To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of DARCY ROSE HAUSLIK find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Emily Huddart Kennedy, Ph.D., Co-Chair

Jennifer Schwartz, Ph.D., Co-Chair

Jennifer Sherman, Ph.D.

Christine Horne, Ph.D.
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THE BOUNDARIES OF WASTE, WANT, AND REUSE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF
THRIFT STORE SHOPPING AND DUMPSTER DIVING IN
WASHINGTON STATE

Abstract

by Darcy Rose Hauslik, M.A.
Washington State University
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Co-Chairs: Emily Huddart Kennedy and Jennifer Schwartz

Being a consumer in the contemporary United States is a complicated endeavor. As consumption choices have been linked with issues from declining stocks of natural resources to grievous harm to workers and resource-based communities, an increasing proportion of Americans seek to make “ethical” consumer choices. These ethical consumers buy or avoid specific products to promote social or environmental goals, and perceive these choices as reflecting morality. Yet many ethical consumption choices (e.g., solar panels, organic food) are financially out-of-reach for many, particularly working-class households. How do lower-status people use consumer choices to navigate the complex terrain that maligns mainstream consumption and values socially and environmentally reflective consumption? This dissertation examines thrift store shopping and dumpster diving as two cases of consumption that are both environmentally significant and stigmatized. These cases are theoretically significant because they widen the gaze of studies of consumption to consider the intersection of consumption and
waste, allowing me to shed light on how identity and social-inequality are processes related as much to waste as to consumption. Further, because these practices reach beyond the realm of elite ethical consumption (i.e., buying organic produce), I am able to discuss how the process of creating distinction is related more to discourse and practice than to any particular item. Specifically, using the case of thrift shopping, I demonstrate how people in different social strata convey distinction within a marginalized consumption space. In the case of dumpster diving, I discuss the process of meaning-making undertaken by a marginalized group. First, I show how economically-constrained dumpster divers, despite adopting a politicized worldview, are hesitant to adopt a political explanation for their consumption habits. From this observation I argue that mainstream political imaginaries rooted in a neo-liberal logic might not resonate with marginalized groups. Next, I show how the stigma of dumpster diving is mitigated not by making appeals to dominant moral frameworks, but by rejecting familiar cultural narratives of what is decent or acceptable behavior. I advance the concept of “active defiance” to capture this pattern. This dissertation has important implications for understanding identity, distinction, and the political imaginaries of marginalized groups.
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Dedication

To all those who

came for the pizza and stayed
to destroy capitalism.

Stay Weird, Oly.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Late-stage capitalism is often criticized as a “waste society” (Buendía 1997), “rubbish society” (O’Brien 2008) or a “throwaway culture” (Packard 1967; Slade 2006). Staggering statistics about consumption (e.g., the average American generates almost four and a half pounds of waste every day (United States Environmental Protection Agency 2015) and news reports about environmental degradation (e.g., “I Went to The Great Pacific Garbage Patch and This is What I Saw” [Maloney 2018]) seem to support this waste society critique. Alongside depictions of our waste society is the characterization of the modern epoch as a “consumer society.” Indeed, statistics about average levels of consumption within the United States (U.S.) are equally staggering: Today we consume more than twice as much as we did 50 years ago (Taylor and Tilford 2000) meaning that the average U.S. household today holds more than 300,000 objects (MacVean 2014) and one in every ten Americans rents off-site storage containers to handle the overflow (Mooallem 2009). However, although a subset of society sees consumption as morally questionable, the consumer holds a more secure footing in the wider cultural landscape; waste is much more widely maligned and disdained (Clapp 2002). Even within sociology, attention to consumption has a much greater depth and breadth than attention to waste.

Consumption has been called America’s true national pastime (Glickman 1999). More than a pastime, consumption is a way of life, central to both our national identity and our economy. For example, President George W. Bush’s early remarks after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 urged citizens to go about their daily lives, specifically he urged citizens to go shopping, a central part of our daily lives which, if interrupted, would let the terrorists win (Shiller 2012). On the eve of the Great Recession, President Bush’s message was the same, to keep the economy
growing, he encouraged us all to “go shopping more” (Terkel 2006). The political and economic implications of Bush’s pleas aside, consumption is as central to the project of modernity as production was to the political and economic projects during the industrial revolution (Gregson 1995).

As fitting as both the waste society and consumer society monikers are to our current age, it is much more common for academics to use consumption, rather than waste, as a tool to understand social phenomena. While many classical theorists wrote in passing about consumption, the popularity of consumption as a lens for understanding society emerged in the United States (U.S.) in the post-war era, a time characterized by unprecedented levels of wealth and consumption (Warde 2015). Sociologists in the latter half of the 20th century followed Baudrillard (2016 [1970]) in considering consumption as an integral part of social identity, a way to signify our innermost selves to others. Later sociologists found utility in Bourdieu’s (1984) contention that consumption, rather than displaying individual preference, is an intimate tie to social class. Today, consumption is a tool for sociologists to analyze a host of social phenomena including “issues of inequality and exclusion, social divisions, leisure, distinction and taste, household organization, everyday life, self- and social identity, economic exchange, and material culture” (Warde 2015; 117).

Waste has not experienced the same cultural relevance or academic explanatory power as consumption. Waste is deliberately invisible in our culture. Disposing of an object marks the end of our engagement with both that object and the waste stream more generally, obscuring the complicated, multi-billion dollar, politically fraught journey our waste and recycling is about to embark upon. But waste and consumption are inseparable. Consumption at the unprecedented
levels seen today relies on the ease and normalcy of disposal. The ability to externalize waste is the only way we can continue to consume at the levels we do today. In this way, we are living in what is both a waste and a consumer society.

To fully understand the dual nature of modernity as defined by consumption and waste, it is important to consider waste and consumption not as fundamentally separate processes or as distinct objective categories but as existing on a continuum predicated on social constructions of value and worth. O’Brien (2008;5) defines what it is to create waste: “To waste something, in contemporary parlance, means to lose its value, to render the thing unavailable for constructive use.” In short, waste is that which is no longer worth consuming. However, this distinction is incredibly fluid and modern economies rely on as liberal a definition of waste as possible. Endless economic growth requires consumers to cycle through products quickly, meaning they must often deem usable goods as waste before they have truly reached the end of their usefulness. This is not just true of individual consumers, Barnard (2016) shows how stores rotate stock to maintain a veneer of freshness and abundance by ex-commodifying goods, that is, throwing away useful items, redefining a commodity – that was just moments previously valued at a specified dollar amount – as valueless. The thin line between wasted and consumable is the tightrope modernity walks to maintain its status as both waste and consumer society.

Importantly, it is possible – even common – for objects to simultaneously occupy the status of waste and to become the objects of consumption. Storing, processing, and treating wastes and recycling is a global, multi-billion-dollar industry (Pellow 2007), wherein the Global North ships its waste to nations throughout the Global South where such wastes are either scavenged for usable goods or simply stored. On an individual level, scavengers both from the
Global South and throughout the Global North depend on waste for their daily survival in the form of scrapping, recycling, or dumpster diving. Every day, the consumption of waste is further blurring the line between waste and consumable commodities.

This dissertation follows two cases within this liminal stage between consumption and waste: thrift store shopping and dumpster diving. Both cases interrupt the smooth reclassification of a usable object as waste. Across the case studies I employ a dual-process framework which understands the deployment of culture in two distinct, intrinsically-related processes. The first process is automatic, without any reflection and the second is slow and reflective. Advancing a view of culture as both embodied and deliberate allows me to more effectively use concepts from the sociology of consumption to investigate the intersection between consumption and waste seen in thrift stores and through dumpster diving. The concepts popular in the sociology of consumption allow me to probe questions about the social construction of value and how consumption patterns affect social judgments. By bridging the sociologies of consumption and waste, I shed light on the complex and often semi-conscious process of attributing worth to social groups and physical objects.

It is not just the construction of value of specific objects through the process of consumption, but larger questions of social worthiness. We know from more traditional consumption studies that consumption is a process fundamentally related to maintaining social inequality, which reaffirms social class distinctions (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, consuming waste can be particularly marginalizing. The distinction between waste and value is a manifestation of one of the most basic distinction any society makes: between the clean and the unclean (Douglas 1966). The social construction of entire systems of value, not just which materials to throw out,
maintain the distance between the clean and the unclean, value and waste. Socially-marginalized groups are symbolically associated with the unclean and physically separated into polluted places. More privileged groups insulate themselves from material reality of contamination and the symbolic contamination it brings. Consuming from the waste stream problematizes this dichotomy, adding a level of complexity not usually observed in the sociology of consumption. Fundamentally, this is a study of the fluidity of the definition of waste, of how actors negotiate that definition, and how such definitions matter for processes of distinction and stigmatization.

This dissertation presents two cases where the act of re-use renegotiates the category of waste. The first case of thrift shopping shows how the consumption of objects minimally associated with waste undergoes many of the same processes present in any form of consumption but takes on an added moral component to mitigate the stigma of waste. The next case of dumpster diving shows how the express consumption of trash is much more problematic to justify to others and to reconcile internally. The reality of the scale of both hunger and waste, discussed through this case of dumpster diving, presents a significant challenge to the status quo that challenges dumpster divers’ durable habits and beliefs. While the practice of thrift shopping largely reaffirms cultural narratives and hierarchies, the case of dumpster diving challenges more deeply-held beliefs. I argue that this is because waste, especially that which has the designation of garbage, holds a uniquely stigmatized position in our society and association with garbage disrupts conventional identity construction processes.

While the connection between these cases is their relation to waste and re-use, they also present common theoretical themes including the use of a dual-process framework (Vaisey 2009) to understand how culture, action, habit, and belief are mutually reinforced. In its own way, each
chapter probes how the renegotiation of waste through re-use serves to reify or challenge existing symbolic boundaries (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002); how engaging with waste requires boundary work, justifications, and strategies of stigma management, all of which drawn from larger cultural repertoires (Swidler 1986); and how social position influences these processes. This introduction first gives an overview of the study sites and methodology used in both case studies. I then outline the theoretical insights from each of the substantive chapters.

**Study Sites**

The first case study documenting the use of thrift store shopping among diverse residents of Washington State (WA) took place between May and August of 2016. This study was part of a larger interview-based study of environmental attitudes and behaviors among diverse middle-class participants. As a diverse range of participants was important to the larger study – and allowed the specific work on thrift store shopping to move beyond studies of avid thrift shoppers (see Guiot and Roux 2010; Steward 2017; Yan, Bae, and Xu 2015) to how thrift stores are used more widely – the team of three researchers selected six communities through a clustered sampling design, which identified three sites, representing rural communities, urban clusters (towns), and urban communities.¹ Random selection from a list of all similarly rural, urban, or urban cluster cities or towns yielded the field sites of Friday Harbor, Pullman, and Olympia.²

Friday Harbor, WA was the randomly selected rural community. Friday Harbor is located on the San Juan Islands in the Northwest corner of the state. Originally, Friday Harbor was an

¹ The 2010 U.S. Census defines urbanized areas as housing more than 50,000 people, while urban clusters are home to between 2,500 and 50,000 people. Rural areas are defined via exclusion; they are the populations not included within an urban area or urban cluster.

² Within the state of Washington there are 14 designated urban areas, 67 urban clusters, and 595 rural areas. Researchers compiled a numbered list of the 14 urban areas, 67 urban clusters, and 595 rural areas and using a random number generator selected the area that corresponded with that number.
important site for international shipping, fishing, and agriculture, however, these industries declined in the latter half of the 20th century, replaced by an economy dependent on tourism and the related sectors of real estate and construction (Town of Friday Harbor ND). With a population of 2,162 (U.S. Census 2010), Friday Harbor fulfills the technical requirements of rurality for the purposes of census designation. However, Friday Harbor’s rich natural amenities attract both tourists and wealthy individuals who keep summer and vacation homes on the island, and this new influx of wealth likely contributes to a social divide between new residents and the long-time, working-class residents (see Sherman 2018 for a similar dynamic). While this work does not theorize on this complexity between the long-time working-class residents and newcomers, it likely contributes to the landscape of thrift shopping in this site. For example, several participants noted that the thrift shops in Friday Harbor had high quality goods donated by the mega-rich who called the island home, at least seasonally. Additionally, Friday Harbor is geographically isolated and does not have a traditional department store, meaning that thrift stores are the only local option for several types of goods that might be available new in different contexts. Many participants recount buying from thrift stores because they were the only option to get something that was immediately needed.

Pullman, WA was the randomly selected urban cluster.3 Pullman, WA is in Southeast Washington State, about six miles from the Idaho border, in a geographical region known as the Palouse, characterized by rolling hills and rich agriculture, particularly wheat and legumes.

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3 Pullman was selected randomly for inclusion in this study, however, the research team was based out of WSU and called Pullman home making this site exceedingly convenient and potentially adding either bias or depth into our analysis of thrift shopping. During my six years living in Pullman, WA, I personally made frequent trips to the thrift shops mentioned by participants as did the two other researchers.
Every August, Pullman hosts the National Lentil Festival honoring this agricultural legacy. Pullman has a total population of 29,799 (U.S. Census 2010) however, Pullman, WA is home to Washington State University (WSU), a large land-grant university which contributes approximately 24,000 residents to that total (Washington State University 2019). While no undergraduate students completed interviews for this project, Pullman’s identity as a college-town was pronounced; the thrift shops in Pullman had reputations for being repositories for goods discarded by college students at the end of terms. Many non-undergraduate student participants also reported engaging in a type of dumpster diving at the end of terms for the myriad goods discarded by students as they moved in and out of dorms and apartments.

The final field site for the study of thrift shopping is Olympia, WA. This was also the site selected for the study of dumpster divers. With a population of 46,478 (U.S. Census 2010) Olympia represents the urban field site. Olympia is the capital of Washington State, and as such has many state-employees and a high level of engagement with local, state, and national politics. For example, in our initial field visit to Olympia, all three researchers were stunned by the amount of political signage – both lawn signs endorsing political candidates and propositions, and more general progressive messages along the themes of tolerance (e.g., “We are all welcome here” and multiple Pride flags and other pro-LGBTQ messages) and other specific messages (e.g., “Black Lives Matter” and “Say Her Name”). Olympia has long been associated with the progressive counterculture, it was instrumental in the development of many musical genres and “scenes,” most significantly those associated with the Do-It-Yourself ethos and aesthetic such as grunge and riot grrrl. Any good tour given to you by an Olympia local will point out multiple sites associated with this history, including where Nirvana performed memorable shows or
Sleater-Kinney recorded their first albums. Alternative identities hold significant cultural value in Olympia, whose unofficial city motto is “Stay Weird, Oly.” Many participants in the study of thrift shopping contextualized their use of thrift stores as something that was specifically valuable in the Olympia context that places added emphasis on unique identities.

While the field sites were important in the study of thrift shopping, Olympia plays an especially important role for situating the study of dumpster diving. I initially chose Olympia as the field site for the dumpster diving case study first for its continuity with the study of thrift store shoppers, as it was one of the field sites in that study, and also for its uniquely progressive reputation that I thought would offer an important contrast to studies of dumpster diving undertaken in large urban locales primarily New York (see Barnard 2011; 2016; Cornelissen 2016), Sydney, Australia (Edwards and Mercer 2007) and Montréal, Quebec (Vinegar, Parker and McCourt 2014). The progressive tendencies of Olympia contoured the cultural context for dumpster diving in various ways, the most important being the lack of actual dumpster diving in Olympia due to abundant alternatives for acquiring food.

Even the most avid dumpster divers related that dumpster diving is either unnecessary or unsuccessful in Olympia due to the expansive resource recovery infrastructure that is largely successful in diverting waste and getting food to those in need. The Olympia Food Bank is the crowning achievement in this institutionalized waste retrieval infrastructure. The Olympia Food Bank employs five, fulltime recovery drivers and a fleet of refrigerated trucks to pick-up food either damaged or nearing its expiration dates from local businesses; these are the ex-commodities observed by Barnard (2016) that would otherwise be available for dumpster divers. Over my six-months in the field I accompanied one food bank recovery driver every Thursday
morning and saw this massive undertaking in progress; we consistently recovered over one-thousand pounds of donations in mere hours. This food bank also provided a low barrier to entry, while some such resources might require users to prove their low-income status, residency, or eligibility in other ways, this food bank was essentially open. This is not to say that it was not possible to dumpster dive in Olympia; despite these Herculean institutionalized resource recovery efforts, there were still dumpsters ripe with usable goods for the enterprising dumpster diver to seize. However, the dumpster divers I interviewed reported that dumpster diving was simply not as popular or important in Olympia owing to these resources.

These resources, and Olympia’s relatively progressive social policies and culture, shaped this work in another, perhaps more fundamental way: In my dissertation proposal I had not anticipated studying houseless dumpster divers or others who engage in dumpster diving primarily as a survival strategy. From the existing literature I had good reason to believe that this group was very different from the activists and ethical consumers who used dumpster diving to eschew the immorality of capitalist consumption. The guiding research question when this ethnographic work began was how do largely middle-class, politically-motivated actors justify their use of the stigmatized practice of dumpster diving. And, relatedly, how do these middle-class actors maintain distinction throughout this stigmatized act? Existing studies of dumpster diving had all seen a large divide between middle-class divers acting out political projects and the houseless who used dumpster diving as a survival strategy. In this study, I did not find such a

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4 The recovery drivers recorded weight and general descriptions of donations for tax purposes.
5 This was the term preferred over homeless by local political groups in symbolic recognition that home is more than a structure. In most cases people who do not have adequate shelter still have attachment to the place where they are living, making it their home. What they lack is the physical structure of a house, hence they are houseless. This is similar to Duneier’s (1999) use of “unhoused persons” to refer to the street vendors he studied in New York City.
stark difference between these groups. As Chapters Three and Four will detail, around half of the dumpster divers I interviewed for this study (16 of the 30), I consider to be economically-constrained, meaning they came from disadvantaged class backgrounds and used dumpster diving primarily as a survival strategy. However, these economically-constrained divers largely resemble the situational divers, those more middle-class divers, when it came to their politicized discourse.

Olympia’s relatively progressive policies regarding houselessness and abundant social resources have made it a refuge for houseless travelers who often stop in Olympia for its mild winters. Many of the dumpster divers I interviewed (both economically-constrained and situational) are travelers without fixed residences who hop trains, squat in abandoned buildings, or live out of cars and vans. While dumpster diving might not be popular in Olympia itself, it is incredibly popular among this group. Another significant portion of the dumpster divers in this study are students at The Evergreen State College. This is an almost notoriously progressive liberal arts college in Olympia which also serves as a radicalizing force in city.6 There is also overlap between these groups: some divers, such as Jordan came to Olympia as a traveler and stayed, eventually enrolling at Evergreen. The intersection of multiple groups from a variety of backgrounds made this study infinitely more theoretically interesting than the study of middle-class dumpster divers I had initially proposed.

This study is a testament to the strength of qualitative methods to adapt to empirical surprises. The data presented in Chapters Three and Four come from 30 semi-structured

6 The Evergreen State College was recently the subject of a controversy regarding a professor, Dr. Bret Weinstein, and a campus wide event known as a “Day Without White People” which resulted in substantial negative media attention and even congressional testimony. See Feliciano and Green 2018 and Weiss 2017.
interviews with self-identified dumpster divers and more than 1,000 hours of participant observation. Participant observation largely consisted of volunteering alongside my participants at Food Not Bombs, socializing with dumpster divers informally at coffeeshops or other social settings, and accompanying participants as they went dumpster diving. Participant observation was crucial to understanding the significance that dumpsters hold in the lives of both economically-constrained and situational divers as more than either just survival or politics, but as urban playgrounds, shelters, community centers, and, so often, as a source of identity.

**Chapter Outline**

I conclude this introduction with an overview of the theoretical insights gained in the forthcoming chapters. A summary of specific theoretical insights from each substantive chapter is presented in Table 1.1 and described in detail below. However, the overall theoretical project of this dissertation is to promote the study of waste as a socially-constructed category with important implications for discussions of consumption, sustainability, and identity. While each chapter applies established theoretical tools from the larger sociological literature – primarily those tools found in the sociology of consumption – this dissertation shows the unique role that waste plays in complicating cultural and identity processes.

Table 1.1 Major Empirical and Theoretical Insights from Substantive Chapters

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Chapter Two</th>
<th>Main Empirical Finding</th>
<th>Meso-Level Theoretical Explanation</th>
<th>Major Theoretical Implication</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Class-based difference in practice and discourse of thrift shopping (e.g., finding something “brand new” or something “unique”).</td>
<td>For lower-class actors, distinction is linked with being a savvy, frugal shopper; for higher-class actors, distinction was linked with authenticity. Social class conditions the</td>
<td>The process of creating distinction is related more to discourse and practice than to any particular item.</td>
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<td>Chapter Three</td>
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<tr>
<td>The constellation of meanings, materials, and skills associated with thrift shopping varies between social classes. There are lingering associations between thrift stores and poverty. Thrift shopping was universally invoked as an expression of morality, though the specific moral appeals varied by social class.</td>
<td>To mitigate stigma, dumpster divers use discourse and strategies that maximize distance from wider society (e.g.,</td>
<td>These strategies of distancing were adopted because they facilitated the formation of a new distinct cultural identity which lead to new cultural narratives</td>
<td>People in different social strata convey distinction within a marginalized consumption space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in different social strata convey distinction within a marginalized consumption space. When members of different social classes shop at thrift stores they are essentially engaging in different social practices. Those from higher class backgrounds were more likely to justify their thrift shopping by appealing to an explicitly to concern for the environment. Those from lower class backgrounds used more general rhetoric of waste.</td>
<td>When faced with reality of food waste and availability both economically-constrained and situational divers adopt anti-capitalist, politicized discourse. Despite these similarities economically-constrained divers are less likely to explicitly define dumpster diving as political.</td>
<td>Rupture to common-sense/taken-for-granted (the state of illusio) triggers critical state of belief (either creativity or hysteresis). Return to illusio (taken-for-granted-worldview) was more easily achieved by the more privileged group.</td>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
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Drawing from 44 interviews with Washington State residents, Chapter Two discusses both the ubiquity of and distinctions made around second-hand shopping. The case of second-hand shopping discusses how a once highly-stigmatized practice associated with the truly destitute (Strasser 2000) has been embraced by people of all social-class backgrounds. However, despite this ubiquity, social class differentially influences the experience of thrift store shopping. Using a dual-process framework I find class-based differences in the practice and discourse of thrift shopping. Specifically, I find that how items came to be valued as worth purchasing in thrift stores varied by social class: lower-middle class respondents sought items that were “brand-new” or generally approximated what could be found in more conventional consumption space, while those from the upper-middle class sought out goods that they deemed unique and communicated their personal style. In many ways this is a process no different than any other form of consumption. However, given that thrift stores are nearly universally accessible and slightly stigmatized, the finding that classed consumption patterns are present in this arena is theoretically important as it shows the maintenance of distinctions within stigmatized consumption arenas and how the process of creating distinction is related more to discourse and practice than to any particular item.

