver material written by "journalists who understand the direct selling business model," their writers are more

¹³ "DSA Board of Directors," Direct Selling Association, 2013, accessed January 5, 2013, <http://www.dsa.org/forms/committee/CommitteeFormPublic/view?id=7F3000604E6>.

¹⁴ One can find several letters about direct selling written by John Fleming on his website, "Direct Selling News," accessed February 3, 2013, <http://www.directsellingnews.com>.

akin to advertisers whose aim is convincing people to join direct selling companies.¹⁵ The end result: women who believe direct selling is a women-centered space are told *by men* that women are natural born sales people because they like to socialize and other myths of similar nature.

Not surprisingly, this gendered division of labor was not evident to my study participants. First of all, there seems to exist a disconnect between the world of sales as managed through various levels of upline networks and the home office corporate employees. These two separate worlds rarely come into contact with one another and representatives are prompted/expected to remain focused on sales leadership for inspiration. The fuzziness inherent in the direct sales imaginary that allows both feminist-minded women and so-called traditional-minded women to see direct selling as a legitimate woman-oriented space is intriguing. Moreover, it is this same ambiguity that prevents most women from seeing behind the propaganda image of their organizations.

Direct Sales is for Everybody, Especially Middle-Class White Women!

Direct selling discourses (visual and textual) promote the idea that direct selling is for everybody. Promotional materials, brochures, and websites frequently emphasize that, in contrast to traditional corporate employment, direct selling is a meritocratic industry. In other words, there are no glass ceilings in direct selling because promotion and reward are given to those individuals who earn them through sales and leadership. An individual's race, class, age, and/or gender are meaningless in direct selling because

¹⁵ One can find more information about Videoplus on their website. See "VideoPlus," accessed June 5, 2009, <http://www.videoplus.com>.

success comes to those who simply work hard enough. For example, the co-founder and president of Warm Spirit, Nadine Thompson explained in an interview for *Empowering Women* that African-American women need (direct selling) opportunities because

They run against a glass ceiling. For white women it's gender, and for black women it's race and gender. They want to find an opportunity where they can be their own business owners, use their skills to develop their own organizations, define how much money they make and can go as high as they can without the corporate glass ceiling.¹⁶

To illustrate the idealism that direct selling is for everybody the industry makes use of images featuring women of various ethnic backgrounds, skin tones, and/or ages. This nod toward diversity, however, appears rather disingenuous when portrayals of “diversity” can be read as discursive representations of a middle-class hegemonic white femininity.

By examining the photos, success story profiles, and advertisements I find that racialized images are deployed strategically as part of an overall marketing strategy. For example, the majority of the images in promotional materials are those of white women with a smaller number of images featuring women of color. This standard could be thought of as the default for many companies (keeping in mind that images of white women are also racialized). In contrast, when the company is one that was started by a woman of color or somehow aimed at recruiting women of color, promotional materials feature images of women of color almost exclusively. For example, in an issue of *Empowering Women* about the company Warm Spirit, a skin care company that is marketed to African-American women, nearly all of the photographs (those of models

¹⁶ As quoted in Erin Casey, “Warm Spirit Empowering Communities around the World-One Person at a Time,” *Empowering Women*, May, 2007, 45.

and those of real distributors) were of black women.¹⁷ I observed a similar pattern in the Jafra issue of *Empowering Women*.¹⁸ Jafra is also a skincare company that claims to be committed to diversity. This issue of *Empowering Women* was the most diverse of my entire sample with photographs of people of various ethnic backgrounds. It appears that the magazine's editors are determining how much diversity to represent depending on which company they are covering. Perhaps the editors are basing these choices on their presumptions about the intended recruitment audience for each company; perhaps they believe women of color are more likely to be interested in companies that are aimed at women of color. In this way companies like Warm Spirit or Jafra are marked as specialized/different because of race or their commitments to "diversity," whereas other companies are unmarked and standing as the "normal" or non-racialized companies.

Although deployed at different times the images of women of color and white women both represent racialized imagery. Besides some variation in skin tone and/or hair style, when compared to one another the images found in direct selling promotional materials are remarkably similar. These images, like those found in *Empowering Women* are readable as reinforcing a hegemonic white middle-class ideal. Hegemonic whiteness, as defined by Amanda E. Lewis, is "a shifting configuration of practices and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of 'normality' in our culture."¹⁹ The ways in which the photographs are staged (what clothing the models are wearing, what activities are

¹⁷ *Empowering Women*, May 2007.

¹⁸ *Empowering Women*, March 2009.

¹⁹ Amanda E. Lewis, "'What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness,'" *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004): 623-646, 634.

taking place, what types of things are included in the backgrounds) provide clues to the discursive construction of middle-class whiteness. The race of the actor in the images is not as important as the performance of whiteness because performing whiteness is about “embracing certain cultural practices, defending institutional practices, [and/or] protecting particular interests.”²⁰ Whiteness is dependent upon ideas about middle-class values and formations and class remains a quit salient aspect of the structuring of direct selling.

The following series of images exemplify how whiteness is presented within the pages of *Empowering Women*. The first photograph (see fig. 6.1) shows a white woman working on a computer with her child nearby. The young girl appears to be coloring peacefully. The desk is neat and uncluttered. The mother can work while she is in view of her child. Like many photographs in *Empowering Women* this image indicates the value placed on motherhood and women as caretakers. The clothing of the mother and child, the computer, and the size of the home in the background also represent a family living a middle-class lifestyle. Similarly, the next image (see fig. 6.2) is that of a brown skinned woman and child. In the photo we can see that both are well dressed and groomed and they are smiling while looking at the same laptop screen. In the blurred background you can see French doors leading out to the white picket fence of a patio or deck.

All of *Empowering Women*’s “Lifestyle Portraits” (success stories) feature information about a successful consultant, a narrative about their experience in direct sales, and several photographs of the consultant usually with her husband and children. For example, the next image in the series (see fig. 6.3) is that of Jennifer Townsley from

²⁰ Lewis, “What Group,” 635.

Arbonne. According to the information and photographs that accompany her story Jennifer is an Asian-American woman who is married to a white man. In the photograph seen below, Jennifer is shown holding her youngest son in her lap at a table while he is coloring. Again, the clues of this photo indicate a middle-class lifestyle and an emphasis on the importance of women as caretakers. Likewise, Arbonne representative Lisa DeMayo is shown in the next image (see fig. 6.4) with her family. In this photo we see Lisa with her husband and children happily gathered around a table playing some type of board game. Lisa and her family are light skinned and might be Italian or Hispanic but it is not certain and the family appears middle class. Again, the focal point of this image is Lisa looking lovingly at her young daughter. Lisa's photograph is remarkably similar to that featured along with the success story of Warm Spirit representative Mardi Woods (see fig. 6.5). Seen below is a photo of Mardi, her husband, and children sitting at a table playing a board game. Mardi and her family are African Africans; yet, aside from the tone of their skin color, this photo is remarkably similar to the photo of Lisa. Both photographs show a married couple and their children. Both photographs show the families engaged in a family activity (board game) and both show the families in middle-class looking homes. Most of the photographs in *Empowering Women*, especially those of the successful consultants, are photographs of women with their children and/or husbands. If their husbands are not depicted in the photograph it is indicated that the consultant is married in the text, highlighting the importance of families within the context of heterosexual matrimony.



Figure 6.1 Photograph showing typical image of woman with child from *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 11.

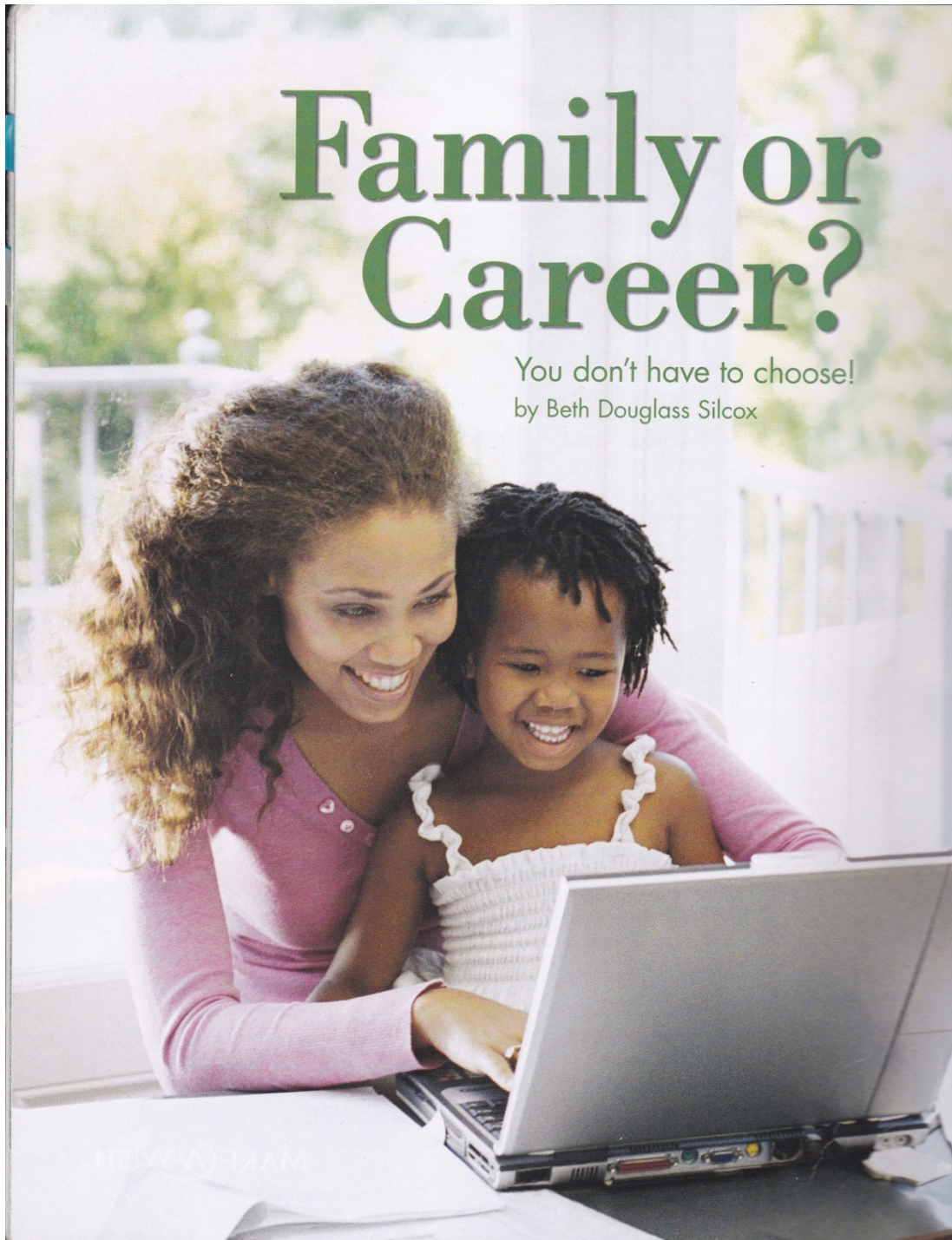


Figure 6.2 Photograph showing typical image of woman working with child from *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 29.



Figure 6.3 Photograph featuring successful Arbonne Representative Jennifer Townsley and her son. *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 119.



Figure 6.4 Photograph featuring successful Arbonne representative Lisa DeMayo and her family. As seen in *Empowering Women*, June, 2008, 12.



Figure 6.5 Photograph of successful Warm Spirit representative Mardi Woods and her family. As seen in *Empowering Women*, May, 2007, 15.

The direct selling industry portrays itself as open and inclusive. However, selectively marketing images of diversity (i.e. only when writing about African American or “diverse” companies) implicitly reifies women of color as racialized subjects and white women as without race. Portraying white ethnicity as raceless contributes to the hegemony of whiteness (as an unexamined category). It also contributes to the difficulty that white individuals express in understanding whiteness as a racialized identity, and to the difficulties my interviewees had in articulating/interpreting the racializations of the direct sales imaginary.²¹ Moreover, the imagery associated with the direct selling

²¹ Lewis, “What Group?”

companies affirms their reliance on middle-class values as means of structuring and representing direct selling to potential recruits.

Erasing Difference in Direct Selling: Kaybots and Sales Mangers

The pressure to conform to the appearances and behaviors of other distributors certainly plays a role in the experiences of some direct sales representatives. Mary Kay cosmetics places considerable pressure on their consultants to conform to the “Mary Kay Look,” which includes having consultants’ makeup fully done (with Mary Kay makeup), hair done, blazer or sweater, skirts (no pants), panty hose, and closed toed shoes.²² Although there is no written rule about this dress code, it has been the standard ever since Mary Kay Ash began the business. Ash insisted that in order for women to be taken seriously in business, but not lose their femininity, they needed to dress the part. Many women in this study who had previously sold Mary Kay expressed their irritation with the strict dress code and said that it was their least favorite aspect of Mary Kay.

Yet when conforming meant becoming “less ethnic,” the experiences was more than irritating—it was traumatic. Manisha began selling Mary Kay cosmetics after moving to the United States from India. Although she was working she sent most of her income to family in India, so she wanted to earn a little extra money for herself. When Manisha was first recruited her director seemed overly excited by her “ethnic” appeal. She introduced her to others on her team saying that Manisha “will be helping our team

²² I learned about the dress code while in attendance at a Mary Kay sales meeting. Mary Kay also denotes different rankings through dress. Those who have a team and significant level of wholesales orders become “Red” level directors and are expected to wear red blazers to the sales meetings. Above that are National Sales Directors who wear a skirt suit that is standard and issued from the company. The suit changes every 1-2 years and the sales directors are expected to purchase them with their own money. The Sales Directors at the sales meetings and other attendees told me that the suit symbolized success to them and it was part of their motivation to rise in the ranks.

open up a new market!” Manisha’s experience ended poorly because of her director’s inability to get past Manisha’s racial difference. As Manisha explained:

My relationship with my director was complicated. I constantly felt that she was condescending toward me, making little comments about my race, religion and accent whenever she could and implying that I could somehow play the diversity card to advance in MK. She enforced the dress code strictly and I will never forget the time she made me remove my traditional bangles and makeup including my bindi (forehead caste dot), sindhoor (color in hair parting) and kajal (kohl eyeliner), replacing it with the “Kaybot” look. I tried to tell myself to stay upbeat, but I cried that night.²³

Manisha said she eventually quit because her director did not value her as a person. The Mary Kay “look” is not necessarily about white beauty standards instead it is more about middle-class standards associated with whiteness. In Manisha’s case, the markers of her religious and ethnic identity had to be removed and erased. Without valuing difference, promoting diversity, which my interviewees and *Empowering Women* articles claim is a virtue of direct sales, is a rather empty promise.

Pressure to conform to ideals of middle-class whiteness might be part of the reason that the industry has not been very successful at recruiting (or retaining) women of color. Or perhaps women of color (depending on their social economic status) are more reluctant to trade a steady paycheck in favor for the uncertainties of direct sales. In any case, the Direct Selling Association’s most recent survey (see fig. 6.7) 87.7% of the direct

²³ This story comes from the Pink Truth Discussion Board; this website will be discussed in more detail later. See, “Manisha1,” “My Pink Story,” *Pink Truth Discussion Board*, March 19, 2012, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.pinktruth.com/board/index.php?topic=1988.msg26448#msg26448>.

selling industry consists of “White Non-Hispanic” and “White Hispanic” representatives. “Black/African American,” distributors only make up 7.1% and “Asian/Pacific Islanders” only 3.1% of the entire industry (the actual demographic breakdown of different companies remains unknown). Indeed, throughout this research Mary Kay and Avon were the only companies in which I meet or observed any distributors of color at company functions.