Chapter Three introduces the case of dumpster diving as another example of how the same practice can vary wildly in understanding and significance based on social standing. Also using a dual-process framework, this chapter looks at how the basic premises of dumpster diving (e.g., that there are usable goods in the trash available for free) problematize taken-for-granted
assumptions about the world (e.g., that you must work for money and then exchange that income for goods). That is, when faced with the reality of food waste and availability both economically-constrained dumpster divers and situational dumpster divers adopt anti-capitalist, politicized discourse. This reconceptualization shows how a rupture to common sensical ideas about the world which exist in what Strand and Lizardo (2015) call the state of illusio can trigger a more reflexive and critical state (either creativity or hysteresis). However, the 30 dumpster divers interviewed for this project varied in how they applied and sustained this new critical realization. The more privileged divers were better able to reconceptualize their dumpster diving as a political act and return to their unreflective performance of culture (i.e., return to a state of illusio). The less privileged divers, owing to their extreme marginalization, were less able or simply unwilling to categorize dumpster diving as a political act and remained in a heightened critical state. This chapter has important implications for understanding the unique political imaginaries – generally, considering what is a legitimate, viable political strategy – of marginalized groups. Ultimately, conventional political action is rooted in the status quo and reflective of the current social hierarchy. This chapter shows how marginalized actors can challenge the very notion of what is and is not political.

Chapter Four resumes the case study of dumpster divers and explores the options for stigma management available to a group that is both extremely marginalized and in a heightened critical state. While most studies of stigma management show how individuals and groups work to minimize the distance between themselves and socially accepted groups, dumpster divers adopt approaches that maximize their distance. While risking further stigmatization, this strategy serves to reaffirm their status as “other” in a way that constructs dumpster diving as a distinct
cultural identity. Dumpster divers use this new cultural identity to construct a new set of cultural narratives redefining what is decent and acceptable behavior. Ultimately this chapter makes important theoretical claims about the agency that marginalized groups have in challenging moral hegemony.

Finally, Chapter Five synthesizes the broader theoretical implications of this work. In brief, I contribute to the wider sociological literature on culture and consumption by looking at the construction and maintenance of distinction within marginalized consumption spaces. Specifically, I find that morality holds an especially important place in the justifying stigmatized consumption as evidenced in both the pro-environmental rhetoric of thrift store shoppers to the reverse stigma of dumpster divers. Additionally, I show how worldviews, especially those associated with social constructions of waste and value, are most malleable when there are significant interruptions to daily habits, which allows me to dialogue with the literature on culture and action. Specifically, I discuss the differences between the critical consciousness achieved by dumpster divers and the often-superficial actions of more privileged political and ethical consumers and show how a certain level of discomfort is vital to trigger paradigm shifts. I also make claims about the agency and creativity of marginalized groups to challenge hegemonic conceptions of what makes both objects and people worthy and valuable. That is, I show how marginalized groups reject hegemonic standards of what is worthy based on narrow definitions of decency and how similar redefinitions could be useful in advancing the ends of environmental sustainability. I discuss the ways that the empirical work presented in this dissertation both utilized and can contribute to the literature of dual-process models, especially, as they relate to
the overarching themes of behavior change and environmental sustainability. I conclude the dissertation by discussing avenues of future research.
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CHAPTER TWO: “IT FEELS SANER:” THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THRIFT STORE CONSUMPTION

Denny: Some people need to be humble before they go in [to a thrift store]. But if my friends see me buying someone else's clothes—I'd rather that than them seeing me at Macy's.

Interviewer: How do you think your friends would react to seeing you at Macy's rather than a thrift store?

Denny: Probably slap me. My friends, I don't know, most of my friends would be, like, ‘Are you serious? Tell me you're buying something for your mother.’ Yeah, they'd be shocked. I wouldn't even see most of my friends at Macy's. If they saw me at the mall they'd be, like, ‘Hey, are you okay? You doing alright?’ And I'd be like, ‘Yeah, I just took a lorazepam, I'm alright, just started to relax.’

Denny (44, urban, middle-class) belongs to a social group for whom thrift shopping is both necessary, to stretch a tight budget, and socially valued, due to its prominence within his social network. Denny, now 44, left home at the age of 13 when he found work on a farm. During his youth, thrift stores were the only place he could afford to buy clothes and other basics. Since his youth, Denny has enjoyed much more financial security and the social respect that comes with that. When I interviewed him in the summer of 2016, Denny was preparing for his graduation from a liberal arts university in Washington State. He had been employed for many years as a youth counselor and planned to undertake a career in research. Despite this quite significant increase in his place in the social hierarchy, thrift shopping remains his primary means of acquiring durable goods. Today it is no longer the price tags that keep Denny from shopping outside of thrift stores, but the embodied sense of enjoying a practice that feels natural, alongside a feeling of pressure to fit in with his social group. For Denny, the idea of entering a mall is anathema; in his mind, an occasion for anti-anxiety medication.
That thrift store shopping is predicted by more than an economic need is not surprising given sociology’s persistent rejection of economic determinism as the premiere explanation of consumption in favor of myriad cultural influences (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, Johnston 2008, Warde 2015). However, thrift store shopping takes this premise even further: there are no barriers to entry; on its face, the practice of thrift store shopping is open to everyone. This premise stood out clearly among the data collected for this chapter—all but one of the 44 diverse Washington State residents I interviewed reported at least occasionally shopping at thrift stores. In the face of this universality, the vastly different explanations and understandings of what is essentially the same practice (thrift-store shopping) is striking. In this chapter, I demonstrate that shopping at a thrift store reproduces the same class-based differences observed in other, more traditional consumption arenas, showing how actors can achieve distinction in a Bourdieusian sense (1984), even while participating in the same, traditionally marginalized act of consumption. I employ Vaisey’s (2009) dual-process model to document how the process of creating distinction is present in the discourses participants used to discuss their thrift store shopping, and the practice of thrift shopping as it differed between participants across social statuses. This chapter contributes to the wider sociology of culture and consumption by looking at how distinction is constructed and maintained within a marginalized consumption space.

The chapter begins with a brief history of thrift stores and a summary of relevant research. Next, I introduce the theoretical framework orienting this chapter. I then describe the methods used to conduct the 44 interviews with a variety of Washington State residents in 2016 and discuss the limitations and advantages of using such a diverse population. After introducing the themes that emerged through data analysis and building my argument about the systematic
differences in thrift store shopping, I discuss the wider implications for understanding consumption as a vehicle for cultural reproduction. I conclude with recommendations for future research that can build on this work.

Thrift Stores: A Social History and Current Patterns Along Social Class

“I’m gonna pop some tags
Only got twenty dollars in my pocket
I, I, I, I’m hunting, looking for a come-up
This is fucking awesome”
Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, Thrift Shop, 2012

Macklemore and Ryan Lewis’ 2012 homage to thrift stores rose to be Billboard’s number 1 song of 2013 (Billboard 2013). Perhaps surprisingly, this is only one of the most recent in a long line of cultural references and meanings associated with thrift stores. In the 1986 cult classic film Pretty in Pink, Molly Ringwald’s character, a gifted high school student on scholarship to a prep school, fashions her prom dress from two thrift store gowns and is begrudgingly lauded by her peers for her sharp look (Deutch 1986). There was a brief time in 2007 when celebrities, including Angelina Jolie, wore thrift store dresses on the red carpet to show the advantages and viability of recycling (Goodson 2007). While Macklemore and Lewis’ song simultaneously offers a critique of consumer culture and the influence of materialism on hip hop culture specifically (Hsu 2016), the most prominent pop culture association with thrift stores is with the musical genre of “grunge.” Kurt Cobain, in many ways the face of the grunge scene, publicly professed a strong affinity with thrift stores and often appeared in oversized plaid shirts, ripped jeans, and generally “grungy” second-hand attire. The “grunge” look proliferated, ironically inciting retail companies from Wal-Mart to Marc Jacobs and Saint Laurent to develop lines of
clothing in this style (Heath and Potter 2004), cementing the popularity of thrift stores as a valued site to glean unique items that convey authenticity and cool.

Past research illuminates a variety of motives for shopping at thrift stores, including curating a unique personal style (i.e., vintage) (see Fischer 2015; Veenstra and Kuipers 2013), providing material goods on a budget (see James et al. 2010), checking unmitigated economic growth (see Cherrier 2009), demonstrating pro-environmental choices (see Yan, Bae and Xu 2015), and participating in charitable giving (see Le Zotte 2013). Sociological analyses of second-hand shopping also reveal the cultural meanings that thrift stores take on, from providing the material requirements of a niche cultural identity (see Renshaw [2006] on thrift stores and swing dancers and Maly and Varis [2016] on hipsters) to allowing an affordable means for lower-income consumers to access style markers once reserved for the elite—in this way “disguising” poverty (Hamilton and Catterall 2006). To ground these diverse cultural constructions of thrift shopping, I will use the following section to outline the history of thrift in the United States (U.S.) to describe how second-hand goods have moved from stigmatization to cultural cachet, summarize the perceived environmental and moral benefits of second-hand shopping, and conclude with a discussion of differences in thrifting across social classes.

A Brief History of Second-Hand Shopping

As recently as the 1950s, thrift stores and second-hand shopping were highly stigmatized (Le Zotte 2016). Before the proliferation of used goods, the market for second-hand goods looked very different than it does today. Until recently, the idea of discarding wearable or serviceable items was unheard of—items were mended, repurposed, handed down, or simply maintained (Strasser 2000). The relative scarcity of second-hand goods meant that such things
could only be purchased at pawn shops and informal markets and were associated with marginalized ethnic groups (i.e., gypsies and Jewish immigrants in New York) and the urban poor (LeZotte 2016). Today, thrift stores receive daily deliveries of garbage bags full of clothing that either no longer fits, is out of fashion, or needs repair. Scholars point to the proliferation of discarded goods as a hallmark of late-stage capitalism; consumers now commonly designate goods as waste before they are broken beyond repair (O’Brien 2008).

The radical cultural change required to make waste a viable way of life was a niche for which second-hand shops were well-suited (LeZotte 2016). Second-hand shops branded themselves as instruments of charity that could simultaneously provide an option to absorb waste and a tool to ameliorate growing inequalities (Strasser 2000). Most thrift stores began as charitable ventures as a way to make waste more palatable to the average consumer for whom consuming discarded goods felt unseemly. Today, connections with charity are still a cornerstone of what makes thrift stores a valuable choice for acquiring and donating goods. Most thrift stores are still connected with non-profit or religious organizations (Gregson and Crewe 2003) and thrift stores at least claim to provide valuable job training for under-privileged workers (LeZotte 2016). Goodwill’s branding still emphasizes its role in job creation with slogans such as “Donate stuff. Create Jobs” and a running counter on their national website states how many jobs they have created to date each year (Goodwill Industries 2019). A paper Goodwill shopping bag I attained in the urban field site in this study boasts the claim of serving over 10,000 people and creating over 3,000 jobs in the local community alone.⁷

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⁷ The actual benefit of Goodwill is much more controversial. Goodwill industries are often criticized for paying substandard wages especially to the disabled (see Hrabe 2012).
Major second-hand retailers have also used claims of environmental benefits to morally bolster second-hand shopping. The same Goodwill shopping bag boasting of job creation also claims that “recyclers like Goodwill keep approximately 3.8 billion pounds of waste out of landfills” accompanied by the familiar recycling symbol and a clipart image of the earth. A banner hanging over the entrance of a different, large second-hand retailer reads “going green never goes out of style” (Field Notes, September 3rd, 2017). There is a conscious attempt to recreate the thrift store image as good for the community and explicitly pro-environmental. This pro-environmental discourse is gaining traction among young consumers also drawn by the appeal of cultivating a unique style (Yan, Bae, and Xu 2015) and among devout thrift store shoppers who articulate environmental concerns as motivating their commitment to thrift (Guiot and Roux 2010).

Thrift-Store Shopping Across Categories of Social Difference

Despite the cultural cachet now earned by purveyors and connoisseurs of second-hand goods, the practices associated with thrift store shopping are still patterned by social class. Past research informs us that in times of general economic stability, less-privileged households tend to use thrift stores to shop for necessities, while more-privileged households shop for trinkets and antiques (Ferrell 1990; James et al. 2010). However, these patterns change during times of economic hardship. Research on thrift shopping done in 2010 in the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008 shows that in times of general economic decline, middle and low-income shoppers are more likely to shop for clothes and furniture at thrift stores, while high-income groups are less likely to take advantage of these sources, even in times of economic downturn (James et al. 2010). This reluctance among high-income groups to shop in thrift stores even in
times of economic hardship—and enduring patterns of difference in thrift store use—begin to show some unsettled cultural assumptions about the extent to which second-hand shopping is considered an acceptable practice.

Existing studies of second-hand shopping report differences between types and motivation of shoppers based on gender, education, and income. Limited survey research based on a non-random sample found that among highly-educated, mostly female shoppers, the motivating factors to shop at thrift stores included a desire to save money or find a unique item for a themed event (Mitchell and Montgomery 2010). These findings largely substantiate the typology of three distinct thrift store shoppers presented by Gregson and Crewe (2003): The first are those who rely on thrifting for everyday household provisioning: this group is predominantly low-income and only rarely supplements thrifting with shopping at traditional retail stores. The second group includes those who shop at thrift stores as a means of escape or entertainment. Bardhi and Arnould (2005) also identified this sort of ‘hedonistic’ experience in interviews and ethnographic observations of 12 devoted thrift store shoppers. Finally, for the third type of thrift shoppers, “second-hand spaces provide a key resource for discursive communities to enact both distinction and skill” (Gregson and Crewe 2003; 86). In other words, communities such as hippies, goths, grunge, and punks use thrift stores to show their mastery of cultural values and anti-mainstream tastes.

Although thrift shopping has a history as a marginalized practice, there is fairly extensive evidence that the practice can be used to display distinction and skill not only among subcultural groups but also among mainstream shoppers. Steward (2017) observed categories of shoppers similar to what Gregson and Crewe (2003) noted, and extends their work by showing how varied
uses of thrift shopping differ based on cultural capital. Using ethnographic observations of thrift store shoppers in Portland, Oregon in addition to interviews with these same shoppers, Steward identified a typology of thrift store shoppers that notes two types: the “creativists” seeking authentic styles who had higher stores of cultural capital and the “thrift seekers” who above all wanted bargains and tended to have lower stores of cultural capital. In this case, it was not just the objects gained at thrift stores that had symbolic value, but the narratives associated with thrift store shopping and the skills of recognizing value, fashion, and originality. This paper builds on scholarship exploring how distinction operates in marginalized consumption spaces and how thrift shopping varies by social class. Briefly, I find there are not only differences in the sorts of materials and discourses involved in the practice of thrift shopping but that these elements are bound with different moral narratives. To ground this analysis, I start by introducing existing theories on classed consumption.

Classed Consumption

Theories of classed consumption are typically rooted in Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and habitus. Cultural capital is the sum of knowledge, behaviors, and skills required to be a culturally-competent member of a certain social class (Bourdieu 1984). These tastes play a major role in perpetuating social inequality, as they create affinities and commonalities within social classes that create additional boundaries between groups. Habitus, the embodiment of cultural capital, is a “schemata of thinking” which predisposes members of different classes to different actions and tastes. Put differently: habitus is the embodiment of class-based preferences (Coulangeon and Lemel 2010). For Bourdieu (1984), social class was produced and then reified based on access to the legitimate use of culture, meaning social class was inherently tied to taste,
preference, and consumption. One of the main differences in consumption between social classes is the ability of the upper classes to distance themselves from material necessities. This is what many scholars have referred to as “tastes of luxury” (Bourdieu 1984 see also, Baumann, Szabo and Johnston 2017): tastes that signal to others that one can consume for pleasure rather than for survival.

One of the leading analyses of class-based taste preferences in the U.S. context was undertaken by Holt (1998), amid speculation that Bourdieu’s theories were not applicable to the U.S. given a less rigid class structure than in France (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lamont 1999; 2002). Holt found the same basic division described by Bourdieu, namely differences in tastes of luxury and tastes of necessity. His findings confirmed the clear presence of class-based differences in what sorts of items, vacations, and lifestyles were valued by those with higher cultural capital (HCC) and those with lower cultural capital (LCC). The six main points of division that Holt found were between the HCC values of idealism, aesthetic value, authenticity, cosmopolitan, eclectic, and critical compared to the LCC themes of materialism, functional value, mass production, local, consistency, and referential taste (see Table 2.1).
The first distinction, between idealism and materialism, highlights the way HCC consumers can distance themselves from material needs (see Table 2.1). An example of this difference would be that LCC consumers are more likely to value a large house, say in the style of a “McMansion”, while HCC consumers would be more likely to value a smaller space with some other selling point (e.g., location, unique architectural style). Similarly, HCC consumers distance themselves from the functional properties of consumer goods and privilege aesthetic value. For example, HCC consumers might prefer staging a conversation area with decorative chairs not meant to be used on a daily basis, in contrast to the preference for reclining arm chairs or large sofas among LCC consumers. The next contrast is between authenticity and mass production.\(^8\) This highlights the tendency for HCC consumers to value goods that are unique (e.g., fine or original art), while LCC consumers value what is popular (e.g., posters or prints).

\(^8\) Authenticity is itself a complex topic often used to denote a particular aesthetic orientation to consumption. Johnston and Baumann (2007) discuss authenticity specifically as it applies to constructing gourmet (HCC) tastes using an inclusive definition of authenticity as a social construction that prioritizes handmade over industrial construction, local settings, a sense that the calculation of worth was sincere rather than the result of calculation or strategy, imbied with honesty, integrity, and a closeness to nature as opposed to institutionalized power sources. Johnston and Baumann (2007; 179) argue, “authenticity is an overwhelmingly positive trait in our culture, operating most broadly as a foundation for a philosophy of ethics.” For the purposes of this chapter I define authenticity more specifically as reflecting an aesthetic that is the result of careful self-reflection that demonstrates self-actualization.
These patterns can explain tastes across many domains of consumption, from art (DiMaggio and Useem 1987; Useem and Dimaggio 2017) to food (Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston 2018). The next three axes (see Table 2.1) show differences in what references are used in establishing good taste. HCC tend to have more varied tastes (eclectic) rooted in a global context (cosmopolitan), whereas LCC consumers value local parochial tastes in consistent ways based on what is popular among their immediate social peers (referential). For example, LCC consumers might be drawn to television shows in a familiar genre (i.e., police procedural) that have high ratings.

Through an interview-based study of how a socioeconomically-diverse sample of residents of Washington State understand thrift store shopping, I provide insight into the more general processes and narratives people use to evaluate and/or make sense of reusing discarded items to understand more generally how classed processes of consumption extend to marginalized arenas and discarded goods. This review of the role of social class in consumption highlights several themes that are suggestive of how people across the social hierarchy might understand and experience second-hand shopping. First and foremost, we can expect HCC and LCC thrift shoppers to reference different embodied standards in line with the distinctions put forth by Holt (1998). To orient my examination of the motivations for and experiences of thrifting across social class, I next describe a theoretical framework that draws on a conception of culture as dialectically rooted in both the discourse and practice of thrift shopping.

Theoretical Overview

This chapter looks at how the lingering stigma and emerging cultural cachet of second-hand shopping is understood and experienced by a diverse group of thrift store shoppers in Washington State. To better understand these differences, I will use a version of a dual-process
model of cultural and action specified by Vaisey (2009). This framework problematizes a simple relationship between preference and action (i.e., I shop at thrift stores because I like it) or between belief and action (i.e., I shop at thrift stores because I believe they are better in some way), to highlight the complex role culture plays in influencing preferences and beliefs.

Examining the complex role of culture using this dual-process model is crucial to the main theoretical addition of this paper: how distinction is maintained, and social status reproduced in a marginalized consumption arena. That is, to understand how what is ostensibly the same act (shopping at a thrift store) can vary dramatically between social classes, I analyze how culture functions as deeply entrenched feelings of what is right and natural, motivating action, and how culture is used discursively to justify actions. Both the motivations and justifications of thrift shopping vary between social classes, showing how even in what is a marginal and widespread shopping practice, distinction is maintained and reproduced.

_Dual-Process Framework_

Recent trends in the theory of action have taken issue with individualistic and linear theories of the relationship between beliefs and social action. These individualistic, linear theories of action argue that action is the outcome of desire. That is, that individuals use their personal preferences and values to make choices. In this model, individuals are described as rational actors seeking to maximize their benefit in some way (Hechtor and Kanazawa 1997). While still dominant in the field of economics and popular in many subareas of sociology, cultural sociologists Michael Strand and Omar Lizardo (2015; 44) categorize such explanations as “desire-opportunity folk psychology.” Criticisms of these individualistic theories vary, with some scholars highlighting the obvious lack of perfect information (Elster 1984; Hedström and
Swedberg 1996), while others more crucially contest the very premise that knowledge and values are antecedent to social action (Martin 2011; Swedberg 2014).

Critiques of the individual desire/opportunity model have led to the need for more phenomenologically valid theories of action and culture in sociology. Theories that move beyond this desire/opportunity model have followed two main patterns: culture as motivator of action and culture as a justification of action. In other words, do we act based on our individual values and preferences (culture as motivator)? Or do we simply make the choices laid before us by the social structure then creatively justify them in some desperate attempt to inject agency into our lives (culture as a justification)? The paradigm—motivation or justification—a scholar subscribes to has tended to be a matter of preference rather than a studied decision (Jackson 2006; Vaisey 2009). Recent work by Vaisey (2009) and Lizardo (2017) address this issue by arguing that culture is both motivation and justification, establishing a framework for how to systematically study culture as both.