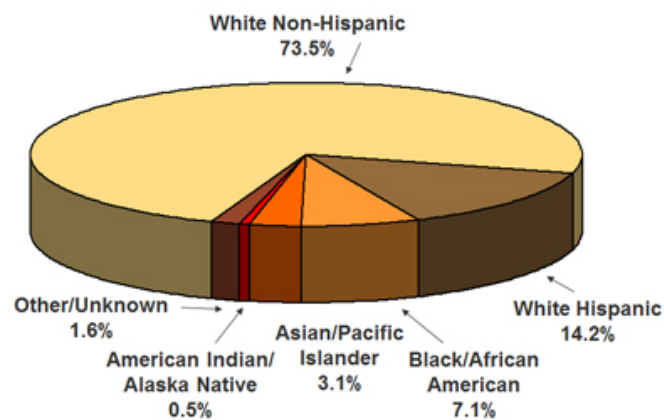


Figure 6.6 Racial Demographics of Direct Sellers from the Direct Selling Association’s 2011 survey.

The women sampled for this study reflected similar (lack of) diversity. When at sales meetings or during interviews I asked about women of color in direct sales many women immediately defended direct selling as a diverse industry because they “knew of several” women of color in their company (or another). When I probed more deeply on that question they would speculate that any lack of women of color was likely a mere reflection of local demographics and not a reflection of the structures or values of the

direct selling industry's companies. Clearly, women tried to avoid conflict between the rhetoric and realities of the industry.

The women I interviewed were equally ambivalent about their own racialized experiences. Aside from the demographic question, unless I prompted, race was nearly absent from our interviews. In fact, while cultural stereotypes about working class people came up during interviews, the women rarely brought up race, the race of their customers, or the racial make-up of their companies. Only once did one woman bring ethnicity into accounting for a difference in the sales success of a new recruit. For instance, Olivia told me:

Well she's my first Hispanic recruit and she's just great, she's bilingual, she's just great. But she's trying to sell to her you know network, her community. And my husband's Mexican so I understand how they are and this is not the kind of direct sales business they lean towards. They want their products now and they don't want to pay up front. They want you to cover it until it comes. So she's really struggling because she wants to stay there because that's where she's comfortable because her first language is Spanish. But for her to be successful she might have to get out of her network.²⁴

Ethnicity, in this example, was seen as a detriment to the labor of a new recruit because Olivia believed it corresponded to cultural differences in consumption behaviors. However, Olivia felt that her recruit could overcome this simply by getting outside of her personal network. Despite the fact that when you initially begin in home party sales you must rely on your personal networks for parties, many women I interviewed did not

²⁴ "Olivia," interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux.

believe that race or class would present any road blocks to gaining entrance into other types of networks. Nor did any of my interviewees acknowledge that their own race and class status might have helped them because they had better access to particular networks. On the contrary, most of the women I interviewed held firmly to the belief, as sold to them through the direct sales imaginary, that the only thing making or breaking one's success was their own attitude and work ethic.

Marketing the Middle Class: Direct Selling is the American Dream?

Direct selling discourses rely heavily on the ideology of the American dream. Although the American dream is a flexible and fluid concept that changes over time, at its most general it is a shared belief that American society is fundamentally a merit-based society with upward mobility and opportunities being equally available for those who “embrace a strong work ethic.”²⁵ As sociologists Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong observed, the American dream often includes the belief that Americans have equal means of obtaining “freedom, happiness, family, economic security (an above-average and secure income), higher educational levels (for themselves and their children), personal fulfillment (a rewarding job), home ownership, and financial success.”²⁶ Largely, the American dream is about middle-class aspirations and about sitting yourself off discursively from those less affluent.

The American dream discourse is intertwined with the direct selling discourse in such a way that they seem one in the same. For example, reasons suggested for entering

²⁵ See Robert Perrucci and Earl Wyson, *New Class Society: Goodbye American Dream?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 45-46.

²⁶ Ibid.

into direct selling, as listed in *Empowering Women*, mirror the desires and promises of the American dream ideology. As the excerpt below illustrates (my emphasis):

Flexibility and Freedom: *Take vacation* when you want, not when it's convenient for your boss. The *freedom* to set their own hours is one of the top reasons women start their own home-based businesses. The *flexibility* of the business fits the lifestyle of a corporate professional as easily as a stay-at-home parent.

Financial Freedom: Give yourself a raise whenever you want! *Building your own business* allows you to *control your financial future*. Maximize your earnings by taking advantage of the opportunity to build a team and earn residual income.

Recognition: *Recognition* is practically nonexistent in an adult's day-to-day life—unless you're part of an industry in which praise is part of the package. *Good companies recognize their representatives' achievements with applause, trips, jewelry and more.*

No Limits: Set your own goals, dream big and create the life you want with no restrictions on territory or income. When you're employed by someone else you rely on them to give you a raise or a promotion. When *you're the boss, you decide!* Perhaps that's one reason more young women are choosing this alternative-career path over the corporate world.

Earn Money While You're On Vacation: Take advantage of the residual-income *opportunity* most direct selling companies offer by building a team and *you'll be on your way to earning money*—even when you're not

working. Direct selling offers *independent business owners* the *opportunity to maximize* their income based on their personal efforts and those of their team.²⁷

The above excerpt did not include any evidence to support the claims that it made like that “more young women are choosing this alternative-career path;” instead *Empowering Women* tosses around vague terms like opportunity, freedom, and self-determination to tap into the appeal of the American dream ideology. This list also emphasizes the financial rewards (both in terms of consumption and income) that suggest that direct selling can either lead to or maintain living a middle-class lifestyle.

The direct selling industry focusses on the rewards that women can obtain throughout their promotional materials, especially within the success stories. The table below (see table 2) represents the most frequent outcomes and rewards found within a sample of success stories from *Empowering Women*. Beyond the standard rewards (listed as outcomes) these success stories are designed to showcase the lucrative financial rewards one might obtain, such as purchasing homes, paying off debt, paying for children’s wedding or college expenses, being able to travel and take vacations, and so on. Additionally, the direct selling industry has long offered their sales force gifts and prizes (such as fur coats, cars, jewelry, etc.) that were symbolic of middle-class desires. Considering the changing distribution of wealth in the United States and the ensuing economic recession, it is likely that these success stories and the rewards that direct sales promises create a strong and compelling narrative for new recruits: the American dream is possible through direct sales.

²⁷ “It’s a Woman’s World,” *Empowering Women*, March, 2008, 10.

Table 6.2

Most Frequent Outcomes & Rewards Success Narratives of *Empowering Women*

Outcomes of Working in Direct Selling		
Success	Freedom	Achieved Dreams
Discovered Treasure	Be Own Boss	Stability
Security	Time for Family	No Stress
Escape “Rat Race”	New Opportunities	Help Others Achieve
Rewards of Working in Direct Selling		
Travel/Vacation	Purchase New Cars	Pay for Children’s College expenses
Diamonds/Jewelry	Purchase New Houses/Vacation Homes	Pay for Daughter’s Wedding
Coats	Pay off Debt	Pay for Husband’s Retirement

The rhetoric and imagery of direct sales situates direct selling as the vehicle for transporting women into realizing the American dream. However, direct selling is more about consumption than it is about class mobility. Thorstein Veblen, one of the earliest authors to address consumption at the turn of the nineteenth century, identified consumption as the process by which upper/middle class people could display to others their detachment from “necessary labor.”²⁸ At its simplest, Veblen’s reasoning was that because upper/middle-class (white) women had become removed from productive labor their role shifted to focus on consuming products/things for their households and/or spouses. This pattern continued to shape upper/middle class consumption into the twentieth century.²⁹ The Post-War boom of the 1950s ushered in a new consumerism that

²⁸ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1912 [1899]).