Vaisey (2009) presents his dual-process model of culture based heavily on the work of Giddens (1984). The dual-process model understands culture simultaneously as means and ends. Culture, as a means or motivation, is related to what Giddens (1984) calls practical consciousness. Practical consciousness guides actors through their daily lives so that they might function in appropriate and largely nonreflexive ways. People are surprisingly likely to act without reflection and also surprisingly bad at supplying reflection when asked. Vaisey (2009) uses the example of a child who is able to recognize incorrect grammar while unable to explain why it is incorrect. The symbolic culture of language is, in this case, not the conscious application of grammatical rules but the engrained subconscious knowledge of the rules, an
example of practical consciousness. For Giddens (1984), the majority of our decisions and actions are dialectically related to practical consciousness; we react to the world around us with little need for reflection. It is only when there is a rupture from our daily routines that reflection is needed in the form of justification. Discursive consciousness is expressible knowledge; this pool of knowledge serves as a basis for forming justification through reflection. For Lizardo (2017), ‘declarative culture’ is that which is obvious and easy to evaluate and articulate, while ‘nondeclarative culture’ is composed of the elements of ritual action that defy easy articulation and are immersed in daily routines. The difference between declarative and non-declarative culture is in keeping with Giddens’ original conception of practical and discursive culture wherein “between discursive and practical consciousness there is no bar; there is only the differences between what can be said and what is characteristically simply done” (Giddens 1984; 7).

Lizardo (2017) argues that the investigation of declarative and nondeclarative cultures is already tied to existing lines of sociological inquiry: social practice theories and repertoire theories (discussed here as orders of worth). These two families of theories reject both explanations of social action based on the model of homo economicus, which assumes that actors work toward individual interests, and homo sociologicus, which assumes that actors work to conform to norms (Reckwitz 2002). Social practice theories and repertoire theories are cognitive theories that challenge any presence of an internalized mental map of culture that serves to guide action. While these theories vary in important ontological ways, they are fundamentally complementary to understanding the link between cognition and action (Lizardo and Strand 2010)
I present the relationships between repertoire theories, social practice theories, culture and action in Figure 1.1. The relationship between declarative culture and action focuses on how culture serves as a repertoire of justifications for use in discourse, the subject of repertoire theories. By using appropriate justifications, one can show their cultural competence, and thus solidify their legitimacy and belonging. The relationship between nondeclarative culture and action is the purview of social practice theories, which look at how routine constantly recreates daily life. In this way, action is motivated, though not consciously, by culture. This study of thrift stores thus relies on repertoire theories to explicate the presence of declarative culture—that which is said—and uses social practice theory to understand the presence of nondeclarative culture—that which is so internalized that it is simply done without reflection.

Figure 1.1 Culture and Action as Motivation and Justification

Social Practice Theories

To understand thrift store shopping from the perspective of non-declarative culture—the many classed differences that are present in ingrained and habituated understandings of thrift shopping that defy easy articulation by actors—I employ a social practice lens. Social practice theories have gained popularity as a tool for studying consumption in the last 15 years (Warde 2015). This is largely owing to the realization that most acts of consumption are rooted in
everyday life and as such are largely automatic in the service of larger social goals (e.g., I consume gas in my car not for the sake of consuming gas but as part of the larger practices of driving and travel.)

Consistent with Vaisey’s (2009) dual-process model, social practice theories hold that most social action is not consciously reflected upon, but the result of subconscious inclinations. It is not that there is no room for reflection, but that daily life functions most smoothly when our actions are automatic and routinized. For example, if we had to re-learn how to drive or ride a bicycle every time we traveled to work or school, how to shop at a grocery store or take money out of a bank, daily life would be exhausting. The most promising approach to understanding these automatic and routinized tendencies is through social practice theories (Kennedy and Hauslik 2018; Shove 2003; Warde 2005). Material consumption in practice theories is often seen as tangential to practice: that is, people rarely consume simply to consume (Warde 2005); rather, they consume resources in the pursuit of carrying out a practice.

A practice is not the fulfillment of any single task (i.e., cooking, working, investigating) completed by a specific actor, but rather the blueprint for how such actions should be undertaken. For example, while the practice of driving might vary slightly from person to person, the use of a vehicle, roads, gasoline or other fuel, and traffic laws remain the same despite the individual actor, making the practice of driving distinguishable despite slight differences. To better operationalize social practice theory for explaining consumption practices, Elizabeth Shove (2003) concretely defines practices as a constellation of meanings, materials, and skills.⁹

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⁹ One of the main differences between Shove’s articulation of social practice theories and others is her emphasis on materials. This emphasis shows her clear intellectual debt to Foucault, while most social practice theories tend to more clearly align with the cultural and structural inclinations of Bourdieu and Giddens respectively.
Continuing with the practice of driving discussed earlier, we can usefully apply these elements. For example, the material requirements of driving are obvious: vehicles, roads, traffic signs, gasoline. Culturally, what it means to drive in a context takes a bit more investigation and culturally-specific knowledge. In the U.S. context, cars might signify the freedom of the open road, a rite of passage associated with becoming an adult, and independence. Finally, the skills associated with driving include all the practical know-how included on a driving test and the informal rules of the road that are acquired over time (Warde 2005).

To fully understand thrift store shopping as a practice, I will look at the materials required to partake in a practice (in this case the second-hand goods for sale), identify the various meanings, or images, of second-hand shopping (noting also how the practice is conceptualized as appropriate for a group, or the associations people draw to the practice), and describe the competences (or skills) and the practical knowledge involved in the successful completion of a practice. Ultimately, I will characterize the constellations of these factors—noting how they differ between social groups as they situate thrift shopping as viable, attractive, or off-putting. Since social practice theories are influenced so heavily by the theory of habitus, it is only right that we should expect to see systematic differences between social groups. Habitus operates as predisposed durable schemas of thinking that guide our daily lives. These schemas operate subconsciously to reproduce class status (Bourdieu 1984; Coulangeon and Lemel 2010).

Therefore, we cannot interpret habitus, or social practice theory, without simultaneously looking

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10 Meanings at first look are remarkably like justifications. However, for the purposes of this analysis I propose that there are subtle differences. Meanings are much more related to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and the unconscious biases that make something seem “for me” or “not for the likes of me” (Bourdieu 1984; 197). Explanations are the explicit reasons given for an action.
at social class. When used in combination with repertoire theories (which identify declarative culture), practice theories complete the story of how culture is related to social action by shedding light on how nondeclarative culture influences thrift store shopping.

Repertoire Theories: Orders of Worth

My analysis of thrift shopping is completed by looking at the role of declarative culture—the narratives and justifications actors use when reflecting on their actions, as mobilized when explaining thrift shopping. Theoretically, this analysis is influenced by the body of theories generally referred to as repertoire theories. These theories, owing heavily to Swidler’s (1984) analogy of a toolkit of culture, argue that there are a variety of ready-made justifications and articulations that actors can draw on discursively to frame their actions. Like practice theories, repertoire theories are best understood as a family of theories. For this chapter, I draw specifically on Boltanski and Thèvenot’s (1999) orders of worth to analyze the moral discourses thrift store shoppers employ. Understanding the moral discourses used by thrift store shoppers is appropriate, as increasingly what we consume must be justified as morally worthy. As Sassatelli (2004;180) writes, moral justifications of consumer choices, “contribute to a continuing battle over how best to judge and justify something as worthwhile and right or as meaningless and corrupting.” In the context of this chapter, the purposes of scrutinizing when and how consumer choices are justified as morally worthy are first, to describe the moral commitments that exist among my sample, and second, to discuss how these moral commitments vary by social class.

To better account for the distinct types of moral discourses actors can draw on, Boltanski and Thèvenot’s (1990) work advances six general orders of worth, or acceptable lines of reasoning, that can be used to command respect from others. In later research, Lafaye and
Thevenot (2017) add a seventh order of worth. These include: market, industrial, civic, domestic, inspired, and opinion, with “green” as the later addition. To offer a brief description (see Table 2.2) the market order considers market competitiveness to determine if an action (or, in the context of consumption, a product) is worthy, asking, ‘is this worth the price?’ The industrial order of worth emphasizes efficiency and often blurs into the market order by asking about cost-effectiveness. The civic order of worth focuses on the collective and works to maximize equality and solidarity, asking about contributions to justice and equity. The domestic order of worth attempts to hold with tradition, trustworthiness, and family, asking, ‘what would I traditionally do?’ The inspired order of worth is related most closely with aesthetic concerns that foster passion and enthusiasm, asking, ‘is this authentic and worth-while?’ The opinion order of worth values popularity, recognition and symbolic value, asking, ‘is this what everyone else is doing?’ The final, and later addition of green orders of justification prioritizes environmental concerns and asks, ‘is this what is best for the environment?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orders</th>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Criteria of Evaluation</th>
<th>Questions for evaluation of thrift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Market</td>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Market competitiveness</td>
<td>Is shopping at a thrift store worth the price?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Technical Efficiency</td>
<td>Does shopping at a thrift store mean efficient housekeeping?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic</td>
<td>The collective</td>
<td>Equality, solidarity</td>
<td>Does shopping at a thrift store promote collective welfare?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Can one trust the products at a thrift store are quality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired</td>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Passion, enthusiasm</td>
<td>Does shopping at thrift stores inspire creativity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion</td>
<td>Public opinion</td>
<td>Popularity, recognition</td>
<td>Is shopping at a thrift store considered popular or fashionable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Environmental concerns</td>
<td>Is shopping at a thrift store better for the environment?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Anderson 2011
These orders of worth form a cultural grammar (Boltanski and Thevenot 1999) that people use to classify phenomena to make them manageable and to coordinate action. All seven orders of worth are culturally viable explanations of action, but the degree to which they are viable varies from setting to setting. For example, one can justify their choice to buy a head of cabbage by explaining that it was well-priced (market order of worth) or well-priced for the number of portions contained (industrial order of worth) or by explaining that their family has a long-standing preference for cabbage as it is used in many of their traditional meals including sauerkraut (domestic order of worth). It is often common for one person to use many of these orders simultaneously.

Despite the widespread appeals of these orders of worth, the way they are put into use varies both by social context and by the social position of the actor. Stamer (2018) applies the orders of worth approach to analyze a Dutch consumer panel survey and finds just such a variation based on social class. Using a factor analysis, Stamer found clearly-delineated bundles of priorities and practices that corresponded to the six general orders of worth. She also found evidence that these orders of worth varied based on social and cultural capital, though they did not vary with economic capital. Those with higher levels of cultural capital were more likely to subscribe to an inspired or civic order of worth. The association between cultural capital and civically motivated consumption is seen often in the field of sustainable and political consumption. Carfagna et al. (2014) compare the demographic features of those who participated in boycott or boycott activities to those who did not, with a nationally representative sample of 1457 respondents drawn from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS). Their findings suggested that environmental consumption, consuming based on the green order of worth, was related to
education but not income. Though education was the sole indicator of cultural capital and the relationship was established by simple t-tests of means, this study points to the myriad ways environmental practices are being inscribed within the cultural repertoire of HCC consumers.

This study examines the act of thrift shopping by integrating theoretical frameworks designed to probe both the nondeclarative and declarative modes of culture to show the persistence of class-based distinctions in a marginalized shopping space. In discussing thrift shopping as a social practice composed of materials, meanings, and skills, I show how thrift shopping varies between social classes to the extent that it constitutes a different social practice. In applying repertoire theories, specifically analyzing the orders of worth applied in the discursive justification of thrift shopping, I show how thrift shopping holds different symbolic meanings for shoppers based on social class. This chapter uses a dual-process framework to show how the act of thrift shopping, an act that is both marginalized and uniquely accessible to a wide subsection of the population, can still serve to create and maintain previously observed categories of distinction.

Methods

The data I present in this chapter are derived from a larger interview-based study of social class and environmentalism, conducted between May and August 2016. Working in a team of three researchers, we conducted 44 semi-structured interviews with individuals in six purposively selected neighborhoods across the State of Washington (WA). We selected these six communities through a multi-stage clustered and quota-based sampling design. This cluster sample, which ensured inclusion of individuals from a variety of social class backgrounds, was a key feature of the larger study of social class and environmentalism as much of the literature fails to engage diverse class voices. It was also useful for this study of thrift shopping as it ensured a
more diverse sample than is usually considered in studies of thrift shopping that look at devout thrift shoppers rather than a more typical shopper.

The first step in our cluster sample design was selecting one rural, one urban area, and one urban cluster. Within the state of Washington there are 14 designated urban areas, 67 urban clusters, and 595 rural areas. We compiled a numbered list of the 14 urban areas, 67 urban clusters, and 595 rural areas and using a random number generator selected the area that corresponded with the randomly selected number. The rural field site is located on the San Juan Islands in the Northwestern corner of WA. The urban field site is on the State’s west side. The urban cluster is on the east side of WA.

As the next step in our cluster sampling design we purposively selected two neighborhoods within each of the three geographic sites, one representing a lower-middle-income neighborhood and the other an upper-middle-income neighborhood. We determined the lower and upper-middle neighborhoods using 2010 census tract data. Using census tracts as a proxy for neighborhood groups, we sorted all census tracts in the selected city or town boundaries (as determined by the geographical designations from the census) by income and then divided the tracks into quintiles based on income. We considered census tracts from the second and fourth quintiles for inclusion in this study. To triangulate the census tracts as representative of typical neighborhoods in the second and fourth quintiles, we compared median home prices relative to the city at large using Trulia (a housing market website). We made final determinations based on walkability as this was key to our sampling scheme.
Table 2.3 Demographics by geographic locale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Median Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2,162</td>
<td>$46,964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Cluster</td>
<td>29,799</td>
<td>$27,831</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>46,478</td>
<td>$54,523</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*U.S. Census, 2010

The design was key to ensuring a variety of income and life circumstances would be reflected in this study of thrift store shopping to improve on much of the existing qualitative interviews conducted with devout groups of thrift store shoppers (e.g., Darley and Lim 1999; Fox, 1995; Gregson and Crewe 2003). By not sampling based on participation in thrift store shopping, this study begins to look at the cultural significance of thrift store shopping in a general sense. As the final step of our clustered sampling design to select households within neighborhoods the research team knocked on every other door to attempt to contact participants. The quota goal was to conduct interviews with eight individuals in each neighborhood. If there was no answer initially, we left a flyer with a description of the study and contact information at the door. We contacted each non-response household a second time. Participants who were home and chose to participate set up interview times for the coming week. We offered participants incentives in the form of $10 gift cards to local cafes. This research design is in keeping with a random route sampling strategy (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik 2003). This is a research strategy that has been used successfully for major data collection processes undertaken by the European Union including the European Community Household Panel and Socio-Economic Panels. Random-route sampling has also been used by more popular outlets such as The Washington Post and
more established research-centric organizations such as Gallup (The Washington Post 2010; Gallup World View 2012).

This sampling design yielded 44 recorded, semi-structured interviews. Interviews ranged from one hour to three and a half hours with an average length of an hour and a half. Most of the participants were interviewed alone, although occasionally partners or even friends were present, and one couple chose to participate together. Most interviews took place in respondent’s homes, though some were conducted in cafes or workplaces. The sample is 60% female with an average age of 55. The sample was racially homogenous: only three participants identified as non-white. The sample was also politically homogenous with 95% identifying as democrats or otherwise aligned with the political left.\footnote{The summer of 2016 was during the Trump presidential campaign. It is possible that under less politicized circumstances more participants might have been expressed more conservative leanings. It is also possible that these political leanings were an artifact of the sampling strategy that required each participant to agree to an interview about the environment with no key informant vouching for the interviewer which would have been present in more traditional qualitative research strategies.} While this study does not claim to be generalizable to either all residents of Washington State or all thrift shoppers, it is important to reflect on the limitations of this homogenous sample. It is possible that those who refused to take part in the study varied systematically from those who opted into the study. Our sample demographics (see Table 2.4) suggest that those who agreed to participate tended to be older, better educated, identify as white, and more likely to identify as democrats or aligned with the political left than those who either were not contacted successfully or declined to participate.
Table 2.4 Sample Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-white</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED/high school degree</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college/AA</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-middle class</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-middle class</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using a follow-up questionnaire, we asked respondents to self-report their income, occupation, and education. We used these data, along with the neighborhood where the respondent lived, to categorize participants by class status, though in some cases, we used subjective criteria from the interviews to make a final designation (see Appendix A). For example, a particularly complex case is Rachel, who did not complete elementary school and earns over $100,000 a year. From the interview as a whole, the research team agreed, given her unique living situation as a live-in superintendent in a high-end condo complex whose husband works in construction, that she could be coded as lower-middle class. The initial neighborhood-based sampling strategy means that the entirety of our sample can best be described as somewhere near middle class. The class categorization and breakdown are as follows: lower-middle (32%), middle (30%), and upper-middle (38%) (see Appendix A for detailed information...
on social class determination). Despite some of the limitations of the sample, the sampling design was successful at representing a diversity of social class positions.

The interview guide was divided into five related modules and was organized around the general theme of sustainable consumption. One of these question modules asked specifically about thrift store shopping practices and perceptions (see Appendix B). While interviews were semi-structured and allowed for some fluidity in question order and emphasis, we tried to keep the general order as much as possible without disrupting interview flow.

Interviews were digitally-recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the research team with some assistance from an undergraduate research assistant. The resulting data serves as the basis for a variety of works by the original research team (see Hammond and Kennedy 2019; Kennedy and Givens 2019). We performed independent data analysis for our respective works. For this analysis, the coding strategy began with an exhaustive process of open coding to generate as many ideas as possible; these codes were then grouped and refined based on a close reading of the data and existing literature (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008). A significant number of codes rested on the use of principles from practice theory and made specific groups for references to materials, skills, and meanings. Additional relevant codes represented discourses that were anticipated to reflect orders of worth (Boltanski and Thevenot 1999) and Holt’s (1998) summary of consumption patterns and discourses that emerged in the interviews.

**Findings: Second-hand Distinction**

This chapter synthesizes classical treatments of consumption in sociology and theoretical breakthroughs in the understanding of the interplay between culture and action in order to
understand how class distinction operates in a relatively marginalized consumption practice. I unpack this contribution in several steps. First, I find that the materials, meanings, and skills associated with thrift shopping vary by social class and are contoured by class-based judgments about thrift stores and the people who shop there. The first section discusses the lingering associations of thrift shops with poverty and how participants from different backgrounds negotiate this association. I then discuss the end goal of thrift shopping as replicating the class-based distinctions found by Holt (1998). Those from lower-class backgrounds use thrift stores to find goods that resemble what they could find new in a more conventional shopping outlet. In this case, the measure of successful thrift shopping is finding something “brand new.” Those from higher class backgrounds use thrift store shopping to skillfully procure goods that can convey a unique aesthetic. Success for the high-status participants is defined as finding something “unique”. Finally, I also note how discourses of justification serve to reify class-based differences, particularly with regard to discussions of morality and waste. Those from higher class backgrounds are more likely to make explicit appeals to the environment while those from lower class backgrounds stress their dislike for waste, both physical and monetary, more generally.

A Place for the Poor

All participants regardless of social class tended to have an ingrained sense that thrift stores exist to serve the poor. Upper middle-class participants explicitly associated thrift stores with poverty and described feeling out of place in a thrift store. Middle-class participants expressed some hesitancy in shopping at thrift stores owing to a connection with the lower class and perceptions about cleanliness and quality. Finally, lower-middle class participants reflected
on how thrift stores are, or have been, a necessary way to make ends meet. While incorporating thrift shopping into their daily practices, lower-middle class participants are at once aware of social stigmas and keen to remark on the positive side of buying second-hand goods. Despite this context of understanding thrift stores as a place originally intended for the poor, none of my participants view this as a hard and fast division. Instead, participants recognize that this association is eroding and is not something that keeps them from acquiring second-hand goods.

Among the upper-middle class, thrift shopping had clear associations with economic deprivation. For Annie (59, urban, upper-middle class), these meanings come from her mother who would have seen second-hand as “what poor people do” and thus “she [her mother] would not be seen there.” Ben (77, rural, upper-middle class), reasons that “it makes you feel like you might be a needy person” and later he compares shopping at a thrift store with going to the food bank to get food. For these upper-middle class consumers, thrift stores feel like they are generally “not for them” and therefore they use them only occasionally and for specific goals. Of the 17 of upper-class participants, 11 expressed similar sentiments of thrift stores as serving the poor, a group with which they clearly did not identify. However, all but one of the upper-middle participants shopped at thrift stores at least occasionally.

For the upper-middle participants, the connection with poverty is something that can be (and often is) overcome. A common way that upper-middle class participants overcame these associations and began shopping at thrift stores was with the transition to parenthood. Angela (39, urban cluster, upper-middle class) and Eloise (47, urban, upper-middle class) describe the process like this:
Angela: I don’t know, something about having a kid makes you realize you don't have to have everything new, because she's just going to be in this for three months and then it's gone. Yeah, it must be the doorway in and then it’s like ‘well this isn't that bad, I could buy something for myself too.’

Eloise: I think [the appeal of thrift stores] has to do with the intersection of high price. but short-term use, for example, like buying clothes for the kid who, which you will soon discover, go through clothes at an alarming clip and a lot of the times they barely have time to wear them once or twice and then they can't wear them anymore because they've grown too much. So, going to second-hand stores for clothing for [my son] or buying them from friends, buying them on eBay, something like that to reduce the cost of something that's going to be used briefly and then putting them back out into the universe again, donating them to Goodwill and letting someone else be excited about finding my kid’s old shorts.

Spaargaren (2003) argues that routines generally remained unchanged until faced with an external rupture. While Spaargaren uses the example of how we do not even think about our water use until for some reason brown water comes out of the tap, for Angela and Eloise, having children creates a similar rupture, allowing for a new practical reality where thrift shopping makes more sense than shopping at traditional stores. In this case, using a social practice approach to consider parenting as practice is a useful way to understand the act of shopping at a thrift store. Thrift shopping is an important skill for providing for children, a sort of knowledge that people without children probably would not see. Materially, some of the drawbacks associated with second-hand goods (i.e., cleanliness or quality) are also minimized, as Angela and Eloise point out children’s clothes are often not even worn or worn infrequently before they are donated. The meanings associated with children’s clothing are different than for other goods as they are perceived as more temporary owing to how quickly they are outgrown.

Participants from all classes hesitated to shop at thrift stores, owing to assumptions about a lack of cleanliness or quality and uncertainty about thrift store clientele. This was especially
prevalent among middle and upper-middle class respondents. For instance, Sharon (63, rural, middle class) explains that she did not go thrift shopping until she met her husband, who she describes as a “connoisseur” of thrift shops: “Before that, I don’t think I would have thought… I think it kind of creeped me out to shop at thrift stores. I didn’t want other people’s old goods.” William (65, rural, lower-middle class) also admits, “I think I was a little uncomfortable with the rest of the customers. You know, what kind of people are these...they have to buy used, inexpensive clothes.” This sense of who thrift shopping is for is exacerbated by considerations of cleanliness. Sarah (57, rural, upper-middle) expresses her preferences for not buying second-hand as influenced by a general sense of lack of cleanliness:

I don't know, I guess it's just the thought of, I'd rather wear clothes that are new that have only been worn by me, maybe it's a... I don't like the smell of old garments that haven't been cleaned … I don't know; that stuff kind of creeps me out. I don't want to wear somebody's clothes, somebody's reused clothes. If I—I might go to the thrift store and buy a blanket that I was going to put in the car for my dog or something like that but I tend not to purchase things at a used, yeah, I just tend not to do that.

Overall, 7 of 13 middle-class participants expressed this sense that thrift stores have a patina of poverty and dirtiness showing their intuitive, unreflective associations between poverty and dirtiness.

Participants from lower-middle backgrounds reported feelings of necessity or a long history with thrift shopping that left a lingering impression of the what it means to use thrift shops. Ten of the 14 lower-class participants made comments that suggested that thrift stores are associated with necessity. Growing up, Don’s (66, rural, lower-middle class) single mother shopped exclusively at thrift stores, and he explains that “there was kind of a negative onus about it,” when asked how he felt about it as a kid. In contrast, he says that today, “it’s completely
gone the other way. It’s very chic to shop at second-hand stores now.” Today Don recognizes that shopping at thrift stores is now popular and socially acceptable owing to this new popularity. In this explanation, Don is drawing on a referential rather than a critical explanation of taste, looking to what is popular rather than what is aesthetically desirable. Holt (1998) would argue that drawing on the popularity of this practice is an invocation of a referential aesthetic, which is a mark of low cultural capital (LCC) consumption trends.

The tension between lingering feelings of stigma and necessity alongside an appreciation of the material benefits of thrift stores was common among the lower-middle class participants. Jim (29, urban cluster, lower-middle class) expressed a very clear motivation for shopping at thrift stores: “Lack of money. Pretty much. I think if everybody had all the money in the world, they'd buy all new stuff. That's what I think.” However, Jim regularly shops at thrift stores and points to many benefits: “the pants are already broken in” and he enjoys looking through the “goofy stuff from the 70’s.” For Jim, within the practice of thrift shopping there is a disconnect between the unique material benefits available at thrift stores and the meanings which are intimately tied to not having the economic resources to buy new. A similar meaning lingered for Myra (45, urban cluster, middle class):

I feel like—a little bit like for a long time we sort of had to? And now I don't strictly have to. And, so, I have a bit of a, ‘ugh, don't do that’. I mean, when you have to do that because you really don't have money it just feels kind of limiting, but I can see, really, a lot of my favorite clothes have come from Goodwill; it's no different.

This suggests that for Myra thrift shopping as a practice is incomplete in merging materials, skills, and meanings; owing to stigmatized associations with thrift shopping, these meanings are not dispelled despite the reality that shopping at thrift stores has had the material benefit of “a lot
of [her] favorite clothes.” Dave (32, rural, lower-middle class) experienced downward class
mobility and started shopping at thrift stores after being laid off in 2008. When asked how
shopping at thrift stores felt under those conditions he responded by sighing loudly and replying:

It kind of felt like a necessity. But now it, I guess it's become more fun as I've had more
money. But I still don't mind...Even if I did have all the money I'd still go because I've
found so much more useful stuff than brand new. And sometimes I've found practically
brand-new stuff there.

Dave had to navigate his new social status as someone who thrift shops are for. Because the
material benefits largely outweighed the initial stigma, this transition was relatively
straightforward. After engaging in the practice of thrift store shopping Dave recognized a
disconnect between the materials of the practice and the meanings that he once associated with
the practice. Dave is able to justify his shopping at thrift stores by appealing to the industrial
order of worth: the items at the thrift store are more useful and less expensive ultimately, so he
was able to construct a new meaning for thrift stores. In this case we see how practice and
discourse function iteratively to restructure Dave’s cultural worldview.

There is a general sense among all social classes of who thrift store are for. Having to
negotiate their embodied (i.e., non-declarative) associations with thrifting as they practiced it in
the past, continuing to shop at thrift stores often felt more like a burden for those that once but no
longer shopped at thrift stores out of economic necessity. These lingering associations do not fit
with the reality of who shops at thrift stores and the material benefits that are available. In the
case of upper-middle class respondents this sense of who a thrift shop is for is something to
come to terms with before entering. Thrift shopping was often an unfamiliar practice that needed
to be contextualized on the discursive level (i.e., declarative culture) before it could be
considered a viable option. As we see in the next section, embracing the availability of unique goods at thrift stores as part of a quest for an authentic presentation of self is one way that upper-middle class respondents came to term with the lingering stigma of thrift stores.

Search for Authenticity

As articulated by numerous scholars (e.g., Holt 1998; Johnston and Baumann 2007; Steward 2017), the search for authenticity is an important dimension of upper-middle class taste preferences. Authenticity is an important meaning associated with the practice of thrift shopping. Further, the accomplishment of authenticity, the ability to create and frame your actions as authentic, is a skill integral to the practice of thrift shopping. Lindsey highlighted the connection between authenticity as a meaning and a skill when she (28, urban cluster, middle class) likened thrift shopping to hunting in the sense that “you really have to look and dig and I feel like I have kind of an eye for finding things and seeing their use.” Here we see the skills associated with thrift shopping as being able to find appropriate items and being creative with what is available.

In many cases successfully shopping at thrift stores was used to maintain distinction and group belonging. Carissa (37, urban, middle class), when asked if she told people she shopped at thrift stores, said she did, as she felt thrift shopping was a unique way of accomplishing an authentic form of consumption:

Yeah, I don't really have, no shame in that regard. In my particular group of friends, I would say that it's sort of like ‘oh dude you scored! That's awesome!’ It's very much a mark of, it's like you went out and hunted the thing yourself. There's a little more achievement with it than oh, you bought something cute from the mall or whatever. It's pretty socially acceptable in my particular group of friends but I also don't think I would be friends with someone who like really cared where I bought something.
Shopping at thrift stores was not only accepted by her circle of friends, shopping at thrift stores allowed her an extra occasion to prove her authenticity and creativity. Rather than buying “something cute from the mall” that would have shown referential and popular tastes, she was able to “score” something one-of-a-kind at a thrift store. Ellen (33, rural, middle class) echoes this sentiment by adding “I began to find my own style at second-hand stores rather than trying to achieve something that someone else was suggesting.” During the interview, Elena (82, urban cluster, middle class) began pointing to objects around her house that she had gotten second-hand from family members or from thrift stores showing off how unique they were to the interviewer. These all appeal to the inspired order of worth related most closely with aesthetic concerns that foster passion and enthusiasm.

These explanations of authenticity and uniqueness were largely exclusive to the upper-middle class and middle-class groups, with the exception being Rachel (41, rural, lower-middle class). However, her take on authenticity and uniqueness had subtle differences:

It's like a treasure hunt. It's totally like a treasure hunt. In a conventional store you [have the] pressures of people [trying] to sell you something. It feels so institutional. As I said you get the same thing on every rack. Here's the same 20 of a single shirt, here's 20 of the same pants. There's just no fun. Just no fun. And then the cost, you know, you've got to think about do you really want to spend 30 or 40 dollars on a shirt, a brand-new shirt? I really don't.

Rachel clearly decries most elements of mass production, preferring a more varied shopping experience, however, rather than using unique goods to create a sense of authenticity as a mark of belonging, she values the sense of fun and excitement. She also almost immediately pivots to cost, showing a more materialist, industrial order of worth as opposed to the inspired order of worth we saw with the upper and middle-class participants.
Authenticity is predicated on the idea that the materials one finds in thrift stores are somehow unique or at least different from those one could find elsewhere. As opposed to their upper-middle counterparts who insist that the value of second-hand lies in uniqueness and the ability to find items that do not exist elsewhere, lower-middle class respondents are more likely to value items for being comparable to what is widely available new or for approximating the state of being “brand new.” Many lower-middle class interview subjects spent time in their interviews pointing out objects that participants found “brand new” in thrift shops or telling tales of amazing “brand new” finds. Brand new is a material element of the practice of thrift shopping that shows affinity for mass-produced objects, what one could easily find at the mall, rather than some abstraction of uniqueness. Also associated with this trend was the tendency to assign a price with these brand-new items indicating that there were substantial savings, harkening back to the market and industrial orders of worth, which are more concerned with value and efficacy than with creativity and passion.

The connection between declarative culture and ideals of authenticity are clear: middle and upper-middle class participants clearly articulate their desire to shop at thrift stores with the culturally valuable idea of creating a unique and authentic look. In its declarative form we see how a search for authenticity can be used to justify shopping at thrift stores by applying the inspired order of worth rather than the market or industrial order. We also see participants engaging in dialogues that prioritize idealism (e.g., “finding my style”) rather than materialism (e.g., “brand new”) in keeping with the trends noted by Holt (1998).

Additionally, a practice theory framework sheds light on how shopping at a thrift store comes to feel authentic to participants. For some, the meanings, skills, and materials coalesce in
a way that makes thrifting not only non-problematic, but preferable; a manner of consuming that feels right and authentic. This is evident in statements given by Carissa, Lindsey, Rachel, and Denny who began this chapter. Carissa and Lindsey clearly evoke the role of skill in shaping the experience of shopping at thrift stores with their references to having “an eye” for aesthetics and likening shopping with hunting. Denny and Rachel both underscore how deeply engrained thrift shopping is with their sense of self. For Rachel this comes in the form of the “fun” associated with thrifting. For Denny, quoted at the start of this chapter, this connection is so deeply felt that shopping at the mall (rather than a thrift store) would require anti-anxiety medications.

Morality

It is not just a quest for authenticity that makes thrifting a desirable practice. There are also intersecting moral overtones that animate thrift shopping and give it social value. This section draws primarily on varying orders of worth used to establish moral connections to thrift shopping. Similar to Stamer (2018), this study finds systematic differences in the application of orders of worth by social class. Those of the middle and upper classes were more likely to explicitly reference a “green” order or civic order of worthy, while those in the lower-middle class were more likely to draw on the industrial or market order of worth to describe the process of waste and re-use.

Upper and middle-class moralities: A ‘green’ way to shop

Previous research has shown how thrift shopping is increasingly motivated by environmental values (Guiot and Roux 2010) and my data also suggest evidence of this trend.12

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12 However, because the interview related to thrift shopping came within a larger interview focused on the environment, connections with the environment are likely inflated, due to a priming effect. A discussion of the
Upper-middle class participants often reported feeling somewhat uneasy about not shopping second-hand due to their perception that it was more environmentally sound and sought out other justifications to morally shore up their actions. When asked about the connection between the environment and thrift stores, Avery (45, urban cluster, upper-middle class) responds, “Oh, yeah, I think it’s really good, but I find it really inconvenient, so I try to be selective in what we do buy. So, I like to pretend to myself that maybe that makes up for it. I don’t know. It’s like, we don’t buy a lot of junk anyway.” Here, Avery shows her familiarity and command of environmentalism as a legitimate justification for action but is able to adapt the argument to one of selectivity and minimalism rather than the sustainability of re-use. Ben (77, rural, upper-middle class), uses a similar tactic, “I'm not a shopper. I just don't like shopping period. So, I think shopping at second-hand stores is more environmentally friendly because it's getting a second use out of it.”

Many upper-middle class participants discussed the environmental and social benefits of shopping second hand and how these connections can even outweigh other realities and perceptions of thrift shops. Judy (52, urban, upper-middle class) points to her sense that when buying second-hand, she’s “reusing” something that does not need to be bought again. Despite expressing that shopping at thrift stores is inconvenient and sometimes uncomfortable, Judy reflected that shopping at traditional retail venues made her feel “guilty” owing to the labor conditions and environmental consequences of mass production. Annie (59, urban, upper-middle class), when asked why she shops primarily at thrift stores, responded with justifications drawing

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environmental perceptions of thrift shopping are not included as evidence of the popularity of this appeal in particular, but as evidence of the popularity of moral appeals in thrift shopping more generally.
explicitly on the green order of worth, but also the civic order of worth related to social sustainability:

So [shopping at thrift stores], I guess satisfies or fulfills that desire to be a little more sustainable in my choices, to reuse a thing that has already been purchased new and can continue to be used. I think in doing that I'm supporting a much more local economy as well, which is a good thing for the social sustainability part of things.

Judy and Avery both mention the inconvenience of thrift store shopping. Shove proposes that inconvenience, along with concerns about cleanliness and comfort, are three common ways constellations of sustainable meanings, materials, and skills fail to gain traction. That is, if a practice does not promote comfort, does not meet cultural standards of cleanliness, or is inconvenient, especially given busy schedules and the demands of other practices it is unlikely to be adopted on a wide scale. However, despite her experience with thrift shops as largely inconvenient, Judy states that she continues to shop at thrift stores owing to the strong association with social and environmental benefits. It is rarely the case that practical concerns, such as how inconvenient a practice is, are outweighed by one’s values. More often we see respondents like Avery who, despite being aware of the associations between thrift stores and pro-social behaviors, are guided by their practical senses, in this case avoiding thrift stores because they are inconvenient.

Other justifications common among middle and upper-middle class consumers were based in the charitable nature of thrift stores. These justifications were not mutually exclusive to pro-environmental reasoning, but often bound together:

We like to support those places that are typically local and like the one down here, we go in there a lot … I believe they employ disabled adults down there and we like that, so, we like to support them as much as we can. We make donations there a lot and when I need
something weird, like a charger for an old phone, it's a great place to go. I feel like that's obviously, that's a form of recycling. If you can buy something and reuse it, then a new one didn't have to be sacrificed on your account. Brian (48, urban cluster, middle class)

Once again, we see a reference to the obvious recycling and reuse that occurs with second-hand consumption, appealing to the green order of worth. Additionally, Brian articulates an appeal to the civic order of worth when talking about the “local” economy.

Even where the environmental justification was not particularly compelling, the charitable narrative – part of the wider civic order of worth – did have some traction. Harriet (72, rural, upper-middle class), the wealthiest participant we interviewed, was the only person who reported never shopping at thrift stores. She does still convey the moral overtones of thrift stores by emphasizing that she donates used goods to the thrift stores. She mentions donating a designer suit that cost her $700, indicating that she donates quality and valuable items.

Waste Not, Want Not

The last section talked about how upper- and middle-class participants reconciled their feelings of being out of place (part of their practical consciousness) and their stated motivations for thrift shopping (part of their discursive consciousness). That is, thrift shoppers from these classes rely on narratives of green and civic orders of worth to explain how thrift shopping is an important part of their lives. There was also significant overlap in moral justifications between the social classes. While upper-and-middle class respondents were more able to justify their actions in context of the environment in explicit terms, references to a desire to avoid waste were more universal.13 Angela (39, urban cluster, upper-middle class) put her desire to avoid waste as

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13 Note that this might be a result of priming owing to the overall context of the interviews as focused on environmental topics.
fulfilled by thrift shopping this way “it's just, I don't feel like it's as excess[ive]. You get to reuse something. It's not as wasteful” and for William (65, rural, lower-middle class) “it’s like, hey, this doesn't need to be thrown away.” The idea of waste here was informed not just in an environmental sense, but more generally as related to excess and keeping things in their proper places “out of the landfill, or somebody’s front yard or backyard, or dumpster” as Greg (66, urban, middle class) put it.

Participants use the idea of waste in relation to several different orders of worth including the civic and industrial orders. Sharon (63, rural, middle class) shows the multiple contexts that a rhetoric of waste can be employed:

I hate to throw things out, to waste things. I don’t mind throwing out old worn out things, but you know, to waste things. And usually if we are getting rid of stuff, we usually take it to a consignment shop or to a thrift store, because there is somebody that needs them. I’d just as soon help somebody. Sometimes you have like a set of dishes but enough are broken that you only have five and so, to have somebody that might really need that be able to get it for a buck instead of having to go and pay whatever someplace else, yeah…I hadn’t thought about that…that is definitely something to do with the environment, isn’t it? When you are not only consuming the new.

Interestingly, Sharon’s first instinct when talking about the concept of waste does not seem to be a clear connection to the environment. Sharon shows some uncertainty when employing a green order of worth—asking the interviewer if it has something to do with the environment—but she makes a clear invocation of the civic order of worth when she recognizes that her donations might benefit someone who might need plates as in her example. Sharon’s hesitation and a more general inclination to bring in the idea of “waste” rather than the environment might have something to do with the multiple meanings associated with waste. Rachel (41, rural, lower-middle class) thinks of waste as it relates to money:
Yeah, name brand products I think are just a rip off. Just a waste of money. I can't see spending $45 on a pair of jeans. I just can't conceive of that when I can go spend $4 at the [thrift] store. I've never understood that. Never understood that. … Don't buy new. It's a waste. You don't want to waste your money.

With Sharon and Rachel, we see how “waste” can meaningfully intersect with both the civic order of worth and the industrial order of worth. This is evidence of the multiple cultural connections associated with thrift shopping.

In addition to civic and industrial orders of worth that can be specifically narrated, there is also a more commonsense understanding of waste. Charles and Kim, lower-middle class respondents, describe a more ineffable quality of waste as something to be avoided:

Interviewer: Do you ever think about the environmental impacts of second-hand?
Charles (66, rural, lower-middle class): I, I know that instead of being dumped, it is going to be used again.
Interviewer: Does that make consuming it feel any different?
Charles: Yeah. It feels saner.

Kim (38, urban cluster, middle class), specifically referencing the abundance of waste left by college move-out days laments “we could find all that stuff in the garbage; if we took the time to look in the garbage, we could find all that stuff... It's mental.” Upper-middle class respondents were more likely to use the jargon of sustainability referencing reducing, reusing, recycling while lower-middle class respondents were more likely to talk about the idea of waste. There is evidence that everyone is concerned about the impact that their consumption has. However, the upper-middle class consumers articulate this as an abstraction, an ideal, while lower-middle class consumers articulate this in material terms of waste while also experiencing this in a practical sense. As Charles said, “it feels saner.” This is not necessarily a part of his discursive
consciousness but guides his practical consciousness; clear motivations for avoiding waste are not easily articulated, but nonetheless are an appealing aspect of shopping at thrift stores.

Discussion

This chapter aimed to make sense of the enduring differences that can emerge through a more-or-less universal practice. My analysis produced three specific findings, which coalesce into a larger finding on the nature of distinction in marginal consumption spaces. First, despite the near universality of thrift shopping, I found that there are still perceptions of whom a thrift shop is supposed to serve, and this understanding shapes how different social groups use thrift stores. Second, I looked at how specific cultural goals associated with thrifting varied based on social class: those from higher social classes used thrifting to prove authenticity through a unique aesthetic. Those from lower social classes used thrifting to meet with more commercially-available standards of style and to save money. Finally, I observed thrift store shopping being universally invoked as an expression of morality, noting that the notion of waste is central in these moral designations but that the specific moral appeals varied based on social class. From these three observations, we see how processes of maintaining distance and distinction operate in marginalized consumption arenas. I explain each of these findings below.

First, in what way are thrift stores and is thrift store shopping part of a cultural narrative of status and poverty? Despite constant gains in respectability, there are enduring associations with thrift stores as a site for lower-class people. Past research has revealed an influence of social class on how people shop at thrift stores (Ferrell 1990; James et al. 2010; Steward 2017). My research is consistent with this scholarship as I note differences in the material use of thrift shops, finding that upper-middle classes shopped less frequently at thrift stores and for less
intimate items (furnishings rather than clothes) when compared to those from lower-middle classes. Additionally, the meanings associated with thrift shopping differed by social class: lower-middle income participants’ experiences with thrift shops were tinged with associations of necessity and deprivation. Upper-middle income participants also held these traditional notions of who thrift stores are for and had to overcome these associations before entering. In Denny’s analysis, “some people need to be humble before they go in.” This suggests that thrift shopping is a distinct practice (i.e., the constellation of meanings, materials, and skills) when performed by members of different social classes.

Second, how are people’s justifications of second-hand shopping contoured by their position in society? One of the key dimensions of difference between social classes is what defines success in thrift store shopping. Upper-middle and middle-class groups seek unique pieces that show their authentic style. Success for this group would be “scoring” a unique item that someone else might comment on. For lower-middle participants a thrift store “score” would be a new item with tags still on that they buy for a fraction of the retail price. This is similar to what Steward (2017) found in her analysis of the “creativists” and the “thrift seekers” who use thrift stores for very different objectives while both groups define their mission in opposition to the other group (e.g., the creativists observe that they are different than those trying to score a good deal and the thrift seekers note they are different than those who are trying to look vintage). These classed tendencies show how different narratives of aesthetic value found in other retail and consumption avenues—namely, those specifically articulated by Holt (1998)—are reproduced in thrift stores despite their egalitarian veneer. That is, those from higher class backgrounds are more likely to seek authenticity and uniqueness, while those from lower class
backgrounds have much more referential taste prioritizing things which are “brand-new.” While most studies of class-based tastes look at avenues of consumption with some barriers to entry, this study of a seemingly egalitarian and even stigmatized market shows that distinction is a process throughout consumption practice, regardless of arena.