²⁹ The relationship between consumption and class is complex and has shifted over time depending on various social and political factors. For an excellent history of consumption and its

shifted class boundaries and gave working class people a means of living “the good life.”³⁰ Housewives, usually middle-class white women, were the targets for marketing campaigns and recognized as the main consumers within households. During this era selling Tupperware and holding Tupperware parties became a method of signaling one’s belonging to the middle-class. Tupperware mainly relied on the labor of married middle-class women knowing that these distributors could hold parties with other housewives during the daytime while husbands and children were not at home. Similar assumptions are made about today’s direct sellers.

In direct sales, the line between selling products and consuming products is fuzzy and unclear. Women are advised, if not outright required, to use the products that they sell. They are taught that they are their own best advertisement and that potential customers are more likely to purchase products if they see their consultant also benefiting from their use. Being able to “get products you love at a discount” was even among the reasons for joining direct sales.³¹ Many of the products are marketed as appealing to working class women/families (such as products that save time, save money, or are affordable, etc.) yet frame the consumption of these products as middle-class refinement by reframing home parties as “spa days” or “fashion shows” and so forth.

The majority of women in this study identify as middle class and their combined household income (theirs and their husbands) places them within the range of middle-tier

relationship to gender, race, and class see Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

³⁰ Elaine Tyler May argues that the post-war era that led into the new consumerism was popular because it deemphasized class difference and supported the appearance of upward mobility for the working class. See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

³¹ “It’s a Woman’s World,” *Empowering Women*, 10.

earners, which according to 2010 census data is \$20,262 to \$101,582 (with \$20,262 to \$50,000 defined as the lower middle class).³² The median household income for my study participants was \$77,500. All but one of the currently active consultants in this study were married and this mirrors the general pattern of the direct selling industry, as the majority of direct sellers are reported to be married women.³³ In most cases the income of the consultants' husbands alone placed their households within the range of middle-income earners. The married consultants defined their direct selling income as "extra" money that was not counted as part of the general family budget; which could thereby be used to pay off debt or as "spending money" for the consultants' and/or their children. Only one of the currently active consultants I interviewed was single and she had turned to direct selling to supplement her unemployment payments that she was collecting due to being recently laid-off.

That direct selling requires no special training or skill and has "low" start-up costs are trumpeted as being appealing to women of lower economic means (e.g. single mothers, minority women, etc.). Although Avon's sign-up fee is the lowest at ten dollars, the rest of the companies in my sample had start-up costs ranging from \$75 (for Mary Kay) to \$2,500 (Cabi) with the average costs being somewhere between \$200 and \$400. Some of the companies do not require consultants to purchase inventory but instead

³² This figure denotes middle-tier income. In some cases this range is used to determine class status but sociologists have shown that other factors contribute to the experience of class. See the discussion of class in Perrucci and Wyson, *New Class Society*. See also David Rohde, "What Do We Mean by 'Middle Class'?", *Reuters* December 29, 2011, accessed March 29, 2013, <http://blogs.reuters.com/david-rohde/2011/12/29/what-do-we-mean-by-middle-class>; 2010 Census Data, "2010 Income Tables: Households," United States Census Bureau 2010, accessed March 25, 2013, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/household/index.html>.

³³ According to personal communication with the Director of Marketing & Publication Services at the Direct Selling Association, Karen E.T. Garrett, a large majority of the direct selling women are married. See Karen E. T. Garrett, email message to author, January 23, 2013.

suggest that they grow their demonstration kits. Because many companies introduce new products throughout the year consultants will be in constant need of updating their demonstration kits. Furthermore, some companies have strict sales quotas that require consultants place minimum orders to retain their rank and/or discount levels. I found that when consultants did not have the minimum required they would sometimes make personal purchases just to maintain their status. The consultants in this study claim that these costs are negligible because the company gives discounts for new products/kits and these purchases are considered business “investments;” with the expectation that consultants will see a return on their investment. However, whether or not consultants saw a return on their total investments was difficult to gauge as many of the consultants in this study did not keep good track of their business expenses. From signing up to remaining active, direct selling may come with more costs than consultants realize.

When I asked the women in this study how someone from a lower socio-economic means could be successful many told me that socio-economic background did not matter. As Janet explains:

Somebody might join and their friends might not have a lot of money but it is those type of people who will typically have a show and host their own show because the holidays are coming and they can't afford Christmas so they need to get the jewelry for free. So usually the shows that are lower retail like that are the shows that you get more bookings from. My higher retail shows, if I have an \$800 or \$1000 show that's great, but nine times out of ten I rarely get bookings off of them because those are the people who can afford to buy whatever they want and they don't care about the free products. If people who are coming on who don't

have a lot of money they have the potential to have a lot of shows right off the bat with their friends that maybe don't have a lot of money but along the way it's going to branch out and you're going to get into different groups from your initial group and you're going to meet people that you never met before.³⁴

In fact, several women in this study told me that one could never predict the sales volume of a party based on preconceived notions of socio-economics. Instead, the consultants in this study suggest that people with lower income might be more likely to spend money, especially on things that might be considered luxury goods. These women, whose average household income places them much higher than those of the working/lower-middle class, perpetuated assumptions and stereotypes of the spending abilities of working class consumers.

Working-class and/or lower middle-class women are not likely to experience direct selling the same way as women of higher social economic status. To begin, working-class women are probably the least likely to forfeit a steady paycheck in favor of a direct sales commission as it may take weeks, months, or even years before achieving a satisfactory level of stability. Especially when considering that the annual average earnings for non-leadership consultants (meaning they have no downline) are reported as being a meager \$1,400.³⁵ Additionally, because new representatives initially rely on their personal networks of family and friends for their customer base, women of lower social economic status may have a difficult time in reaching their sales goals.

³⁴ "Janet," interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, Mesa, Arizona, August 10, 2011.

³⁵ This figure is not advertised on the company websites or even on the DSA's website. However, I was able to obtain this figure by personally contacting the Director of Marketing & Publication Services at the Direct Selling Association. She freely reported that the annual gross income reported in a 2008 survey was \$1,400 for non-leadership distributors. Karen E. T. Garrett, email message to author, January 23, 2013.

Furthermore, home parties involve the literal opening up of one's home to others and this act carries with it class and race connotations about *who can* or *who would want to* invite others into their homes. This is exemplified best in an interview with the co-founder of Jafra, Connie Tang from *Empowering Women*. In this interview Tang discusses how her company's flexibility supports diversity, noting that

We started as a party-plan company, but we support flexible selling systems...

For example, if I live in an 800-square-foot apartment in New York City, having a party is hard. For that person, the sheer logistics of a party aren't an effective way to do business. Hispanics by lifestyle or home conditions are more often selling on a more personal level. So that person would do individual selling or present products in a smaller group environment. But someone in Portland, Ore., may love having parties.³⁶

Tang describes the home party as being the most conducive sales method for (white?) women in Portland, while people with small spaces (note: not because of class but because of geographical location) and "Hispanics" because of their "home conditions" or "lifestyle" are more likely to use personal sales methods. Tang's quote illustrates how assumptions about ethnicity and class work together to construct "Hispanics" as living in some sort of way that precludes them from doing home parties. Therefore, although direct selling sometimes appears to be marketed toward working/lower middle-class women and/or women of color, it is the discursively constructed ideal representative who is married, middle-class, and likely white, that the direct selling industry uses to model success.