Finally, how is the practice of second-hand shopping valued and evaluated, and how do these judgments vary across class? This chapter comments on how class differences are reproduced not only through aesthetic distinctions, but also through moral distinctions. This chapter discussed morality in terms of orders of worth employed by participants to explain the appeal of thrift stores. Consistent with Stamer’s (2018) research with consumers from the Netherlands, those from higher social classes were more likely to articulate thrift shopping as an environmentally significant act. The environmental significance was largely tied to the aspect of waste diversion inherent in thrift shopping. The universality of concerns over waste show that social class is not displayed through whether one is concerned about waste or not, but in the articulation of those concerns. Those from higher class backgrounds were more likely to express their condemnation of waste in explicitly environmental terms, while those from lower class backgrounds were more likely to condemn waste generally as both a physical and economic problem. This study adds to Stamer’s (2018) work, and work on orders of worth more generally, by looking at actual discourse between social-class groups rather than groupings of survey responses.

More broadly, this chapter used a dual-process framework to show how the act of thrift shopping, an act that is both marginalized and uniquely accessible to a wide subsection of the population, can still serve to create and maintain previously observed categories of distinction.
As discussed above, the practice of thrift shopping varies to between members of different social classes that it comes to resemble two distinct social practices. These differences in practice are then compounded by differences in justifications to create a unique landscape for previously creating and maintaining distinction. This is a crucial insight to the study of consumption, given strong evidence of cultural omnivorousness (Peterson 2005). Among HCC consumers, cultural omnivorousness is an observed consumption trend that relies not on command of traditionally distinctive items and genres (e.g., champagne and jazz) but on the appreciation of multiple social categories (e.g., an appreciation for both jazz and hip-hop) to gain distinction. This trend toward omnivorous tastes is evidence of how cultural capital, especially in the U.S. context, is more embodied than objectified (Holt 1998; Steward 2017) and how distinction is a complex social project performed not just by command of elite markers but by ‘legitimate’ appropriations of more marginalized markers. While some argue that the trend toward cultural omnivores herald the end of stark cultural boundaries between social classes (Peterson and Simkus 1992), it is more important than ever to understand how even the same act or object of consumption can hold wildly different connotation based on social position.

This chapter has shown how legitimate command of cultural markers in a marginalized space can reproduce class-based distinction. In discussing thrift shopping as both rooted in practice and discourse this chapter uses a dual-process framework to show how the act of thrift shopping, an act that is both marginalized and uniquely accessible to a wide subsection of the population, can still serve to create and maintain previously observed categories of distinction. This chapter has also shown the role that moral justifications play in establishing class-based consumption
Limitations and Future Research

In this study, the desire to study the general population rather than devout thrift store shoppers was both a benefit and limitation. The main benefit was the opportunity to observe thrift shopping as a general phenomenon and then to comment on the ways class-based differences pervade even a ubiquitous action. A limitation, however, is that the quotes and accounts presented here are largely unspecified recollections as individuals attempted to recount their general relationship with thrift shopping in the past. No qualitative study, especially one relying on 44 interviews, can hope to speak in a generalizable sense. However, this study does not attempt to generalize to any population, but to comment on how social class is recreated in this marginalized consumption space. Additionally, the couching of this study in a larger environmental project limits the claims that can be made about the environment. Despite these limitations, this study has advanced both the studies of social practice, orders of worth, and consumption generally by discussing a marginalized consumption arena and employing a dual process model.

Future research seeking to expand on these themes should address some of the limitations in this work to better understand the cultural and moral role of consumption in thrift stores. First, future research should parse out cultural and economic capitals because these are not synonymous with social class as this paper discusses. Studies have found that consumer practices are often influenced by either economic or cultural capital in distinctive ways. Stamer (2018), for example, found that orders of worth as applied to food shopping varied with social capital independently of economic capital. It is likely that these two sources of capital will intersect (or functional more-or-less independently) in interesting ways, creating the opportunity for a more
nuanced categorization of thrift shoppers along both economic and cultural capital axes that might further elucidate the classed processes at work.

Future work applying social practice theories could benefit from ethnographic observation in addition to interview data. Halkier (2017) makes a compelling case for the benefits of ethnographic observation in applying practice theory which are by definition more difficult to describe than to observe. In the case of thrift store research, Steward’s (2017) observation of two clear patterns of behavior at thrift stores—those who painstakingly sorted through all options and those who were looked for a specific item—led to the insight of a difference between those seeking creative looks and those looking for bargains that was borne out in semi-structured interviews.

Conclusion

Using a dual-process framework, this chapter has employed practice theories to understand non-declarative cultures and repertoire theories to account for declarative cultures, as part of an attempt to investigate the systematic differences in thrift store shopping across social classes. Despite the growing popularity of thrift shopping among all social classes, there are lingering stereotypes of who a thrift shop is for. These stereotypes shape the shopping experience for those who fit this perceived target population—those with fewer economic resources—and for those who do not perceive thrift shops as intended to serve them. Through analysis of 44 semi-structured interviews, I found that the stated motivations and practices associated with thrifting varied between social classes. Those from higher social classes used thrifting to convey authenticity through a unique aesthetic, while those from lower social classes used thrifting to pursue commercially-available standards in consumer goods while saving money. Despite these
differences, thrift shopping was a morally-charged endeavor for all participants, with a specific commitment to curtailing waste.

In short, in this chapter, I show how engagement in what is ostensibly the same practice (thrifting) can reproduce differences based on social class, how similar discourses can be invoked to justify different practices, and how the same practice can be explained or justified using different discourses. The next chapter undertakes a similar intellectual project in applying a dual-process framework to the case of dumpster diving. Much like the practice of thrift shopping, the practice of dumpster diving was experienced differently depending on social position. However, unlike the case of thrift shopping, when applied to the much more radical and stigmatized act of dumpster diving, we see how actors respond to challenges that fundamentally alter their experiences of habituated culture.
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CHAPTER THREE: “AN F-YOU TO CAPITALISM”: THE (A)POLITICAL NATURE OF DUMPSTER DIVING

The system we live in generates so much waste, so much, and it's horrible for a lot of reasons. There's not a whole lot I can do about it. I can protest. I can try to petition. I can do direct action or whatever. I could do non-participation, also. But generally, there's a lot of people doing that and things are still the way they are, and it's been like that forever.

So, it sucks when you feel like you can't really do anything to change it. And I think that for me dumpster diving is this amazing thing of, ‘Well, I can't do anything about the fact that they're wasting all this food, I can take it though! I can literally stop them from wasting it because they're throwing it away and then I'm taking it.’ And then it kind of becomes this weird integrity, fun thing where you're giving them the middle finger, because you're like, ‘Yeah I hope you waste as much stuff as possible, that way I can take all of it and redistribute it to people, or just take it for myself, either way’, and that's cool.

(Anya, 24, economically-constrained houseless, trans femme)

Anya’s decry of waste, lament of the ineffectiveness of political action, and finally, passionate defense of dumpster diving sounds like something overheard at an activist support group, but Anya is not an activist. She did not start dumpster diving as a way to challenge a wasteful system, as this quote might suggest. Anya was kicked out of her house at the age of 17 when she came out as transgender. She began dumpster diving soon after she found herself houseless. 14 This chapter offers insight into the cultural mechanisms that connect the deeply personal material conditions that initially led to Anya’s dumpster diving and her systemic analysis of dumpster diving. Whereas the previous chapter revealed cultural mechanisms through which engagement in thrift shopping can reproduce boundaries between social classes, this

14 This was the term preferred over homeless by local political groups in symbolic recognition that home is more than a structure. In most cases people who do not have adequate shelter still have attachment to the place where they are living, making it their home. What they lack is the physical structure of a house, hence they are houseless. This is similar to Duneier’s (1999) use of “unhoused persons” to refer to the street vendors he studied in New York City.
chapter uses a different case of stigmatized consumption – dumpster diving – and examines a different outcome: I look at the role of dumpster diving in the development of systemic critiques of the broader system of consumption.

Before looking at the relationship between dumpster diving and critical political imaginaries, it is necessary to articulate dumpster divers’ motivations for consuming from the waste stream. The first motivation positioned dumpster diving as an individual strategy for acquiring goods. This was especially important to the 14 dumpster divers I interviewed, including Anya, who are currently houseless. When prompted to reflect on what first motivated them to dumpster dive, a majority of respondents (n=17) (not just the currently houseless dumpster divers [n=14]) first identified hunger and need. However, the second motivation followed seamlessly for almost all the dumpster divers I interviewed: dumpster diving is a way of confronting capitalism.

While often associated with poverty, foraging for usable goods that have been discarded, widely known as dumpster diving, has a more diverse range of practitioners than might initially be expected. In addition to those who are food insecure, dumpster diving is often practiced by more affluent individuals motivated by political (Barnard 2016a, 2016b; Cornelissen 2016; Nguyen, Chen and Mukherjee 2014; Pentina and Amos 2011) or environmental reasons (Cherrier 2008). However, these two trends of dumpster diving are often considered as a

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15 Based on the concept of social imaginaries as articulated by Charles Taylor (2004). Social imaginaries are the way a people make sense of their collective social life, it is the collection of norms, values, practices, etc. Political imaginaries are the collective norms, values, practices that constitute political action underscoring society as a political project defined by indeterminacy and struggles over defining legitimacy rather than simply drawing on convention (Adams, Smith, and Straume 2012).

16 14 of the dumpster divers interviewed were currently houseless, an additional 4 had experienced houselessness at some point.
dichotomy with no overlap. There are many studies of dumpster diving as a political tactic, usually focusing on “freegans,” those who are attempting to entirely boycott capitalism (see Barnard 2016a, 2016b, Pentina and Amos 2011). While rarer, there are also studies of dumpster diving as a strategy to alleviate food insecurity (c.f., Eikenberry and Smith 2005; Vinegar, Parker and McCourt 2016)—these studies note how understudied dumpster diving is relative to its prevalent use among food insecure individuals. Finally, there are still fewer studies that look at both economically-constrained and politically motivated divers simultaneously (see Carolsfeld and Erikson 2013). Within these studies of both economically-constrained or politically motivated dumpster diving there is no mention of overlap between these groups. Most studies draw stark divisions between dumpster divers who are food insecure and those who are expressly politically motivated. Analyzing these groups simultaneously allows me to investigate the malleability of worldviews in the face of interruptions to routines. This allows me to dialogue with the literature on culture and action, specifically by identifying mechanisms through which actions and beliefs co-construct lived reality.

In six months of ethnographic observation and 30 interviews with self-identified dumpster divers in Olympia, Washington I found a more nuanced hybrid model of dumpster divers than exists in the literature to date, capturing those who identify with the motivations of both need and political activism. In previous literature, a prominent explanation for why economically-constrained divers adopt political discourse is that these actors are attempting to manage the stigma associated with dumpster diving. This is doubtlessly a piece of the puzzle (for a lengthy discussion of stigma management among dumpster divers see Chapter 4). However, to dismiss the political convictions of economically-constrained dumpster divers as stigma
management is empirically inconsistent with their accounts and misses the important theoretical insight that consuming in this marginalized space can awaken latent political convictions.

A more promising explanation for the existence of two reported motivations for dumpster diving adopts a dual-process approach. Dual-process theorists argue that belief and action work iteratively to establish ways of being in the world (Evans 2008; Giddens 1984; Haidt 2001; Harvey 2010; Vaisey 2009). Often, new beliefs arise when one feels the need to improvise action in the social world. For example, when someone finds themselves houseless or hungry, dumpster diving can be a course of action that was not previously considered or even actively avoided, deemed dangerous, dirty, and improper. Upon finding that—contrary to these previous assumptions of dirt and danger—dumpsters provide reliable and quality resources, established beliefs are challenged as ill-fitting to the situation at hand. This mismatch between expectation and experience leads to a critical state and, in the case of food insecure as well as more privileged dumpster divers, can result in a radical rethinking of the merits and functioning of capitalism. Despite these similarities, the radical conclusions can manifest very differently between these two groups.

**Dumpster Diving in the Sociological Literature**

Dumpster diving, in its simplest definition, is foraging for usable goods that have been discarded by individuals, stores, and other commercial establishments. The reuse of discarded goods is seen in myriad contemporary and historical contexts. Slum dwellers in today’s Global South often employ scavenging as a means of obtaining valuable metals found in electronic waste (Medina 2007). The urban houseless recyclers earn similar livelihoods in the developed world by sorting through residential trashcans for bottles and cans to return for their deposits.
(Gowan 2010). Dumpster diving can also meet more immediate needs without reselling or recycling; dumpster diving can be an important strategy for combatting food insecurity (Eikenberry and Smith 2005; Vinegar, Parker and Mccourt 2016). This is not surprising given that we are currently caught in a global paradox of both increasing food insecurity and unprecedented food waste, including in the United States: 15 million Americans were food insecure at some time during 2017 (USDA 2019). While exact measurements are difficult to attain, scholars estimate that “as much as half of all food grown is lost or wasted before and after it reaches the consumer” (Lundqvist et al. 2008).

Many food insecure people consider dumpster diving as preferable to more traditional modes of public assistance and charity geared toward alleviating hunger (i.e., food banks, soup kitchens). These traditional resources are often limited in reach and hours (Eikenberry and Smith 2005; Vinegar et al. 2016), seen as stigmatizing (Gross and Rosenberger 2010; Sherman 2013; Vozoris and Tarasuk 2003), or problematically associated with religion (Edwards and Mercer 2007). Dumpster diving has important benefits of added agency, independence, and reliability when compared with more traditional remedies for food insecurity (Vinegar et al. 2016; see also Ch. 4 this dissertation). Eikenberry and Smith (2005) found that almost one in five food insecure people in Minneapolis used dumpster diving at some point to alleviate hunger. However, reports likely underestimate the popularity of this tactic owing to the continued stigma of dumpster diving (Corman 2011; Nguyen, Chen and Mukherjee 2014) and the difficulty of studying the houseless (Karabanow et al. 2016).

While most global and historical examples of dumpster diving are associated primarily with poverty, studies also discuss dumpster diving as part of political praxis (Corman 2011) or as
a part of a larger ideologically motivated identity (Barnard 2016 a, b). While a strategy among many anti-capitalists or anti-consumption-oriented groups including anarchists (Shantz 2005), back-to-the-land communes (Gross 2009), and environmentally oriented voluntary simplifiers (Cherrier 2009; Iyer and Muncy 2009), politically oriented dumpster diving is most often associated with the freegan movement. Freeganism is an “alternative strategy for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources (freegan.info ND).” To achieve these lofty goals, “freegans practice strategies for everyday living based on sharing resources, minimizing the detrimental impact of our consumption and reducing and recovering waste and independence from the profit-driven economy” (freegan.info ND). Dumpster diving is central to these strategies. Ideologically motivated dumpster divers tend to be “Caucasian, university students, holding an ‘alternative’ identity, and without a full-time job or children” (Vinegar, Parker and McCourt 2016; 12). This resonates with the freegans observed and interviewed by Barnard (2016a, 2016b), 20 of 22 of whom identified their class origins as solidly middle-class.

While studies of dumpster diving as a means to alleviate food insecurity tend to be descriptive, dumpster diving as political praxis has yielded theoretically-nuanced works. Barnard (2016b) discusses the contradictions inherent in dumpster diving as a tactic to reduce dependence on capitalism. Dumpster diving is not only reliant on capitalism to provide the goods that freegans use to sustain themselves, it is reliant on some of the most insidious inefficiencies of capitalism including the creation of artificial scarcity. Barnard (2016a) argues that in light of these contradictions, “dumpstered” goods function in both practical and symbolic ways. Practically, meeting needs through dumpster diving allows activists to spend more time and
energy on activism rather than working to meet these needs. Symbolically, dumpstered goods serve as totemic markers of morality, communicating distance from flawed institutions while also serving as constant reminders of the extent of the broken systems they work against. As described above, most discussions of the radical or political nature of dumpster diving are divorced from the study of dumpster diving as a subsistence tactic. However, this study found a hybrid of these two modes of dumpster diving: dumpster divers who were both food insecure and ideologically aware. This phenomenon requires a novel rethinking of how action, habit, and ideology interact.

**Dual-Process Models**

Rather than interpreting the presence of two very different motivations for dumpster diving as another case of an actor’s difficulty in articulating a consistent worldview (Swidler 1986) or as a simple justification for a stigmatized act, I draw on dual-process models to offer an alternative explanation for how actions can serve as a basis for forming and changing beliefs. I argue that the act of dumpster diving serves as a profound shock that provokes reflection and paradigmatic shifts. In six months of ethnographic observation and 30 interviews, I learned that dumpster divers were not blaming capitalism to justify their actions. Instead, the act of dumpster diving and a political awakening happened recursively. In an attempt to give equal treatment to both need and political statement as equally important motivations to dumpster dive, this study builds on recent theoretical work that disrupts conventional accounts of action as the result of beliefs. In so doing, I investigate the ways worldviews become malleable when routines are interrupted, leading to sustained changes in both action and behavior.
Sociologists interested in the role of culture in action have recently taken up the cause of dismantling the representationalist model of beliefs in favor of a more nuanced articulation of the relationship between belief and action. The representationalist model of belief starts with the premise that beliefs are explicit, conscious, and accessible representations of the world (Strand and Lizardo 2015), what Geertz (1973) calls a “model of” reality. For representationalists, actors then deliberately draw on this bank of internalized beliefs to act appropriately, operationalizing a belief into a “model for” reality (Geertz 1973). Theorists of rational action and functionalists use this model compellingly to explain a number of phenomena including how decisions are made given perfect information and how imperfect information is adopted and acted upon.

Critiques of the representationalist model draw attention to evidence that people are surprisingly bad at describing clear motivations for their actions in a way that researchers would expect to find if actions were the clear outcome of established belief. When asked to reflect on their actions, people often give contradictory explanations (Swidler 1986). This is not surprising owing to the overwhelming amount of cultural information that culturally competent actors hold (Martin 2011). Likewise, what people state to be deeply held beliefs rarely translate directly into action, a phenomenon that continues to plague practitioners and scholars of behavior change (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002; Rajecki 1982). The most damning critiques of the representationalist model argue that when taken to its natural conclusion, this model results in a “generalized action-accounting template that makes all actions seem reasonable by recasting them (post-hoc) as the deductive consequence of belief/desire complexes understood as mental representations (Strand and Lizardo 2015; 46).” In other words, the representationalist model is
unable to account for the diverse, often counterintuitive ways culturally competent actors act in the real world.

Dual-process models break with traditional models of belief and action by rejecting the unidirectional causal account present in the representationalist model. The main divergence between representationalist models and dual-process models is the contention in dual-process models that cognition comes through two interrelated forms: reflexive thought, when an actor consciously draws upon culturally available resources, and habituated thought, when an actor simply acts in accordance to what is anticipated. The second, habituated, automatic form of cognition is more commonly employed (Vaisey 2009). Reflexivity, or the slow and deliberate application of beliefs is only seen in specific contexts that can, for the most part, be considered out of the ordinary. For example, a daily commute is largely automatic: we simply take the path that we usually take, but when a road is closed or a train station under construction, we must consciously consider our options for how to get home. Rather than individuals acting consciously on their well-defined beliefs, most action is automatic and comes without any sort of deliberation—it is simply done.

Given the importance of intuitive, habitual thinking to influencing our actions, it is important to have a model of action that reflects this. This model of routinized behavior is foundational to Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and practice theory. A later articulation of habitus is especially informative in redefining belief in a non-representational way: “That presence of the past in the present which makes possible the presence in the present of the forthcoming” (Bourdieu 2000; 210). In this articulation, belief is no longer an abstract representation of reality. It is the anticipation of future events based on experiences of the past.
But events do not always unfold as they have in the past. Durable habits and ways of thinking are liable to rupture when what is anticipated does not come to pass. In these moments an actor can become reflective and gain new beliefs. These ruptures between expectation and reality allow actors to “acquire beliefs as they acquire capacities for action” (Strand and Lizardo 2015; 65). Strand and Lizardo (2015) propose four general “states of belief” based on correspondence between belief and the situation at hand. The first state is *illusio*, “the baseline (or optimal) condition in which practical beliefs self-fulfil a reality that maintains a tight correspondence (or ‘ontological complicity’) with the objective tendencies found in situations” (Strand and Lizardo 2015; 57). Illusio is the most common state, where competent actors go about their lives in a habituated manner because they are sufficiently attuned with their environment to make accurate predictions and act accordingly. The next state, *creativity*, still has a high amount of fidelity between belief and the situation at hand. In this state there has been a temporary “surprise” that necessitates at least partial reflexivity. The end of this state is to resolve the uncertainty as quickly as possible to get back to a state of illusio. The next state, *hysteresis*, is similar to creativity except that rather than a mild surprise, the state of illusio is ruptured by a “shock” that cannot be easily resolved in a way that leads back to illusio. In hysteresis there is a fundamental disconnect between the situation and previously held beliefs; this is the state of ontological indeterminacy that fosters revolution rather than reform. Finally, *radical doubt*, is the most extreme mismatch between reality and belief. In radical doubt there is no way to reconcile anticipation with the situation at hand. This state is characterized by fatalism and a sense of general anomie.
In each state of belief, a different set of options presents itself. The state of illusio carries the options already known to the actor—actions which worked in the past and, thus, actors anticipate these options will work in the future. It is in the states of creativity and hysteresis that previously unavailable options present themselves as new capacities for action, which, when realized, serve as the basis for new beliefs. The difference in these two states is the severity and content of the initial break between anticipation and reality.