³⁶ "Jafra," *Empowering Women*, March, 2009, 45-46

The direct sales imaginary promises that with enough hard work, one can obtain lucrative financial rewards and happiness. Claiming that there are no limits on one's potential achievements implies that any failure to reach success is not the fault of the company or industry. Furthermore, because companies equate the role of the independent contractor to that of a small business owner, they make worker organization (unionizing) impossible and transfer responsibility to contractors. If you do not reach your goals or if you lose money you only have yourself to blame. This self-blaming rhetoric allows multi-level marketing companies to continue growing and recruiting because workers who have failed do not unite in their common interests; they instead see their experience as emblematic of their failure to "work the business" hard enough.

The Economic Realities of Direct Selling: At the Base of the Pyramid

In the summer of 2012 *Harper's* featured the article "The Pink Pyramid Scheme: How Mary Kay Cosmetics Preys on Desperate Housewives" written by Virginia Sole-Smith.³⁷ In the article the author described her experiences attending sales meetings and signing up as a consultant with Mary Kay cosmetics. Through her observations and interviews she concluded that, rather than "enriching women's lives" as the company's slogan boasts, Mary Kay manipulates women into purchasing products, sending many into significant debt. According to Sole-Smith, Mary Kay's reported sales of \$3 billion for 2011 do not reflect the success of "empowered women," they actually "reveal just how much [is] spent to be in business with Mary Kay."³⁸ Sole-Smith discovered that

³⁷ Virginia Sole-Smith, "The Pink Pyramid Scheme," *Harper's*, July/August, 2009, 26-33.

³⁸ Sole-Smith, "Pink Pyramid Scheme," 28.

Mary Kay pressured many women to buy large inventories when signing up as consultants, sometimes making them pay as much as \$1,800 to get started. When women did not have that type of cash to make their “initial investment” (purchase inventory) they were shown how to apply for a “Chase Mary Kay Rewards Visa” card. From her investigation Sole-Smith found that many women lost money or felt pressure to purchase and recruit. Some women left because of the debt they acquired while others held on to the belief that if they worked hard enough they would eventually succeed. Ultimately, Sole-Smith concluded that “a business in which only a select few earn real money while everyone else pays to play sounds a lot like a pyramid scheme.”³⁹

Multi-level marketing companies like Mary Kay have been no stranger to controversy and several companies have faced accusations of being pyramid schemes in the past. The Federal Trade Commission defines a pyramid scheme as involving companies that

promise consumers or investors large profits based primarily on recruiting others to join their program, not based on profits from any real investment or real sale of goods to the public. Some schemes may purport to sell a product, but they simply use the product to hide their pyramid structure.... [as evident through] inventory loading and lack of retail sales.⁴⁰

According to this definition, as long as a company does not *require* that new recruits buy large inventories and maintains some level of retail sales, then companies like Mary Kay

³⁹ Sole-Smith, “Pink Pyramid Scheme,” 31.

⁴⁰ Debra A. Valentine, “Pyramid Schemes,” Federal Trade Commission, May 13, 1988, accessed January 5, 2012, <http://www.ftc.gov/speeches/other/dvimf16.shtm>.

are able to avoid being defined as pyramid schemes under the law. However, because of the efforts by the Direct Selling Association, which is the industry's main lobbyist, the law remains vague enough for many companies to claim legality while operating under systems that are remarkably close to the definition of pyramid schemes. The active distributors whom I interviewed insisted that their companies were not pyramid schemes even while explaining their companies pyramid-like pay structures. Additionally, the active distributors in my study (with one exception) claimed that they made some money through their efforts and did not report going into debt. One of my interviewees did report that she had acquired \$10,000 of debt when she was active with Mary Kay. Considering Sole-Smith's findings and my own research it is evident that the multi-level direct selling organizations do not deliver the financial freedom they promise – at least not to the vast majority of those who do not acquire a downline.

As I previously mentioned, the DSA reports that as of 2008 the average annual gross earnings of a distributor in a non-leadership position was only \$1,400.⁴¹ This statistic was difficult to obtain. Although the DSA conducts annual surveys on the industry they are only available for purchase by members of the association for a fee. It hardly seems surprising that the DSA would like to keep these average earnings difficult to find because the figure does not align with the promises of limitless income potential made by the industry. The income reported by the DSA also does not align with the projected average sales as reported on some company's websites, such as the estimated \$12,000 found on Pampered Chef's website. The income reported by the DSA was much

⁴¹ According to personal communication, given freely, by the Director of Marketing & Publication Services at the Direct Selling Association, the annual gross income reported in a 2008 survey was \$1,400 for non-leadership distributors. Karen E. T. Garrett, email message to author, January 23, 2013.

lower than the average earnings reported from the women in this study. However, I do question the accuracy of their estimated earnings only because many consultants told me that they kept poor records of their business expenses and restocking costs.

Others have expressed their doubts about the financial promises of direct sales. Robert L. Fitzpatrick, for example, investigated the financial statistics of ten direct selling multi-level marketing organizations, two of which were included within this dissertation (Arbonne and Herbalife).⁴² One of the most shocking findings in Fitzpatrick's report is that 99% of all sales representatives in his sample, according to his calculations, earned *less* than \$14 a week (on average) in commissions (from downline) while also earning less than ten dollars a week from their own sales. Hence, Fitzpatrick concludes that a large majority of people are earning nothing at all. Furthermore, according to Fitzpatrick, the Direct Selling Association and companies deliberately report misleading information about income in order to hide the dismal reality of their average earnings.

Most importantly, Fitzpatrick shows that within multi-level marketing companies the majority of profits, in the form of commissions, are funneled from a large base of distributors up to a significantly smaller percentage of higher ranking distributors. Although companies vary on their payout models they generally provide a commission based on the sales volume of one's network. Rankings are usually determined by the quantity and depth (how many generations) of an individual's downline network. Some companies require that a higher ranking distributor continue to meet retail sales quotas

⁴² Because many direct selling companies are privately held they are not required to disclose financial data. In his report Fitzpatrick had to focus on the companies whose financial data was available. See Robert L. Fitzpatrick, "The Myth of 'Income Opportunity' in Multi-Level Marketing."

while others do not, meaning that some people can earn money by simply having a downline network.

Fitzpatrick's research shows that in 2009 the bottom 99% of all Arbonne distributors earned an average income of \$87.36 annually whereas the top .04% earned an average income of \$330,516. The graphic below (see fig. 6.8) illustrates the disparity between the smallest percentage of top earners and largest percentage of low earners. I created the graphic based on information found in Arbonne's "Independent Consultant Compensation Summary," available (although not easily found) on the company website. In this document they included a table that shows the commissions paid out by Arbonne to different levels of consultants.⁴³ In 2011 Arbonne had an average of 224,215 active consultants. The pie chart on the graphic visually represents the percent of distributors at different rankings. On the right side of the graphic is a key linking the color, title, and payouts of the differently ranked distributors to the pie chart. This graphic shows that 90% of Arbonne's distributors did not earn any commissions because they did not meet the qualifications. From this chart we can easily see that a tiny percent of distributors make significant commissions over a much large percentage of distributors. Even the jump between a National and Regional Vice President represents \$130,322 worth of commissions. Clearly this model is made to benefit those at the top at the expense of those at the bottom. Ironically, Arbonne's website claims to have "one of the most generous compensation plans in the industry!"

⁴³ "2011 Independent Consultant Compensation Summary," The Arbonne Opportunity Corporate Information, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://www.arbonne.ca/company/info/iccs.asp>.