*A Dual-Process Model of Dumpster Diving*

The difference between hysteresis and creativity is an important factor in differentiating dumpster divers, especially houseless dumpster divers, from more privileged groups reacting to issues of food waste, hunger, and ethical consumerism in general. When presented with disturbing facts or compelling narratives about food waste and the flaws of capitalism, more privileged groups may enter a state of creativity: a retooling of existing habits to be less wasteful. There is still a fundamental correspondence between the situation at hand and past experiences. Consumers can continue to operate in the market field more or less as they always have, specifically by categorizing the newfound act of dumpster diving as an explicitly political action akin to other forms of direct action and political consumption. In contrast, dumpster divers driven to this act through hunger—and faced with an abundance of free discarded food available in dumpsters—faced with a much more obvious mismatch between past experiences and their current situation. This state of hysteresis means that it is impossible to simply retool existing habits in the current field. Instead, the dumpster divers I interviewed questioned their role in

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17 The state of radical doubt presents limitless options all perceived as equally viable. It is this bounty of options that, ironically, creates a sense of fatalism where none of the infinite options appear to offer any advantages.
larger systems with fundamental implications for their worldviews. The act of dumpster diving itself is crucial to this paradigm shift, not merely as post-hoc justification, but as the basis for recognizing previously unavailable options in the face of uncertainty.

Understanding dumpster diving as a new capacity for action that serves as the basis for a radical paradigm shift is key to elucidating the unexpected overlap of ideology and need found in the dumpster divers of Olympia. This chapter documents how dumpster divers come to adopt new beliefs as a result of experiences that challenge established world views. This is true for all dumpster divers—both those in need and those who are more privileged. However, privilege plays a role in how this paradigm shift influences the longer term. More privileged divers are better able to reconcile the new information with previous experience and thus are more likely to return to a state of illusio. One key way to make this transition back to illusio is by categorizing the act of dumpster diving as political. Dumpster divers driven by need are less able to make this transition and, relatedly, less likely to articulate dumpster diving as a political act.

Methods

This analysis draws primarily on 30 semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified as dumpster divers. I supplement these interviews with approximately 1,000 hours of ethnographic observation centering primarily on these same participants in their social contexts. These settings include Food Not Bombs meetings, dumpster dives, and more informal settings primarily in a local progressive coffee shop. In addition to these 30 dumpster divers I also interviewed seven community members involved in local houseless politics and aid organizations who helped orient my understanding of the political space.
Field Site, Positionality, and Sample

All interviews and observation took place in Olympia, Washington. Olympia, the capitol of Washington State, is an unusually progressive place that has been instrumental in the formation of several counterculture trends including grunge and riot grrrl music.18 These progressive tendencies contoured the cultural context for dumpster diving in various ways, the most important being the lack of actual dumpster diving in Olympia due to abundant alternatives for acquiring food, including a food bank with very few restrictions for use. Olympia, was initially chosen as a field site that owing to these progressive tendencies would contrast nicely with existing studies of dumpster diving that speak primarily to the experiences of dumpster divers in large cities such as New York that are perceived as hostile to the houseless and alternative ways of living (see Barnard 2016a; Barnard 2016b and Cornelissen 2016).

I include a note on positionality as I believe my personal biography influenced how I was able to recruit and interact with participants and undoubtedly influences my conclusions and wider academic project. I am a white, cisgender woman. I undertook this project during my graduate studies when I was a student at Washington State University. I moved to Olympia for six months for this project; I am originally from Southern California. At the time of this research, I was approximately the same age as my participants (25 years-old). Before entering the field, I had never officially dumpster dived, though, having lived in college towns for many years I had furnished several apartments with cast-offs found next to dumpsters during the beginnings and

18 Riot Grrrl is a musical genre representing the fusion of punk and feminism (Haenfler 2010). While punk music challenged normative gender identities it quickly became male dominated (Lablanc 1999) leading to the pioneering efforts of female-based groups to reassert women’s presence in alternative music. Notable examples of the Riot Grrrl genre include Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney.
ends of semesters when undergraduate students are moving in and out. My clothing style in the field was generally a casual standard of plain t-shirts and jeans. Except for my shoulder length hair that oscillated at this time between bleached-blonde and lavender and a few relatively discrete tattoos, my conventional and understated self-presentation stood out when compared with my participants, who generally made bolder fashion choices revolving around torn black jeans, faded vintage cut-off Levi’s, flannel plaid’s (staple to the Pacific Northwest), leather vests and jackets, multiple piercings, and many DIY touches such as creatively altered t-shirts, a plethora of embroidered patches and even “stick-and-poke” style tattoos.

Many existing studies of dumpster diving or freegans rely on netnographic methods (Pentina and Amos 2011) or focus on well-established groups engaged in dumpster diving (Barnard 2016a, 2016b). However, Olympia does not currently have any such groups. Gaining access to this population was difficult given this lack of organization. My most important recruiting ground was through my volunteer work with Food Not Bombs. Olympia’s chapter has been continuously active since 2004. This chapter was mainly comprised of college students and had a high rate of turnover. It was not unusual to see new faces every week. Not only did this expose me to many potential participants and more extended networks, it also meant that my dedication (I volunteered dutifully every Saturday for the duration of my six-month stay) quickly

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19 My participants informed me that these weeks are often referred to as “hippy Christmas” or “dumpster Christmas” and we often bonded over the “scores” that can be found during these times.

20 Food Not Bombs (FNB) began in Cambridge, MA in 1980 as a way of protesting nuclear proliferation. They served food in a public setting to protest the money that was being spent on bombs rather than supporting the needs of people. Today FNB has chapters all over the world who both serve vegan or vegetarian meals and provide a forum to discuss multiple social issues including war, poverty, globalization, and exploitation. Most FNB chapters are associated with radical political causes (foodnotbombs.net ND).
made me a familiar face and helped to establish some trust between myself and marginalized groups such as the houseless that we primarily served.

From this foundation and my own personal network of contacts at the local liberal arts college, I worked to stay visible in the community. My main strategy was to spend most of my downtime at a local progressive coffeeshop that, owing to a generous refill policy and liberal attitude, functioned as a de facto houseless day shelter and was very popular among dumpster divers. Some potential participants were understandably skeptical of my intentions, many people, after completing interviews, said that they were initially hesitant that I would “blow up the best spots” by advertising them to other dumpster divers or that I would inform management. I made it a point to adopt this language and to make extra assurances that this was not my intention. Eventually, I had interviewed enough divers from diverse networks that someone a participant trusted could almost always vouch for me. However, I would not have been able to convince my initial participants without first proving myself trustworthy by participating in Food Not Bombs.

I introduced myself as either a graduate student writing a dissertation or a researcher studying dumpster diving. While I made sure to appear knowledgeable about dumpster diving, I never tried to pass myself as an expert and always presented myself as someone who was eager to learn, talk, and accompany people as they dove. There were obvious differences between myself and those I was studying, however; many of my most important insights came from my participants going out of their way to explain themselves to me, a perceived outsider.

Participants self-selected in or out of the study: many people that admitted they had dumpster dived before declined to participate because they did not think they had anything to add to my study or because they did not consider themselves to be avid enough divers. Usually
these contacts were important in introducing me to those they considered to be more “serious” dumpster divers.

Recruitment yielded 30 interviews with self-identified dumpster divers. The mean age was 26. Nearly half of my sample (43.3%) identified as gender queer or transgender, 23.3% identified as cis-women, and 33.3% as cis-men. Fourteen of the 30 participants were currently houseless and an additional four participants had experienced houselessness at some point. About half, 46%, were currently employed. Most divers I interviewed had completed some college or had completed a college degree (see Table 3.1 for full details). All but two participants identified as white; the remaining two participants (Stephanie and Thunder) reported mixed racial backgrounds (full details in Appendix C.)

Table 3.1 Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>Economically Constrained</th>
<th>Situational Diver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total in Category</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age (years)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>14 (46.6%)</td>
<td>11 (64.7%)</td>
<td>3 (23.07%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>14 (46.6%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>8 (61.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Queer/Trans</td>
<td>13 (43.3%)</td>
<td>13 (76.47%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>10 (33.3%)</td>
<td>1 (5.88%)</td>
<td>9 (71.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
<td>3 (17.64%)</td>
<td>4 (28.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than H.S.</td>
<td>4 (13.3%)</td>
<td>4 (23.53%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

21 Income varied wildly from a reported $5-$10/day to a $47,000/year salary. Any attempts to compile income into a summary form would be misleading. Full details on self-reported income, occupations, and survival strategies for each participant can be found in Appendix C.
Following the general motivations of economic constraints and political critique as two primary drivers of dumpster divers, I labelled my participants as “economically-constrained” and “situational”. In my sample, there were 16 dumpster divers who were motivated by serious financial need. Of these divers, 13 were genderqueer, ten were currently houseless, and an additional four had experienced houselessness at some point. This group includes runaways, people kicked out of their parents’ houses before the age of 18, people who aged out of foster care, people raised in extreme poverty, and recovering and active drug addicts.

The 14 situational dumpster divers began dumpster diving either in college or when they were young and around other people who dumpster dove. Several talked about the role that alternative music genres like “crust punk” and “zines” such as The Freegan Manifesto (allegedly authored by the former drummer of the popular punk band Against Me!) played in their initial decision to dumpster dive. Three of the situational dumpster divers are currently houseless, all three are cis-gender. Three are current college students. In applying the label of situational, I do not mean to suggest that dumpster diving is not an important part of these divers’ identities nor

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22 It was difficult to distinguish between these three homeless situational divers and those from the economically-constrained category before having several conversations and a formal interview with demographic questions. That is because these divers are often in financial need, however, these divers have a better safety net to fall back on. All three of these divers come from more securely middle-class backgrounds than those in the serious need category. While on any given day their financial situations are likely identical, this group could access funds if they needed. Essentially, these divers are choosing to live in non-traditional ways.
that it will not have a lasting impression. For example, Jake began dumpster diving when he was in college, but even after getting his master’s degree in education and working fulltime as a high school teacher he has continued to dumpster dive. Today he dives as he saves money to buy land to convert to a homestead.

**Interviews**

I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with people who identified as dumpster divers. Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours, on average interviews were about an hour. The topics of the interview guide ranged from motivations to dumpster dive, the practical requirements of dumpster diving (i.e., how do you find a good dumpster?), stigma associated with dumpster diving (i.e., do you tell people you dumpster dive?), and specifically probed about political and environmental implications. I asked participants if they considered dumpster diving to be political. In many ways this analysis was inspired by the tension raised in answering this question. Interviews concluded with a series of demographic questions verbally posed to the participants and a final open-ended opportunity for participants to voice additional thoughts not specifically touched upon (see Appendix D for full interview guide.)

**Ethnography**

More than 1,000 hours of ethnographic observation supplement the interviews conducted for this study. Ethnography serves as an important source of triangulation by allowing me to view actions in situ rather than simply relying on the conscious reasonings given by participants as they actively reflect in an interview. Ethnography is more faithful to the theoretical approach of dual-process as it avoids conflating reported actions and beliefs with habituated actions and beliefs, what Jerolmack and Khan (2014) dub the attitudinal fallacy.
The participant observation here draws on Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method. The extended case method situates an ethnographic project as the product of ongoing dialogues between the researcher and researched (Burawoy 1998). The researcher places herself purposefully in the study not as an outside observer but as a participant in dialogue with the participants under observation. The researcher tests theoretical assumptions with key informants in the field to ensure an accurate and adequate understanding of processes and meanings.

Analysis

Analysis began in the field with the use of field jottings and memos. I would take down first impressions and general notes documenting all interactions with dumpster divers and those in their social milieu as soon as possible. As soon as possible after these encounters I used these jottings, which served as reminders of my observations in the field and developed comprehensive field notes. My observations and connections with theory present in these jottings were in many ways the first analysis of the data. I began both transcription and more formal analysis as I completed interviews while still in the field. This is preferable to waiting until the end of data collection as it allowed me to reflect on unexpected themes and then probe for further information in future interviews. I assembled transcriptions of interviews and field notes from ethnography into NVivo qualitative data management software. Within the NVivo file, I began thematically coding information. Weiss (1994) describes coding as linking what a respondent says to categories and concepts that might appear in the report; it is a process of asking oneself “what is this an instance of?” (Rubin and Rubin 2012). In many ways this chapter came out of an unanticipated amount of hesitancy and skepticism on the part of participants when it came to answer the interview question, “do you consider dumpster diving to be political?” This hesitancy
was especially surprising given the evidence of political awareness and frustration expressed elsewhere in the interviews.

The analysis that follows focuses on how the act of dumpster diving is the driving force behind the inception of new beliefs and how this revelatory act differs between situational dumpster divers and economically-constrained divers. First, I present the complementary motivations of need and ideology in the dumpster divers’ own words. Here, I highlight the instinctual sociological imaginations (Mills 1959) of my participants as they locate their actions in terms of structural conditions, namely the coercive forces of capitalism. I next discuss how reframing dumpster diving as a political tactic is a strategy used by situational divers to return to a state of illusio. Finally, I discuss how economically-constrained divers experience the rupture between expectation and the situation at hand as a more enduring shock that defies easy reframing and return to illusio.

**Findings: Capitalism: Hungry, Broke? No Problem!**

There was a widespread convention amongst the dumpster divers I interviewed to implicate larger structural and political forces, primarily capitalism, as culpable in creating both hunger and waste. When asked about their initial motivations for dumpster diving, all 16 economically-constrained divers, and six of the situational divers, pointed to economic motivations. However, participants quickly buttressed recognition of individual need by a statement about the relationship between capitalism and dumpster diving as a means to an end. Twenty-six interview participants explicitly used the concept of capitalism at some point in the interview to ground their understanding of dumpster diving. For instance, a common narrative was how the act of dumpster diving led to a realization of the flaws inherent in capitalism. This
was the case with Jordan (29, economically-constrained, housed, genderqueer) who started dumpster diving when they were eleven. They describe a progression from viewing the dumpster as “a sweet resource” to embodying a larger social problem.

For me it was like this sweet resource that would help me for survival, right? But I think as I got older and more involved with like sharing the food with more people and making like kind of a culture around it with the people in my life, I got to see like the many layers of it and the complexity of like trash and like resources and all that.

For Jordan, what began as a survival strategy motivated by dire financial need, became a key reference point in their life for understanding wider principles about capitalism, equality, and community.

When asked to expand upon the complexities of trash and resources Jordan launched into an analysis with Marxist undertones to discuss the fetishization of commodities, the socially constructed nature of worth and value, and ultimately the “larger problem of like capitalism and resources and scarcity.” Nathan (25, economically-constrained, housed, cis-man) tells a similar story of dumpster diving early in life out of need. He began dumpster diving at age 17 following his parents’ divorce that stretched resources tight and made food unavailable at home. From there, he explained:

You start thinking about capitalism, and the idea of, I think, it's the thing in our society where there's an idea of scarcity in our culture that says that there's just not enough things, you need to compete. But really, there's so much stuff, there's so much being thrown away, that could go to people who can't afford it.

23 All names are pseudonyms.
For Nathan, capitalism tells a story about scarcity that he found to be empirically untrue. The abundance he found readily available in the dumpster contradicted the premises of scarcity and competition central to market capitalism.

When asked about their motivation to dumpster dive, Thunder (20, economically-constrained, houseless, non-binary) responded “simply put, I was hungry. I was living on the streets and the folks that I was hanging out with did that as a regular thing to keep themselves fed.” However, when asked if they considered dumpster diving to be political they explained a tension:

To me it's a means of sustenance, but it's also just, it's in today's world people are punished for trying to sustain themselves outside of capitalism. You see it everywhere. You see houseless folks getting arrested for trespassing and camping illegally or whatever. You see folks on the corner selling fruits and vegetables without a license getting their stuff seized and tickets and what not. So, digging through a dumpster is acquiring resources without capitalism and that's like shit you can't even go hunting without paying them 100 dollars for a goddam hunting license. You can't go out and acquire food without paying for it. You can't farm without owning property. So, you know, dumpster diving you're feeding yourself outside of capitalism.

Dumpster diving is simultaneously a means of sustenance and a means of temporarily avoiding capitalism, a system that, far from being a normal or desirable social ordering, Thunder has come to understand as oppressive and limiting.

These former cases involve a process of revelation. After consistently relying on dumpster diving as a form of sustenance, a new worldview based on the empirical reality of hunger and abundant waste emerged; in other words, a durable habit led to belief. Toby (27, situational, houseless, cis-man) describes a more immediate shock that reoriented his thinking about the economic system. Toby was raised in what he describes as a lower-middle class
household and did not experience food insecurity early in life. He credits “crust punk” music and reading about train hopping with inspiring him to see if he really could live life in a different way. He recounted a supermarket dumpster he had come across in his travels that was full of fried chicken, he described it as one of the “grossest things” he had ever seen and went on to explain how this was a crystalizing moment for him:

I remember just thinking about all the energy that went into raising those chickens, and killing those chickens, and shipping those chickens, and cooking those chickens. And then they're all just in a dumpster. It's like totally pathological. It's like a whole global system of putting chickens in dumpsters. It's crazy.

This is a clear moment when any former sense of illusion, where expectations align with reality, was completely shattered and became what Toby calls “pathological.”

Like Toby, Hyacinth (19, economically-constrained, houseless, genderqueer) and Rain (19, economically-constrained, houseless, transwoman) also used a systemic lens to help explain formerly unfathomable conditions while dumpster diving. When asked if there was any danger involved in dumpster diving, Hyacinth said that occasionally you will find a dumpster that business owners or employees have purposefully compromised. In this case they reflected on finding bleach poured in a dumpster to render discarded food inedible, Hyacinth and Rain bantered:

Hyacinth: It makes me mad that people would throw food away and be so bothered by people trying to eat that food that they would destroy it and try to poison you.

Rain (rolling her eyes): Capitalism can't work without artificial scarcity.

Hyacinth: Right! It's like why do you care? We're just feeding ourselves.

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24 Almost all the dumpster divers I talked to were aware of similar stories, however, only about one-third said that they personally found a bleached dumpster. Locking the dumpster or having an employee patrol the dumpster were much more common tactics for discouraging dumpster diving.
Rain’s ascription of motive to the functioning of capitalism somewhat diffused the idea that someone would intentionally try to “poison you.” In the moment, the act of dumpster diving is an act of survival, but ultimately dumpster diving cannot be understood without recontextualizing the status quo. The act of dumpster diving often acts as a profound shock triggering a state of either creativity or hysteresis interpreted by participants as “waking up” to the realities of capitalism.

Anya (24, economically-constrained houseless, trans femme), quoted at the outset of the chapter, argues that this realization is endemic to dumpster diving regardless of pre-existing ideological affiliations or class standing:

I don't think there's that many people who don't see it through a political lens at this point in time. I think that even people that do it out of necessity, have to know that there's something messed up about how much stuff is being thrown away and they have to view it still under that.

Even if they're just doing it out of necessity, I feel like they still at least can understand the fact that, when someone's yelling at them, it's like, ‘Why do you care if I'm taking this?’ And then that's reflective of the system we live in, and the fact that everyone hates poor people, everyone hates houseless people, everyone hates people who try to make something for themselves that doesn't comply with or fit into supporting capitalism basically.

In a sense, Anya is arguing that everyone who dumpster dives is faced with blatant evidence about the shortcomings of capitalism. Even those dumpster divers who were previously unmotivated by the political context necessarily come to understand their plight in larger terms.

Using a dual-process informed model exposes how the act of dumpster diving is a precondition for the creation of new beliefs regarding the fundamental flaws of the existing economic structure. In this case the conditions that led to dumpster diving and the material
abundance found in dumpsters are fundamentally incongruent with previous worldviews. Strand and Lizardo (2015) might explain this in terms of a change in states of belief. The default state of belief, illusio, when expectations match with the situation at hand, is ruptured by the mismatch between expectation and experience. This incongruence puts the actor in a critically-reflexive state and necessitates a reexamination of previously held beliefs. In this case, reexamination leads both economically-constrained divers and more privileged divers to similar conclusions about the inefficiencies of capitalism.

“It’s definitely political:” Situational Divers Return to Illusio

While the conclusions about the inefficiencies of capitalism are nearly identical between the economically-constrained and situational divers, there were still notable differences in how these two groups understood the act of dumpster diving given this realization. I argue that these differences reflect a fundamental difference in the state of belief that followed the challenges to illusio. Situational divers were more likely to experience the mismatch between original belief and the troubling reality of dumpsters as a momentary surprise over which they have considerable agency, suggesting that they had entered a state of creativity. To return to a state of illusio, situational divers tended to classify dumpster diving as an individual political act; in keeping with how they would respond to myriad social problems, this reconciles an unsettling reality with an otherwise unproblematic worldview.

This return to illusio and redefinition of dumpster diving as political is first evidenced by the tendency of situational divers to relate the act of dumpster diving to other forms of political consumption. Both Phoenix (35, situational, housed, cis-man) and Meadow (18, situational,
housed, cis-woman) made this connection between political consumption and dumpster diving when asked if they considered dumpster diving to be political:

Yes, it is definitely a political act. I think consumption is always political. We vote with our dollars every day, like it or not. Dumpster diving might be more like abstaining or something, but, yeah, it is still definitely political. (Phoenix; 35, situational, housed, cis-man)

It’s definitely political because you're saying, ‘Screw you. I'll just take your garbage that you don't give a shit about, and I'm gonna use it.’ But then people could say, ‘Then aren't you saying that they make good products?’ You can't deny that some of these products are useful. But putting your money into it is a real statement. What you put your money in is a vote on what you think is okay. So, I don't think using their waste at all is saying, ‘I support this company.’ I think it's saying, ‘I don't support this company normally, but I'll take their free stuff.’  (Meadow; 18, situational, housed, cis-woman)

In addition to this connection with political consumption, situational divers also accepted dumpster diving as a political action by equating it to civil disobedience:

There’re more laws with dumpster diving more than ever and using the trash compactors and more security to keep people from doing it, specifically because it's a political act, and it is a threat. They see, because if they didn't think it was threatening to them, they wouldn't do that. The reason it's threatening to them is because it is political, and it is against capitalism. (Mariah; situational, 21, housed, cis-woman)

It politicizes you because you realize that the police are against the way that you're making your living. You’re kind of like setting yourself structurally against the economic system and against the political system seeing that they're not comfortable with the way that you’re living. (Austin; situational, 21, houseless, cis-man)

Well, I mean it's like illegal and I think when you dumpster dive, when you decide that's the thing that you want to do and that there is nothing wrong with that, I think in a way you're like making a statement that like the laws that we make surrounding that and maybe just in general aren't just or fair or make sense. So, I think in that way it is kind of political like you know to say that the law isn't really right here. And then of course you're giving like an F-you to capitalism, you know. (Stephanie; situational, 25, housed, cis-woman)
“Making a statement” and “setting yourself against the economic system” actively evoke the sense of choice and agency in the face of an identified social problem. This shows that the messy reality of food waste and the flaws of capitalism triggered a state of creativity that they could easily reconcile using frames that exist within the state of illusio.

Barnard (2016a;1033) also observed the ease with which freegans move through the social world: “within their daily lives, both within and outside of freegan.info, freegans showed few signs of a Bourdieusian ‘hysteresis,’ suggesting that their habitus and environment were, in a sense, aligned.” For these freegan activists, as well as the situational divers in this study, the practice of dumpster diving allowed individuals to remake a troubling reality into an environment better suited to their needs and convictions. They were able to re-appropriate and reconfigure their material world within the existing status quo and return to a state of illusio, likely adopting what Cherrier (2009; 2) described as a hero identity: one “who elects whether or not they want to be part of the system.”

“Just Surviving”: Hysteresis and Economically-constrained Divers

More economically-constrained dumpster divers experience the mismatch between original belief and the troubling reality of dumpsters as a more durable and significant rupture. When combined with the context of hunger and need, the rift between previous worldviews and the situation at hand is simply too great. This prevents a straightforward return to illusio. Rather than simply being confronted with the inefficiencies of capitalism like the situational divers, economically-constrained divers embody these inefficiencies. Economically-constrained divers embody the depth of the incongruency between reality and expectation and as a result, dumpster diving, a temporary solution to the problem of hunger, is too small an act to resolve the massive
structural change they see as necessary. As a result, despite strong convictions about the shortcomings of capitalism and the resultant social problems, when asked if they considered dumpster diving to be political, participants who fell into the economically-constrained category were often hostile, hesitant, or skeptical.

When asked if they considered dumpster diving to be political, Hannah and Dawn drew on their personal experience with dumpster diving as survival, to register the inadequacy of a system that would politicize food and hunger:

Well, it isn't for me because I don't think people eating should be political. I feel like everybody should have access to food and nobody should starve. There are ways that we need to change the structure of how the government works … That, to me, is where it gets political. (Hannah; 29, economically-constrained, housed, genderfluid)

Would you consider survival to be political? Because it seems like a lot of people fucking do. I don't consider survival to be political, I consider it to be basic and human…Those kinds of things cannot be politicized, per se, things that come down to your survival. Things that are human necessities: food, a safe place to stay, clothing, love shouldn't be political, I don't think. (Dawn; 22, economically-constrained, houseless, cis-woman)

Hannah and Dawn, both in a state of hysteresis spurred by their personal experiences of a system that does not work as intended, came to view the issue of hunger normatively. While they understand these issues as politicized, this is an inadequate framework as it re-establishes what they see as a “human necessity” as controversial or open to political debate.

Jordan (29, economically-constrained, housed, genderqueer) more than anyone attempts to reconcile his embodiment of the social problem at hand and political action and in so doing, he shows that it is a fine line to walk:

I guess I would argue that my survival is political. I think I would argue that because I think every day that people who are struggling to survive, survive, I think that's a win. And I think that's a small fight against a larger system that is kind of built to kill and
incarcerate those people or let them die. So, there's something radical about that. I don't want to sound pompous though and say that just because I woke up today I'm a revolutionary.

Jordan’s quote shows the difficulty in adapting notions of what is and is not considered political in the state of illusio with the state of hysteresis.

Rather than suggesting that economically-constrained divers are less political than situational divers, this tendency to refrain from adopting a political self-identity shows the extent to which economically-constrained divers occupy a state of hysteresis that demands revolution rather than reform. This is evidence of the true spirit of hysteresis where the situation at hand cannot be reconciled with a previous worldview. Hysteresis is the state of belief most often associated with times of revolution, while creativity is tied to more incremental reform.

Economically-constrained dumpster divers viewed capitalism as a fundamentally corrupt system; as such, any act within this system is politically impotent. This is clear in quotes by Elise and Stella:

But just dumpster diving serves no purpose other than, like surviving; it's not creating any sort of mass structural change. Like the fact that you eat out of the dumpster when 90% of other people are still … [not eating out of the dumpster]. (Elise 20, economically-constrained, housed, transwoman)

I think it exists within a political context, but it's more of an individual action. It's not in and of itself politicized. It is the reasons for which you do it and what you do with the product of it, because I think political implies some sort of definite material or system being changed. And when you're just dumpstering for yourself that's just survival. (Stella 19, economically-constrained, housed, transwoman)

However, even when viewed as inadequate as a political act, dumpster diving can serve as an important form of resistance when used in a communal sense. When asked if they considered dumpster diving to be political, Hyacinth (19, economically-constrained, houseless, genderqueer)
responds with some hesitation and an important distinction between what is individual and what is political:

Yeah, I think it depends more on what you do with the food because, I don't know it's just like, I don't think that just surviving is a political act in like any sense. Just using that for survival, no. But being able to dumpster a bunch of food and be able to share it with people and like feed people in a way that like that's not how the government and like capitalism and all of those structures want me to be surviving so that's more of a political act, I think, if it's like shared and stuff.

For economically-constrained dumpster divers, individual actions do not add up, but helping others to survive outside of capitalism might just be a political action. This is different than the scale effect referenced in studies of political consumption that might resonate with situational dumpster divers; for political consumers, individual actions can add up to larger changes, however, for economically-constrained divers individual actions do not scale to larger changes, but might have the effect of immediate changes in the lives of their community.

Economically-constrained dumpster divers also made a connection between dumpster diving and other forms of political consumption; however, this connection was often the basis for dismissing the idea that dumpster diving is political. When asked if she considered dumpster diving political, Elise responded: “Not really. Like, it's just like, well. I don't consider lifestyle stuff to be political.” Malady went further, connecting the shop local movement with oppressive forces of gentrification:

Just like a lot of the shit that's happened to me specifically, like as a poor person, like the way I got pushed out of Oakland and how violent that was. It was directly resulting from these cutesy fucking co-opie businesses that are usually where I steal from. I fucking shoplift local as hell. I shoplift hella local.
Both the hysteretic shock that Malady experienced when she was violently pushed out of Oakland and the association of political consumption with elite gentrifiers means that any consumption under capitalism cannot be considered moral or political. Rather than a solution or mitigation of capitalism, Malady sees political consumption as problematic as any other form of consumption.

Economically-constrained dumpster divers are less likely to define their actions as political, owing largely to their perception that the act of dumpster diving is too insignificant to breach the chasm between old worldview and reality. Dumpster divers do not believe this will change the system, and this is evidence of an extreme lack of trust in the system that comes from hysteresis rather than creativity. Strand and Lizardo (2017) argue that when one is in a state of either creativity or hysteresis, the impulse is to return to a state of illusio as quickly and unproblematically as possible. In this case, for both economically-constrained and situational divers, new habits of eating out of a dumpster challenged durable beliefs about what is proper, sanitary, valuable, and the means to achieve subsistence. These new habits help to foster and enforce new ideological propositions. Foremost, the act of dumpster diving recasts individual plight in terms of structural forces. However, the return to illusio is much more problematic for economically-constrained dumpster divers than for situational dumpster divers.

Discussion

This chapter has attempted to reconcile what seemed like two mutually exclusive motivations for dumpster diving: a survival strategy and a political act. While the literature often separates divers along this line, by using a dual-process model of action this chapter finds a more complicated connection between action and belief. Exposure to dumpster diving creates a new
reality that must somehow be understood in reference to existing worldviews. For both economically-constrained and situational divers, this includes adopting a new critical understanding of the inefficiencies of capitalism. Given this empirical observation, this discussion first summarizes the theoretical arguments made in this paper. Next, I discuss the implications of the findings presented here for our wider understanding of the political imaginaries of disadvantaged groups and for understanding behavior change more generally.

While both the economically-constrained dumpster divers and situational divers described moments of realization regarding the failings of capitalism that would serve to crystalize new durable beliefs, this experience ultimately differed substantially based on social position. I argue the first difference was in the state of belief that this new reality triggered: Situational dumpster divers entered into a state of creativity, while economically-constrained dumpster divers entered a state of hysteresis (Strand and Lizardo 2015). For economically-constrained dumpster divers, this new reality was not just an inconvenient truth about food waste but a deeply embodied new understanding about their own perceived worth within capitalism.

Because the situational dumpster divers were in a state of creativity (Strand and Lizardo 2015), they were ultimately better able to return to a state of illusio by placing their new actions and beliefs into the familiar category of political action and protest that fits non-problematically with pre-existing beliefs. The economically-constrained dumpster divers, in a state of hysteresis, could not easily recategorize their actions as political and return to a state of illusio. I suggest this is because viewing their own actions as political had much more significant implications for these divers; viewing their survival as political would mean that they would have to accept that their very existence is controversial. Ultimately, no means of consumption within capitalism
could be legitimately viewed as political by the economically-constrained dumpster divers because it would all facilitate their further marginalization. It bears investigating how the state of illusio functions as a hegemonic order, privileging the accounts and lived experiences of the dominant group; illusio represents the world for which one is predisposed, a social environment that looks and feels how one would expect. It follows that this is a state more tenuous for marginalized groups who are not usually considered the ‘norm’ in any social environment. It also follows that conventional political imaginaries, those rooted in the status quo, are less appealing to marginalized groups who might have alternate ways of conceptualizing what should be legitimately viewed as political.

This chapter makes an implicit call for more research into the political imaginaries of marginalized groups. In this case we saw economically-constrained dumpster divers as less likely to categorize their actions as political. While there are many explanations for this, including the lack of perceived agency and efficacy available to this group (i.e., my actions cannot change things, therefore are not political) this tendency to not categorize their actions as political likely results from the depth of the rupture between what is expected and the reality these divers faced. Economically-constrained divers entered a state of hysteresis upon recognizing their own precarious survival as mirroring the structural flaws of capitalism. This realization fosters an extreme lack of trust and the recognition that the system as previously experienced cannot be reformed. In this sense the hesitancy to define their actions as political is less about their perceived agency or efficacy but the embodiment of Audre Lorde’s (1983; 94) thesis that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Standards of what groups consider to be political are created and sustained in the state of illusio, ill-adapted to the
needs or understandings of those in a state of hysteresis. To dismiss the actions of economically-constrained dumpster divers as apolitical, as is common in existing literature on dumpster diving, is to apply a hegemonic understanding of what is political. Future research not only on dumpster divers, but on any marginalized group should understand political imaginaries in these terms.

Rethinking how critical political imaginaries can be fostered is not just the work of scholars interested in marginalized resistance but has implications for scholars of behavior change more generally. This chapter has shown how a state of hysteresis rather than creativity or illusio best sustains critical worldviews; in this case hysteresis came from sustained and embodied exposure to the dysfunction of capitalism. The lack of such political and social revolutions as those confessed by the economically-constrained divers continues to beguile scholars and activists of ethical and political consumption. The economically-constrained divers seen in this article developed a critical consciousness reminiscent of C.W. Mills’ (1959) sociological imagination through their direct experience. The promised political imaginaries scholars have been seeking amongst green, sustainable and ethical consumers is present in economically-constrained divers, suggesting that the incrementalist logic of ethical consumption is insufficient to realize the lofty goals of sustained social change (for existing critiques of the incremental tendencies of ethical consumption see Szasz [2007] and Johnston [2008]) and the true dysfunctions of capitalism need to be felt before they can be challenged.

Future research could contextualize the current study given several limitations. First, the sample size of 30 dumpster divers is already a limited sample; however, I further divide the sample between economically-constrained and situational divers. The comparison of such small groups is necessarily limited. Second, the role that the field site of Olympia played is possibly
large and confounding. Olympia is an exceptionally progressive and politicized backdrop for this study and the effects of this context are unknown; however, one meaningful outcome is that dumpster diving is relatively rare in Olympia owing to the bountiful alternatives woven into its civic life including a food bank with a low barrier to entry and several houseless outreach programs to redistribute food that would otherwise end up in the trash. Future research should investigate these general principles of the hysteretical reactions of marginalized groups in other contexts to test the applicability and scope of the phenomenon documented here.

Conclusion

Those living in or visiting New York City can directly experience the political insights that come from witnessing our prodigious disposal of useable goods. The organization, Freegan.info, offers “trash tours” led by dedicated freegan activists who take members of the public, and often the media, dumpster diving. These activists use the staggering amounts of useful or edible trash to make a larger point about the wastefulness of capitalism. In this case, they build on existing political inclinations in their audience—who likely did not simply happen upon this expressly political group—to present compelling evidence and a viable course of action: you can avoid corrupt involvement in capitalism by dumpster diving. Dumpster diving presents a new reality for all who find themselves in the alleyways on the prowl for useful goods. The reality presented by dumpster diving problematizes assumptions about the very nature of capitalism.

A similar process happens when the houseless and hungry open dumpster lids to a reminder of the prodigious waste and excess of our society. This chapter has drawn on dual-process models to offer an alternate explanation for how actions can serve as a basis for belief.
Dumpster diving acts as a profound shock—inducing a state of either creativity or hysteresis—that provokes reflection and paradigmatic shifts. For those facing genuine material need, this produces a unique interpretation of the political nature of dumpster diving. The revelation that capitalism is fundamentally flawed serves as an important source of esteem and stigma mitigation for the houseless in my study. The ability to apply a sociological imagination and understand the personal troubles of the individual in systematic terms is crucial for retaining a sense of dignity and purpose. This process is enabled by the realities of dumpster diving.

However, the extent that dumpster diving is interpreted as political itself, rather than just existing in a politicized context, is contingent on one’s social position. Those with more access to resources (e.g., the situational divers or even the public on a trash tour) more readily define their dumpster diving as a meaningful form of political action. Economically-constrained dumpster divers, who are more directly impacted by the issues of hunger and want, tend to resist categorizing their actions in this way, not because they are less political, but because existing political frames are less likely to resonate given their state of hysteresis. In redefining their actions as political, situational divers reaffirm the assumptions and standards of mainstream society. These are standards and assumptions that economically-constrained divers cannot or will not accept.

The next chapter continues with the case of dumpster divers. It looks specifically at the tools of stigma management and avenues of boundary work available to dumpster divers as they respond to the judgement they face on a daily basis. In this chapter we have seen how dumpster divers use their critical state to employ a sociological imagination to understand their own actions in terms of global capitalism. Not only does this revelation foster a critical worldview, it
also helps dumpster divers to mitigate the shame usually associated with their marginalized social positions. The next chapter digs deeper into this theme and the complementary processes of dignity maintenance used by dumpster divers. It will be helpful to remember from this chapter both the extent of the marginalization felt by economically-constrained dumpster divers expressed here and how these divers are necessarily in a critical state of belief and likely to respond to social challenges in unique ways.
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CHAPTER FOUR: “IT’S A REBELLION OF DIRTINESS:” EXAMINING DIGNITY AMONG THE MARGINALIZED

I kind of identify with trash a bit. I don't feel like a—not that there are normal people—but I don't feel normal. A lot of my experiences being transgender and queer and anti-capitalist. I felt many times cast aside by society like a piece of trash but I also, I love the backstreets, I love ditches, alleyways, graffiti. I’m kind of a trashy person. (Monica, 25, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, transwoman)

In this quote by Monica, we get a taste of the complicated relationship between her stigmatized identities as transgender, queer, anti-capitalist and as a formerly houseless dumpster diver. While Monica reports feeling “cast aside by society like a piece of trash,” her relationship with trash vis-à-vis dumpster diving as both a valuable source of resources and a source of entertainment, even a hobby, is an important part of her identity. Her ability to rewrite this narrative and actively identify herself with trash, and with other dumpster divers, is the primary way that Monica mitigates the stigma associated with her master statuses as a formerly-houseless, transgender dumpster diver.

To possess a stigmatized identity is to be at odds with what Goffman (1963) called normal people. This is an experience that Monica relates to and negotiates every day. However, stigma management strategies, generally the “ways in which stigmatized individuals protect their sense of self and attempt to gain social acceptance” (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004; 26) are not well suited to understanding how Monica and other dumpster divers responded to their stigmatized position. Most stigma management strategies are self-directed (Goffman 1963) (e.g., hiding one’s stigmatized identity or working especially hard to overcome associations with a group wider society perceives as lazy) and work to minimize the distance between the stigmatized person and larger society by drawing on available cultural repertoires (Lamont 2000;
Lamont et al. 2016; Kusenbach 2009). For example, inner city fast-food workers earning minimum wage minimized their stigma by emphasizing that they were hard workers (Newman 2009), who worked for what they earned. This framing serves as a contrast to those who accept public assistance and resonates in the United States context, given a social value for hard work, perseverance, and personal responsibility (Lamont 2000). This hard-work framing was an available cultural repertoire that fast-food workers could capitalize on to minimize the stigma of working for minimum wage in an undervalued sphere.

Rather than capitalize on available cultural repertoires to minimize their distance from wider society, essentially establishing their own decency in the larger moral order, the 30 dumpster divers interviewed for this research often emphasized their difference, even actively subverting and rejecting available cultural repertoires. Rather than framing their dumpster diving as a form of hard work and labor—a strategy used by urban houseless recyclers observed by Gowan (2010)—the dumpster divers in this study, both houseless and more privileged, tended to frame dumpster diving as an alternative to work that rejects participation in capitalism and sees dumpster diving as outsmarting the system. The dumpster divers I interviewed employed boundary work, including the specific stigma management strategies of reverse stigma and active defiance, to maintain and even expand the social distance between themselves and those considered “normal.” This framing is fundamentally at odds with wider society and, while the hard-work framing used by fast food workers and urban recyclers helps to alleviate distance and ultimately facilitate destigmatization (Clair, Daniel, and Lamont 2016; Lamont 2018), the cultural subversion employed by dumpster divers actively works against social acceptance on a wide scale and risks exacerbating stigmatization.
While a risky strategy, maximizing distance helps dumpster divers create for themselves a distinct cultural identity to draw on in the face of outside challenges to their worth. In many ways this mimics the work done by subcultures to present an alternative identity at odds with larger society (Haenfler 2010). This sense of group belonging is crucial to maintaining dignity, and thus fulfills the main goal of stigma management, even if this does not ultimately end in further social acceptance either of the individual divers or dumpster divers as a group. Like Monica, for most dumpster divers the act of dumpster diving became more than a survival strategy or political tactic, it grew, as it did for Monica, into a love of the backstreets and a source of identity. This chapter looks at the distinct ways in which dumpster divers mitigated the stigma of dumpster diving—a stigma that was often compounded by other deeply discredited identities—by maximizing distance between themselves and those who Monica calls normal. In this way, I contribute to the literatures on boundary work, stigma management, and marginalized resistance. More specifically, by exploring how an extremely marginalized group can challenge and even reject norms of decency rather than simply negotiate such norms, I show a viable challenge to moral hegemony with implications for theorizing agency and cultural creativity among marginalized groups.

I begin with a brief discussion of symbolic boundaries and the daily boundary work undertaken by social actors to maintain these boundaries. I then discuss stigma as a type of enduring symbolic boundary and stigma management as a form of boundary work. I review the relevant literature on how groups typically mitigate stigma by minimizing distance between themselves and more socially acceptable groups and behaviors. I then discuss how dumpster divers differ. Rather than attempt to minimize the distance between themselves and more socially acceptable groups, the dumpster divers interviewed for this study often sought to maximize their
distance from society by using reverse stigma (Kusow 2004), a strategy previously observed among dumpster divers (Nguyen, Chen and Mukherjee 2014), and active defiance, a strategy that is uniquely performative and structured in opposition to mainstream cultural narratives. This opposition comes from and reifies dumpster divers’ sense of identity as other, and even as superior to mainstream society. This cultural identity has added significance for the 16 economically-constrained dumpster divers represented here who view dumpster diving as a source of not only survival, but of agency and pride. I ultimately argue that given the hostile institutional and cultural context of neo-liberalism, (e.g., the use of hostile architecture to prevent the houseless from being able to achieve basic needs such as sleep in public places [see Petty 2016] and the myriad laws that criminalize houselessness and poverty [see Saelinger 2006]), this strategy of complete rejection of cultural norms is an adept strategy for maintaining dignity for a group that exists at the margins of society.

*Symbolic Boundaries and Boundary Work, Stigma, and the Struggle to Define Decency*

Lamont and Mólnar define symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people and practices” (Lamont and Mólnar 2002; 168). At their most basic these categories are representations of what is appropriate, desirable, and valuable contrasted against what is inappropriate, undesirable and not worthy of social status, support or regard. Symbolic boundaries take on the force of social facts and have serious consequences for the distribution of not only social regard, but valuable resources including esteem, relationships, and ultimately access to jobs or other economic resources (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Lareau 1988). The persistence of symbolic boundaries relies on actors engaging in boundary work, the process of social differentiation through which people compare and contrast themselves to other groups (Lamont and Fournier 1992). Boundary work establishes the borders
between “us,” those on the right side of a symbolic boundary, and “them,” those on the wrong side of symbolic boundaries. These comparisons and declarations of otherness are ways that individuals and groups establish and maintain their place in worthy groups.

Boundary work can draw from a variety of cultural repertoires, widely accepted myths and narratives that individuals internalize as “common sense” (Swidler 1986). Lamont (2000; 147), in comparing boundary work among working men in France and the United States (U.S.), found that in the U.S., those lower on the socioeconomic ladder used expressly moral narratives as “an alternative measuring stick” to assert their worth. Such cultural repertoires usually draw on the theme of decency. Decency is a central orienting principle among non-middle-class groups (Anderson, Snow, and Cress 1994; Duneier 1999; Kusenbach 2009; Lamont 2000; Purser 2009). Members of low-status groups create their own sense of self-worth by narrowly defining what is and is not decent behavior and showing how they meet the standard of decency often by pointing out others who fail to meet this standard. For example, given the importance of work for identity in the U.S. context, many low status groups maintain their decency by demonstrating their commitment to working hard (even if that work is deemed low-status), as opposed to accepting formal social support (see Lamont 2000, Newman 2009, and Sherman 2009). Decency is almost always constructed using an implicit middle-class standard which results in further marginalizing non-middle-class groups, for instance by relying on stereotypes of “rednecks” (Shirley 2010), “trailer trash” (Kusenbach 2009), and “white trash” (Wray 2006) to show an individual’s exemption from such labels.