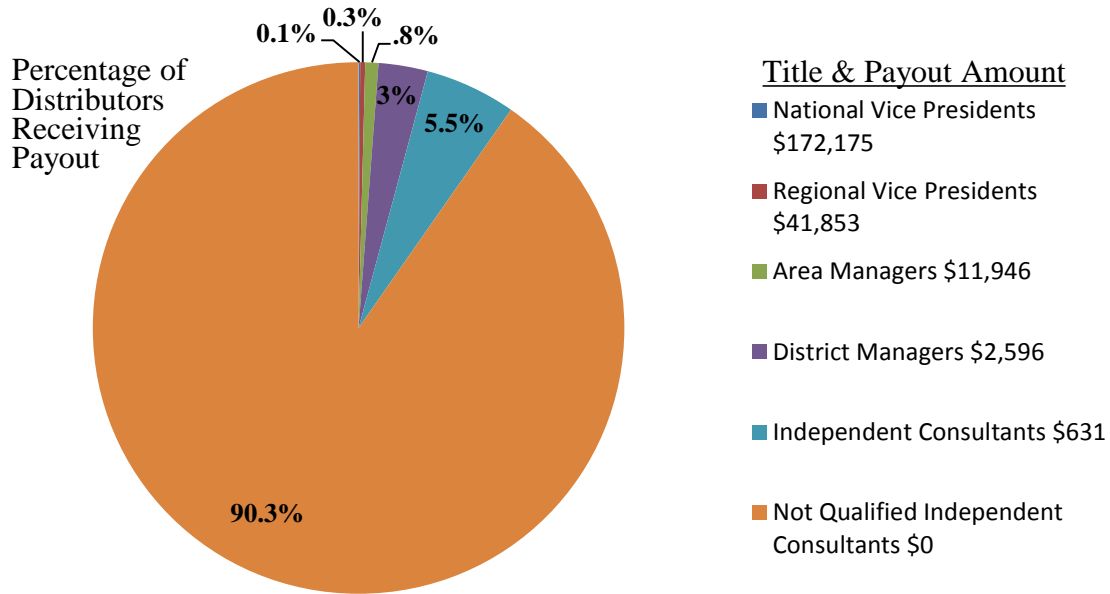


Figure 6.7 Arbonne Company Payout Summary for 2011

A list on Arbonne’s website compares and contrasts what network marketing is or is not. In this list they note that network marketing is not “a pyramid or scam where a few people end up with loads of money and many, many more don’t.”⁴⁴ It is rather outrageous that a company in which 90% of its distributors make a zero amount of commission while the top 1% make the highest commissions could include this statement on their website! As unbelievable as it might be this model of unequal distribution is the basis underlying many direct selling organizations. Fitzpatrick reasoned that these multi-level marketing companies persist largely through the constant recruitment of new distributors. Accordingly, he noted that “the money that this revolving-door group invests and earns no return on is the source of the high incomes to those few at the top each year.

⁴⁴ “About the Industry,” The Arbonne Opportunity, accessed January 10, 2013, <http://www.arbonne.ca/company/opportunity/industry.asp>.

Those top level people remain in their insider positions year after year, benefiting from the investment losses of all those who come and go below them.”⁴⁵ The profits of those at the top of this so-called-not pyramid are built upon the backs (or rather the pocket books) of the endlessly regenerating pool of new recruits. The promise of unlimited income potential seems possible for only the very few who can persist within a business in which very little is guaranteed.

When taking Fitzpatrick’s data and my evidence into account, an interesting picture emerges. I suggest that *class is a key structure* in organizing direct selling, making middle-class women the most likely group to see even minimal success in direct sales. For example, I find that to be successful in direct sales one must: a) not be relying on the income of direct selling, b) have social capital to gain access into networks of consumers with more disposable income, c) have the ability to spend significant amount of time prospecting, d) have the income to purchase inventories or updated kits throughout the year, and e) have the income to attend conventions, seminars, and trainings. Thus it appears that the structures of direct selling stand to benefit middle-class women over, and sometimes through the recruitment of, women of lower social economic backgrounds. What is at stake for lower-middle and working-class women is that they could potentially be exploited by upline sales managers and/or end up wasting money and time on something that was not structured for their success. Furthermore, even middle-class women stand to lose in this system because it appears that most direct sellers make little in terms of profit. Thus, we can surmise that it is the direct selling companies who

⁴⁵ Fitzpatrick, “The Myth of ‘Income Opportunity’ in Multi-Level Marketing,” 10.

stand to benefit the most, in the form of profits, from the constant recruiting of women into an imaginary that claims to greet all women with limitless financial opportunity.

Defectors: Pink Truth and “Pulling the Pink Wool from My Eyes”

Multi-level marketing companies use the promise of friendship, fun, and limitless financial rewards to recruit new distributors into their businesses. Yet, after examining the financial data and the pay distribution it seems evident that the high turnover rate of the industry indicates that many people do not last long as independent contractors. Unfortunately, it appears that many people do not see through the direct selling imaginary until they have lost friendships, time, and/or money. During this research I came across the website “Pink Truth,” which serves as a repository of information about direct selling but is mainly dedicated to “facts, opinions, and the real story behind Mary Kay Cosmetics.”⁴⁶ The Pink Truth website covers topics such as information regarding returning Mary Kay inventory, facts about the company, facts about the direct selling industry, and even downloadable Mary Kay contracts. Also available on pinktruth.com is a “discussion board” for any former (or current) Mary Kay consultants to share their experiences. What is the general consensus? Mary Kay is a cult-like scheme that manipulates and preys on women for the sake of profit.

In addition to information I observed on the Pink Truth’s discussion board, I interviewed six women who had formerly worked as Mary Kay consultants. These defectors shared stories of extreme pressures to conform, to purchase inventory that they could not sell, and even emotional abuse at the hands of their direct uplines (sales

⁴⁶ “Pink Truth,” accessed January 10, 2013. <http://www.pinktruth.com>.

directors). For example, Leslie told me that she “felt very financially, emotionally, and spiritually abused and manipulated,” and she believed that “there are a lot of similarities between being in Mary Kay and dating a sociopath.”⁴⁷ Leslie felt that the women in the company acted very fake and she described being pressured to purchase more inventory than she could afford. She was even told to get rid of any beauty products that were not Mary Kay brand just in case her sales director stopped by her home. Leslie told me that her experience sent her to therapy and she quit the business after nine months. Leslie added that she is “still trying to digest and process through the manipulation. How can people knowingly hurt others like this? I have questioned my faith because God is strongly tied into their rhetoric.”⁴⁸

Although these defectors bought into the direct sales imaginary, they could not make their experiences match the rhetoric. One of the reasons that women go into direct selling, according to my interviews and the promotional literature, is to have fun and make new friends. While many women become part of a sales team and do make new friends when they join the Mary Kay family (in which they refer to other Mary Kay consultants as “sisters”), several women described being completely disowned when they left Mary Kay. The Mary Kay defectors explained to me how they had lost many of their own personal friendships and pushed away family members because they had been burnt-out by the constant requests for purchases and parties. Furthermore, the former Mary Kay consultants all expressed their frustrations with trying to get more sales/recruits and were

⁴⁷ “Leslie,” interview by Tiffany Lamoreaux, February 22, 2013.

⁴⁸ “Leslie,” February 22, 2013.

very uncomfortable with the expectation that they should have to approach random strangers *everywhere* that they went (the practice known as prospecting).

When I asked Gloria if she believed one could make enough money to support oneself in Mary Kay she answered emphatically: “No, these home party businesses are money pits, not money makers!”⁴⁹ Christina’s sentiment mirrored Gloria’s as she explained that one could “absolutely not” support a family on Mary Kay earnings, adding that “even the top 2% don’t make a large enough income to support a family. There is no insurance, no 401k, etc.”⁵⁰ Not only did women describe the difficulty in earning money from sales but they also found that the amount of money that was spent for training, seminars, and other hidden business costs drove them further into the red. Christina’s opinion after seven years with Mary Kay was that

Mary Kay pretends that it is a skin care and makeup company that sells directly to customers. In reality, the skin care and makeup is a tool only to get recruits to purchase big packages in which the recruiters get a cut and so on up the upline.⁵¹

The Pink Truth discussion board contains several hundred pages detailing the failures of Mary Kay as well as those of other direct selling companies. One topic thread asked women to describe what attracted them to Mary Kay and what made them stay. A cursory view of the responses shows that women are recruited into Mary Kay because of the direct sales imaginary, also referred to by forum users as “drinking the pink kool-aid.”

⁴⁹ “Gloria,” interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux, February 21, 2013.

⁵⁰ “Christina,” Interviewed by Tiffany Lamoreaux, February 20, 2013.

⁵¹ Ibid.

They wanted to make new friends, be empowered, and especially earn the financial rewards that are trumped up by sales directors. For example, forum user “Brittanie” wrote that the constant promise of making high profits lured her into the business. As Brittanie wrote: “My director reminds me constantly that she makes a 6 figure income and how wonderful life is and she wouldn’t change it for anything, she also drives a pink Cadillac...[she says that] I could have all this if I’d just be positive, order lots of inventory and come to weekly success meetings.”⁵² It is clear from these stories that beyond the promotional literature that markets the direct sales imaginary to new recruits, distributors also do the work of using the imaginary to recruit new people into their downlines to bolster their rankings and commissions.

Conclusion: A Hard Sale

I recently shared some of results of this study with my mother. She had been telling me that she was going to join yet another company, this time Scentsy—a candle and scents multi-level marketing direct selling organization. My mother was excitedly telling me about the plans she was making to attend their next annual convention (which would cost her airfare, hotel, and conference expenses). I tried to tell her about the information I had learned from Fitzpatrick’s report, from reading the Pink Truth discussion board, and my own findings. I mentioned my concern that it seems unlikely that many women make any actual money from this work and she could potentially lose more money than get in return. It was to no avail. What I said did not matter because this

⁵² Brittanie, “Six Figure Income,” Pink Truth Discussion Board/Talking Mary Kay/What Attracted You to Mary Kay, August 30, 2012, accessed March 1, 2013, <http://www.pinktruth.com/board/index.php?topic=3301.0>.

time it was going to be different. This business was different from the others, my mother insisted, and as long as she “worked it like a business” she could succeed. My mother “knew” of plenty of people who were earning high numbers from this line of work. In fact, she even speculated any statistic I might have found would be skewed by inactive/barely active consultants and does not accurately reflect the (assumedly larger) amount of income earned by those in direct selling.

It is hard to go to bat against a true believer. The direct sales imaginary taps into powerful discourses of race, class, and gender to market the American dream to women who are seeking out a space that is empowering and inclusive. With the image of the successful representative cast in terms of a hegemonic middle-class white femininity it becomes easy for middle-class white (married) women, who make up the majority of direct sellers, to ignore the contradictions inherent in direct sales. Despite the contradictions many women, like my mother, believe that direct sales is a good business for women – because it is merit-based and can grant them financial rewards beyond their wildest dreams. They believe because they want to believe. Unfortunately, because direct selling is structured to benefit some over others, this belief sometimes costs women their friendships, their time, and their money.

CONCLUSION: EMPOWERING PROFITS

When I was a young adult my mother tried to convince me to join a direct selling company. She insisted that my personality was perfect for direct sales. She thought that I would make good money and that “it could not hurt to try,” as she would say. In 2007, I finally agreed to sign-up, but told my mother that I would only work for an adult-toy home party company. I figured that if I was going to try my hand in direct selling it might as well overlap with my doctoral program of study, which I had recently begun. In my mother’s excitement for my entrance into direct sales she offered to cover the sign-up fee and pay for the starter kit; all of which cost over \$250.

Although there were more successful adult-toy home party companies my mother signed me up with a local company that maintained a few brick and mortar retail shops. This company recently began a home sales division and they were hoping to capitalize on the successes of other adult-toy home parties. Likely due to their nascent experience with home sales, this company was devoid of the standard organizing structures and practices of direct selling. For training I attended a single party with another distributor and was handed a description of the products that I would be selling. Even though my company’s physical store sold a wide range of products, the home sellers had a much more limited selection to offer. I did not let the lack of training or selection faze me because I had convinced myself that home party sales would be good practice for teaching.

Hawking adult-toys was no easy task, especially when considering many people's discomfort with talking about sex in general, let alone having a stranger explaining to them the ins and outs of the latest vibrator. My first party was a complete disaster; I stumbled while explaining the value of each product and when guests were not being rude they looked thoroughly embarrassed. After my first failed attempt I decided to turn my parties into mini sexual education seminars – much to chagrin of a few of my hostesses, no doubt. I used these parties to discuss safer sex practices to giggling bachelorettes and focused on the value of sexual self-exploration. Yet after working only a handful of parties I realized that the small commission I earned was hardly worth the time or trouble that it required.

My experience in direct selling serves as an interesting contrast to the stories from the consultants in this study. For example, because my company was new to direct selling they did not organize their labor like other companies. I had no training, no scripting, no sales meetings, and no community of direct sellers to share a sense of belonging with. Additionally, unlike in the examples in this dissertation, I was never inundated with discourse about my company or about direct selling in general. There was no company rhetoric about consultants doing adult home parties in order to help women fulfill their needs for heterosexual romance and pleasure (although this theme is certainly within other adult home-party companies). I changed how I framed and ran my parties because I was a graduate student studying sexuality and it seemed like a good opportunity for teaching. My desire to teach was selfishly motivated; although someone might have learned something new from me I certainly was not framing my activities as caring, sharing, or helping other women. Without any of the structures put into place by the

discourses and logics that are found within other direct selling companies I had nothing to buy into. I had no reason given to me as to why I should keep doing direct sales. This made it very easy for me to see the mathematic impossibility of high earnings and the limitations of my product-line. Furthermore, while this business might have worked for someone else, I had three young children at home, a husband also in college, a teaching assistantship, and my own graduate studies to attend to. I ultimately quit because I was busy and did not see how anyone could possibly make good money doing this business.

Overall, what was missing from my experience was the *direct sales imaginary*. Although I had grown up with a vague awareness of the direct sales imaginary through my mothers' experiences, I also had an awareness of its failings. The direct selling industry failed my mother and continues to fail her today, but she is committed to its ideology that makes these failings unrecognizable. The direct selling industry deploys various discourses and ideologies that form the overarching organizational structures of direct selling companies. These structures include how home party sales are governed, how direct sellers are managed, and how direct sellers interpret their relationship with their companies.

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the direct sales imaginary is circulated through the direct selling industry's promotional literature, on company websites, at home parties, at meetings, and at conventions and become internalized within the narratives of consultants themselves. In this research I found that direct selling industry deploys various technologies of gender in the construction and maintenance of the direct sales imaginary. Technologies of gender work through various discursive and material practices, which are informed simultaneously by discourses about race and class,

to convey *what woman* the direct selling industry is addressing when it claims to be *for women*. Although direct selling is framed as being for everyone, the industry has historically relied on the image of middle-class white femininity to represent the ideal direct sales worker. These images, and the discourses that surround them, naturalize gender essentialisms and perpetuate the hegemony of white middle-class American values.

The high turnover rate of the industry implies that many women ultimately leave direct selling. Multi-level marketing is inherently unsustainable and unequally distributes profits between its distributors, which is likely one of the main reasons for its high turnover rates. My interviews indicate that women might leave one company for another before ultimately giving direct selling up all together. Because direct selling is structured in such a way that middle-class women will probably benefit more than working/lower middle-class women, those who are already middle-class can afford to stay longer. According to the examples from this study, those who stay longer in direct selling are not motivated by earning money but instead by having a chance to make new friends, to do some type work from home, and to feel empowered. In this way the direct selling industry is able to extract labor and profits from some women in exchange for creating a consumption-based community and granting consumption-based empowerment. In other words, the direct selling industry creates communities of women that are tied together because of the products that they will be consuming – as the line between distribution and consumption is intentionally made fuzzy. Furthermore, empowerment comes to women through the use of products that allow them to feel beautiful, self-confident, and/or healthier and through their direct selling work they experience higher self-esteem.

Future research

There are many questions and avenues for future research that this dissertation brings to light. There are questions that might further the development of a gender analysis. For example, how do men who are direct sellers interpret the direct sales imaginary? Are there companies that are more likely to have men than women and is the discourse/ideology different when that is the case? How do companies promote themselves differently to men and women?

It would also be interesting to examine the global production links between companies, distributors, and producers of products. I asked many of my interviewees if they knew where their products were produced and many were happy to report that their products were made in the United States. This was a point of pride for many that their products were not being shipped from another company and supported the efforts of American workers. Thus, future research might ask, what is the relationship between direct sellers and the people who make their products? How do consultants see their relationship to the workers in the corporate office and the global communities that products are manufactured in and what does it mean? Do the companies who claim to be committed to women carry this into their global markets?

Questions about production in global markets lead into related a related area of interest; future research might examine the corporate philanthropy that many direct selling companies practices. For example, Avon calls itself and its employees “good corporate citizens.” What does this mean? Do the philanthropy works in other countries become a tool for colonization? How about when these projects are done within the United States? How do direct sellers and their customers feel about these companies’

charity and what role does it take in their relationship? What do the companies gain through these projects? How do the communities in which these activities take place feel about this charity?

Furthermore, Premiere Designs' philosophy that, "we believe in America and the free enterprise system," provides but one example of the links between consumer products, companies, and nationalism. Many companies in the direct selling industry have long used nationalistic and patriotic discourses in the marketing of their products and business. What does this relationship look like? What are its implications for nation building and the deployment of labor? Labor relationships throughout the history of the United States of America have been entangled with meanings about nation, gender, labor, and other ideologies, examining how direct selling has played a role in this could show how corporations become a space for building and deploying nationalisms.

Overall, as illustrated within this dissertation, direct selling organizations are able to reap the profits from their distributors as well as from retailing to distributors' personal networks. Direct selling organizations are also able to enjoy the benefits of having a sales force without having to attend to their employees work environments, disputes over salaries, or even overhead. Direct selling workers have no means to organize around their shared interest in opposition to manage because of multi-level marketing system makes it very difficult form collectives because most individuals are not at the same level/rank and many are "supervisors" (in a sense) of another worker. Direct selling organizations are able to manage their sales force this way through the use of discourse demonstrating that discourse and ideology have material consequences for individuals in that they can shape

the way that individuals interact with one another or with companies and even how they think about themselves.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW DATA/PSEUDONYMS

Pseudonym	Company	Interview Date
Aundrea	(former) Mary Kay	February 19, 2013
Barbara	Avon	September 1, 2011
Bridgette	Mary Kay	January 5, 2013
Cheerie	(former) Mary Kay	March 11, 2012
Christina	(former) Mary Kay	February 20, 2013
Elizabeth	Pampered Chef	September 18, 2011
Gloria	(former) Mary Kay	February 21, 2013
Janelle	Avon	December 5, 2011
Janet	Premiere Designs	August 20, 2011
Jennifer	Mary Kay	August 3, 2011
Leslie	(former) Mary Kay	February 22, 2013
Lori	Mary Kay	January 24, 2013
Mary	Mary Kay	September 28, 2012
Megan	Miche	November 29, 2012
Nicki	Premiere Designs	August 1, 2011
Olivia	Lia Sophia	August 15, 2011
Rebecca	Arbonne	September 2, 2011
Rhea	Herbalife	October 4, 2012
Sarah	Close to My Heart	October 19, 2011
Serena	Cabi	September 20, 2011
Sonya	(former) Mary Kay	February 20, 2013
Teresa	Premiere Designs	August 19, 2011

APPENDIX B

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPELED COMPANIES

Company	Description	Website
Arbonne	Skincare, cosmetics, health supplements, home party method	www.arbonne.ca
Avon	Cosmetics, skincare, beauty products	www.avon.com
Cabi	Designer clothing by Carol Anderson, home party method	www.cabionline.com
Close to My Heart	Scrapbooking and card making supplies, home party method	www.closetomyheart.com
Herbalife	Healthcare supplements, weight-loss support, home party method	www.herbalife.com
Lia Sophia	Fashion jewelry, home party method	www.liasophia.com
Mary Kay	Cosmetics, skincare, beauty products, home party method	www.marykay.com
Miche	Designer quality exchangeable covers for purses, home party method	www.michebag.com
Pampered Chef	Kitchen and cookware, home party method	www.pamperedchef.com
Premiere Designs	Fashion jewelry	www.premierdesigns.com
Tupperware	Kitchen storage systems	www.tupperware.com

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

- What is your age?
- What is your race?
- What is your marital status?
- What is your total combined household annual income?
- What is your personal income from direct selling? i
- Do you consider yourself part of a 'class'? Which one?
- Do you have children? How many? What ages?
- Do you work for wages with any other source besides direct sales?
- How would you classify your current employment status in direct sales?
- How many hours do you work, for your direct sales company, per week on average?
- If applicable, how many hours do you work for another company per week on average?
- How long have you been involved with direct sales? How long with this company?
- Describe your first and earliest experience with direct sales?
- Why did you decide to go into direct sales?
- Have you been involved with other direct sales companies in the past?
- Why did you stop?
- How did you learn about this company?
- What type of program for sales people does this company offer, meaning what type of commissions?

- What is the structure of the organization?
- Pretend I know nothing about your business tell me about your company?
- How do you recruit and promote parties, as in where do you get new parties?
- Do you believe a persons' social-economic location will affect the likeliness of their success in direct selling?
- What type of training did you do?
- What was your monetary investment?
- If someone could not afford the initial fees how would you help them (or would you) (or are there options)?
- How do you prepare for a party?
- Where do you spend the most amount of time working?
- Can you describe your workspace to me?
- Are you satisfied with the space you have to do your work?
- What is your personal definition of success?
- What is your success in X direct sales company?
- Where do you feel you get this image?
- How can a direct sales worker achieve your definition of success?
- Do you feel that you have struggled as direct sales worker?
- Where/what were your biggest obstacles?
- What do you feel would help a struggling direct sales worker?
- What is your definition of entrepreneur and do you consider yourself one?
- Do you consider yourself a business owner? Why?
- What types of activities count as "work" to you? Or, how do you define work?

- Describe yourself as a worker?
- Describe a successful party?
- What is type of preparations does a host have to make for a successful party?
- Walk me through a typical day? Week? Day of a party?
- Who in your household is responsible for different chores/duties?
- On average, how much time do you spend per day doing domestic work?
- How much family support do you feel you receive?
- How does your family support your efforts?
- Who provides childcare for you?
- Who provides childcare for the people at the parties?
- Does another parent or adult attend to the domestic work while you are working?
- Aside from training, what types of events (if any) do you go to enhance your direct sales work?
- What do you like best about direct sales work?
- What do you like the least about direct sales work?
- Overall how satisfied are you with your experience working as a direct sales distributor?
- Who is an ideal direct sales worker?
- Where do you get the image of the ideal worker from?
- What types of groups outside from your company support are you a part of?
- Do you think there is a reason that direct sales has more women than men (why?)?

- Do you think direct sales markets their companies to women more than men?

Why?

- What is your company's philosophy?
- Does your company support any charity?
- (if applicable) How does your company support women?