Marginalized groups often lay claim to creative arguments surrounding decency and morality more generally because they do not have access to some of the more classic markers of
success and worth such as high-status jobs or large incomes. However, this chapter documents the case of dumpster divers who are either unwilling or unable to make these classic appeals to morality, likely owing to their especially marginalized positions. The boundary work undertaken by dumpster divers, in the form of stigma management, shows an alternative to contesting decency in conventional terms.

**Stigma Management and the Struggle to Define Decency**

The most salient symbolic boundaries emerge through stigmatization (Lamont et al. 2016). Goffman (1963; 3) defines stigma as an attribute that is “deeply discrediting,” reducing an individual “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” owing to physical deformations, character flaws, and/or membership in discredited groups. Exclusion based on stigmatized characteristics create durable symbolic boundaries. The consequences of stigma, like the consequences of failing to bridge any symbolic boundary, include denied access to critical resources such as employment, loans, or housing (Ayres and Siegelman 1995; Harkness 2016). Additionally, stigma can lead to adverse psychological consequences such as alienation, shame, and self-hate (Goffman 1963; Goodwin, Williams & Carter-Sowell 2010).

Given this context of unequal participation in social life and lingering psychological consequences, stigmatized groups usually find it necessary to engage in some form of stigma management (Major and O’Brien 2005), a form of boundary work, “generally aimed at avoiding or reducing the impact of a negative image on one’s public or private self” (Kusenbach 2009; 401). While traditional theorizing of stigma following in the Goffman tradition often views stigmatized individuals as passive victims of discrimination and prejudice who merely attempt to hide their stigmatized status (Toyoki and Brown 2014), more recent stigma management
literature shows that stigmatized individuals have considerable agency to construct positive identities and maintain dignity (Cornelissen 2016).

Despite the creative options for constructing positive identities, most documented stigma management strategies function similarly, working to minimize distance between their stigmatized status and non-stigmatized groups (Nguyen, Chen and Mukherjee 2014; Roschelle and Kaufman 2004) most often by engaging in boundary work that employs standards of decency. In the stigma management literature this type of boundary work is known as *defensive othering*, a form of stigma management that draws distinction between oneself and others in a peer group (Schwalbe et al. 2000). For example, trailer park residents often “passed stigma down the social pecking order” (Kusenbach 2009, 407) by showing how they differed from those individuals they would consider “trailer trash.”

In this chapter, I demonstrate that rather than draw on existing cultural narratives to establish their own decency or worth, dumpster divers tended to emphasize their difference and accentuate ways that they challenge what mainstream society would call decent and subvert what mainstream society calls worthy. To this end, dumpster divers use two main stigma management tactics: reverse stigma and active defiance. Reverse stigma is a form of ideological inversion: rather than accept the ascription of morally questionable attributes, essentially reverse stigma challenges the premises of morality. In this case, dumpster divers extoll the shortcomings of mainstream culture, highlighting the waste of valuable resources and the moral and practical inefficiencies of capitalism. Nguyen, Chen and Mukherjee (2014; 1878) have already established this strategy among dumpster divers in Los Angeles; however, their sample was comprised entirely of a group who “consciously and voluntarily adopt[ed] a stigmatized practice” and their
argument of reverse stigma hinges on the agency associated with having *chosen* their stigma. This chapter considers both situational dumpster divers who have both chosen to participate in dumpster diving despite having an abundance of other options and economically-constrained divers who began dumpster diving out of a lack of other resources and options. I find that both groups engage in reverse stigma.

Goffman (1961) himself observed defiance as a reactive form of stigma management usually taking the form of confrontation through yelling, disobedience, and other gestures that serve to at least temporarily reject assaults. Several studies find similar strategies of reactive defiance among the houseless (Anderson et al. 1994; Irvine et al. 2012). The dumpster divers in this study, however, described instances of what I term “active defiance”. I use this term because dumpster divers often pre-empted assaults on their worth, largely by using performative tactics to show their difference, and ultimately undermined traditional standards of decency. For example, dumpster divers reported actively trying to “gross people out” to further distance themselves from problematic moral standards (like cleanliness).

**Cultural Identity; New Groups, New Repertoires**

In opting for stigma management strategies which emphasize their difference from “normal society”, dumpster divers present themselves as part of a distinct group forming a sort of cultural identity from which they can write new cultural narratives often at odds with those of mainstream society. A strong sense of cultural identity, or what Lamont et al. (2016) refer to as the feeling of belonging to a group, is often associated with more positive experiences in the face of stigma, especially with regards to racial stigma. Racial or ethnic identity formation, the extent to which an individual understands and feels connected to their racial or ethnic heritage, is
crucial in mitigating and interpreting experiences of racism (Umaña-Taylor and Guimond 2010). Evidence of the same mitigating effect of groupness is more mixed in wider stigma management literature. In some cases, collective action by stigmatized groups comes from being able to unite with “fellow targets” of discrimination to affirm and validate minority culture and values (Crocker and Major 1989; Jones et al. 1984). There is some evidence that the more central a deviant identity is to one’s self-concept, the worse the outcomes and more lasting the negative effects (Major and O’Brien 2005).

However, since boundary work is the process of drawing distinctions between those felt as “us” and those felt as “other”, it would follow that having a strong sense of “us” in the form of a cohesive group membership could serve as an important source of stigma mitigation. This is generally the process through which members of subcultures are able to justify their non-normative values, beliefs, aesthetics, and practices (Haenfler 2013). For subculturalists, the benefits of a strong cultural identity and the associated sense of belonging gained in participation in a subculture outweigh the potentially stigmatizing consequences of the identity they adopt. Participating in a subculture means subscribing to a new set of cultural narratives specific to this new context; these cultural narratives set the stage for a different set of symbolic boundaries that might measure worth and belonging very differently than mainstream culture. For example, knowing the difference between the esoteric musical genres of ‘funeral metal’ and ‘doom metal’ would do little to gain cultural or social capital generally. However, in the Goth subculture this knowledge serves as a type of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996), establishing worth and prestige in relation to one’s chosen reference group.

Dumpster divers, especially economically-constrained dumpster divers—those who began dumpster diving out of dire economic need, usually while houseless—do not fit neatly into
the definition of a subculture, mostly because they have not strictly chosen their new reference
group. However, their preferred stigma management strategies serve to accentuate their distinct
cultural identity in a way that parallels the function of subcultures. Like subculturalists, both
economically-constrained dumpster divers and situational dumpster divers—those who began
dumpster diving for reasons not primarily associated with economic need—actively distanced
themselves from mainstream society. Dumpster divers often see themselves as part of a
subgroup, though not as well demarcated from mainstream society as a typical subculture,
through their possession of specialized knowledge and distinct values and norms (Barnard 2016).

While distancing holds some recognition as a strategy of stigma management in
subculture literature it rarely makes an appearance in the stigma management literature more
generally.25 Roschelle and Kaufman’s (2004) study of houseless youth provides one notable and
relevant example, having observed both “strategies of inclusion” and “strategies of exclusion”
among houseless youth. Strategies of inclusion (e.g., passing, covering) perform the usual work
of stigma management in decreasing the distance between the houseless adolescent and a non-
houseless identity. Strategies of exclusion, on the other hand, mitigated stigma by declaring
difference between their identities as houseless adolescents and others, often asserting that they
are “tougher, more mature, and better than others” (Roschelle and Kaufman 2004; 31). Tactics of
exclusion often had unintended consequences for the houseless youth in this study, including
run-ins with law enforcement, and almost always resulted in further spoiling their identities.

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25 There is a general lack of theoretical guidance on how to bridge the stigma and subculture literatures owing to a
problematic and complicated history of the use of sociological theories of culture to describe and theorize poverty.
The 1960s and 1970s saw a slew of problematic applications essentially pathologizing poverty and blaming those in
poverty for their fate including theories such as the “culture of poverty” and descriptions of the “subculture of
poverty.” Despite studies of subculture having a rich engagement with social class before these problematic
associations, subcultural literature today serves more of a limited niche of documenting youth rebellion usually
approached in a class neutral way or as a phenomenon specific to the middle class (Haenfler 2013).
Roschelle and Kaufman (2004; 41) argue that their participants’ structural location, namely being young, urban, African-American, and houseless, offered “limited opportunities to exert their agency in a socially acceptable way,” leaving strategies of exclusion as a sort of last resort to temporarily maintain dignity.

The consequences of houseless youth’s structural location for stigma management is in keeping with Toyoki and Brown’s (2017; 715) assertion that “stigmatized identities are best theorized in relation to individuals’ repertoires of other (non-stigmatized) identities they may draw on to make supportive self-claims” (Toyoki and Brown 2017; 715). For example, Trautner and Collett (2011) show how topless dancers who are also students are able to mitigate the stigma of sex-work by emphasizing their more culturally-valuable identity as students. The houseless youth Roschelle and Kaufman (2004) studied do not have access to positive identities from which to minimize their status as houseless. Similarly, dumpster divers, especially those who are economically-constrained and occupy other stigmatized statuses, lack easy recourse by mobilizing other positive identities. However, what is also curious is that even the situational divers who might have had more access to alternative identities—often even specifically as students—also employed tactics of maximizing distance, suggesting that there may something more objectively appealing in using the new cultural repertoires available in this new cultural identity of dumpster diving other.

Methods

This guiding research questions of this chapter are: How do dumpster divers manage stigma? How does this stigma management vary depending on social position? How are specific strategies of stigma management part of larger marginalized resistance given multiple and intersecting stigmatized identities? Together, these questions allow me to address the broader
theme of marginalized resistance, which advances literature on boundary work and stigma
management by looking at how groups can reject standards of decency rather than simply
renegotiate these standards. To address the research questions, I draw primarily on analyses of 30
semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified as dumpster divers, supplemented by
approximately 1,000 hours of ethnographic observation centering primarily on these same
participants in their social contexts, occasionally accompanying them as they dumpster dived.

All interviews and observation took place in Olympia, Washington during the summer
and fall of 2017. I began recruiting by attending and volunteering my time at a variety of
community events that I thought would appeal to dumpster divers including Food Not Bombs,
clothing swaps, a local Really Free Market, and a Free Store run by the Olympia Food Co-op.
From the contacts I established at these events, tapping into my own social network at the local
progressive liberal arts college, and advertising for my study on community message boards, I
began snowball sampling.

There was no set definition of what makes one a dumpster diver for purposes of this
study, however, participants, in self-selecting to participate, often held themselves to very high
standards. Many potential participants declined to participate because they felt they did not
engage in dumpster diving frequently enough or it was not a salient enough feature of their self-
identity. The result was a sample of 30 self-identified dumpster divers all of whom had used
dumpster diving as their primary source of sustenance at some point.

Table 4.1 describes the total sample and the specific characteristics of the two empirical
groups, economically-constrained and situational divers, that inform this study. These groups
reflect differences in the initial motivation to dumpster dive. Serious financial need motivated
these 16 economically-constrained dumpster divers to their initial choice to dive. Of these divers, 13 were in some way gender-non-conforming; ten were currently houseless, and an additional four had experienced houselessness at some point. This group includes runaways, people kicked out of their parent’s houses before the age of 18, people who aged out of foster care, people raised in extreme poverty, and recovering and active drug addicts. This group is important to this discussion of stigma as these economically-constrained divers face multiple and intersecting sources of stigma beyond the stigmatized act of dumpster diving. Being economically-constrained is itself a form of stigma, as is a non-conforming gender identity, and being houseless. In many ways these compounding sources of stigma set the stage for more extreme forms of stigma management such as active defiance. The remaining 14 divers are situational, meaning they came to dumpster diving not primarily because of economic need. For purposes of this discussion of stigma, this group has an advantage of holding fewer discredited identities. Economically-constrained divers were on average slightly younger (average age = 24.2) than situational divers (average age = 27.24). Situational divers tended to be more privileged than their economically-constrained counterparts when it came to educational attainment and were more likely to be employed, housed and have a traditional gender identity.

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26 While the focus of this paper is not on gender, the intersection between houselessness and gender non-conformity is striking. The overrepresentation of genderqueer and trans folk in my study speaks volumes to enduring vulnerability of this group and is likely a result of the intersection between gender non-conformity and a lack of family support that often leads to running away, being kicked out, and, unfortunately, disproportionate rates of drug abuse (see Davidson 2014).

27 Many situational divers pointed to cultural factors that inspired them to dive including exposure to other people who dumpster dove, consuming alternative music genres such as “crust punk” and “zines” such as Why Freegan? An Attack on Consumption, In Defense of Donuts which is widely attributed to Warren Oakes, the drummer of popular punk band Rise Against (freegan.info ND)
Table 4.1 Sample Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>Economically Constrained</th>
<th>Situational Diver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total in Category</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Age (years)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>14 (46.6%)</td>
<td>11 (64.7%)</td>
<td>3 (23.07%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>14 (46.6%)</td>
<td>6 (35.3%)</td>
<td>8 (61.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Queer/Trans</td>
<td>13 (43.3%)</td>
<td>13 (76.47%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>10 (33.3%)</td>
<td>1 (5.88%)</td>
<td>9 (71.42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
<td>3 (17.64%)</td>
<td>4 (28.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than H.S.</td>
<td>4 (13.3%)</td>
<td>4 (23.53%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. Diploma</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
<td>5 (29.41%)</td>
<td>2 (15.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College*</td>
<td>15 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (41.2%)</td>
<td>8 (61.54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree**</td>
<td>4 (13.3%)</td>
<td>1 (5.88%)</td>
<td>3 (23.08%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes six currently-enrolled students and one respondent with a master’s degree

Interviews lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours; on average interviews were about an hour. The topics of the interview guide ranged from motivations to dumpster dive, the practical requirements of dumpster diving (i.e., how do you find a good dumpster?), the political and environmental implications of dumpster diving (i.e., do you consider dumpster diving to be political), the stigma associated with dumpster diving (i.e., do you tell people you dumpster dive?), and the extent that they considered dumpster diving a part of their identity. I concluded the interviews with a series of demographic questions verbally posed to the participants and a
final open-ended opportunity for participants to voice additional thoughts not specifically
touched upon (see Appendix D. for full interview guide.)

To supplement the interviews, I also conducted approximately 1,000 hours of
ethnographic observation. Ethnography was an important source of triangulation as it allowed
me to view actions in situ rather than simply relying on the conscious reasonings given by
participants as they actively reflect in an interview. The participant observation here draws on
Burawoy’s (1998) extended case method. The extended case method situates an ethnographic
project as the product of ongoing dialogues between the researcher and researched (Burawoy
1998). The researcher places herself purposefully in the study not as an outside observer but as a
participant in dialogue with the participants under observation. To this end I communicated with
key informants in the field, posing my latest hunches or inclinations to them to get their opinion
on the accuracy and completeness of my understanding.

This ethnographic component has the added benefit of building a more lasting
relationship between myself and my participants which is especially important when studying a
sensitive topic like stigma. While I met some participants for the first time during their interview,
I was already known to many; I served food alongside some participants at Food Not Bombs,
others came by to eat the weekly vegan meal; I commiserated with others when the popular local
coffee shop introduced their one-free-refill limit; some were regulars at the Free Store. While
familiarity would be a bonus in any study of stigma, I think it is especially important in this case
of cultural identity built in opposition to mainstream culture.

Analysis began in the field with the use of field jottings and memos. I would take down
first impressions and general notes documenting all interactions with dumpster divers and those
in their social milieu as soon as possible. As soon as possible after these encounters I used these jottings, which served as reminders of my observations in the field, and developed comprehensive field notes. My observations and connections with theory present in these jottings were in many ways the first analysis of the data. I began both transcription and more formal analysis as I completed interviews while still in the field. This is preferable to waiting until the end of data collection as it allowed me to reflect on unexpected themes and then probe for further information in future interviews. I assembled transcriptions of interviews and field notes from ethnography into NVivo qualitative data management software. I began thematically coding information within the NVivo file. Weiss (1994) describes coding as the process of linking what the respondent says to categories and concepts that might appear in the report; it is a process of asking oneself “what is this an instance of?” (Rubin and Rubin 2012). I repeatedly read and coded each transcript and field note eventually sorting and analyzing for similarities a process in keeping with the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008).

**FINDINGS: Overview of Stigma Mitigation**

The data presented below describe the extent and nature of stigma experienced by dumpster divers and thematically accounts for two methods by which my participants manage this stigma. The first strategy is “reverse stigma”, a type of ideological inversion (Kusow 2004; Nguyen et al. 2014; Storrs 1999) that problematizes sources of stigma by arguing that it is actually mainstream society that is problematic. The second is active defiance. Active defiance a confrontational strategy that uses performances of otherness to subvert mainstream norms of decency. Both strategies seek to maximize the distance between these stigmatized divers and
more mainstream culture and involve the development of alternative cultural repertoires to
develop a robust cultural identity in opposition to mainstream culture.

I begin my analysis of stigma management by discussing the less frequently used strategy of
minimizing distance through defensive distinctions and defensive othering. I then discuss reverse
stigma and active defiance in turn. I discuss how these distance maximizing strategies hinge on
the maintenance of a cultural identity that I argue manifests via othering language and a shared
aesthetic. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which dumpster diving promotes
agency for economically-constrained dumpster divers.

*Defensive Othering: I will never be a “Home-Bum”*

Anantharaman (2016), in her study of elite upper-middle class environmentalists
adopting bicycling as an environmental choice in Bangalore, observed the stigma management
strategy of creating defensive distinctions, a type of defensive othering. Bicycling in India is
stigmatized among the Indian middle-classes as a practice of the poor. In order to defend their
participation in this act, bicyclists actively constructed their identity as distinct from others
engaging in this stigmatized practice. They did this through discourse (e.g., emphasizing their
pro-environmental aims) and the use of high-end, Western bicycles and gear. In essence, this
strategy draws on existing hierarchies to defend one’s actions in a way that shows their
adherence to larger societal goals. More privileged situational dumpster divers are well
positioned to use a similar strategy of setting themselves apart from the stigmatized others who
dumpster dive by either underscoring their own political goals or their agency in choosing to
participate when others do not have a choice. However, this tactic was relatively rare, only
observed from two situational divers.
First, Austin (21, situational diver, houseless, cis-man) goes to great lengths to distinguish his own politically-motivated and personally-fulfilling lifestyle of travel via train hopping and dumpster diving from more stigmatized groups including “home-bums,” a categorization dating back to the great depression that describes someone who is chronically houseless, does not travel, and is not looking for work (“I don’t associate with home bums. I will never be a home bum.”), and ‘oogles,’ a slang term for a young, houseless person, who solicits spare change through panhandling and is considered either naïve or ignorant of street life (“Just don’t be an oogle.”)

When describing who dumpster dives, Toby, a situational diver who is voluntarily houseless, choosing to squat in abandoned properties or hitch rides on trains overnight, identifies his own group, anti-capitalist punks, and reaffirms this identity as distinct from the more conventionally houseless who dive.

You get the punks who are dumpster diving because they're anti-capitalists, and because they heard it from one of their favorite bands or something, and they think it's cool. And then you get the people who are homeless, and they're dumpster diving. They don't even call it dumpster diving. They're just trying to find food.

In drawing a line between those who are trying to be “cool”, and those who are “just trying to find food”, Toby situates his own action as uniquely worthy.

The strategy of defensive distinction is curious not because it explains how situational divers or economically-constrained divers were able to mitigate their actions, but because it was so rarely employed. This is a conspicuous absence as existing literature would suggest this strategy would be appealing not only to situational divers but to economically-constrained divers as well. Gowan (2010), for example, finds that houseless men in San Francisco informally
employed in scavenging discarded bottles and cans to return for the five-cent recycling deposit, used this act as evidence of how they are different than the rest of the houseless population. In pointing to how recycling is hard work and socially valuable they are able to capitalize on mainstream cultural narratives to reduce stigma by minimizing their social distance from housed and formally employed people. Those engaging in defensive othering minimize distance by pointing to how they are different or better than their more stigmatized peers. Anderson et al. (1994) find similar tactics used to mitigate stigma among the houseless who often define their own worth in terms of what others in similar situations are reduced to such as stealing or begging. Dumpster divers, both economically-constrained and situational, could draw on wider cultural repertoires to justify their stigmatized actions.

The lack of these traditionally effective and popular stigma mitigation strategies points to a more complicated landscape of stigma and worth. These differences might have to do with the relative youth or progressive politics of the dumpster divers under study; it might also have to do with the complicated context of compounding discredited identities. This particularly hostile way of minimizing distance by othering those in less privileged positions draws on culturally available repertoires. The relative absence of this strategy in practice shows that there are creative options available to stigmatized groups such as creating new, group-based cultural identities and related cultural narratives.

*Reverse Stigma: I know YOU are but what am I?*

The most common and compelling counter-cultural narrative used by dumpster divers is the stigma management tactic of reverse stigma. This tactic, rather than minimizing distance from the larger society, increases the distance from a select part of mainstream culture. In
adopting a systemic understanding of poverty and a staunchly anti-capitalist worldview, dumpster divers are able to elevate their own moral standing in opposition to the dysfunction of the larger culture. While defensive distinctions and defensive othering construct one’s exception from more stigmatized groups (e.g., drug users who ingest drugs via smoking othering themselves from those who inject), reverse stigma constructs opposition to more powerful groups and forces (e.g., criticizing the immorality of big business). This is the same kind of stigma management tactic seen in discrediting the discreditors (Siegel, Lune, and Meyer 1998) and condemning condemners (Ashforth and Kreiner 2014; Sykes and Matza 1957).

Nguyen et al (2014) observed the tactic of reverse stigma among freegan communities in Los Angeles and New York, where people engaged in dumpster diving adopted the view that they had no reason to feel shame or stigma because they were not the ones being wasteful dupes manipulated by big business. The dumpster divers I interviewed and observed in Olympia also accentuated the problems of waste, but often also associated this waste with inequality by arguing that capitalism ensures not only that there will be abundance, but that the abundance will be wasted before it is shared:

Okay so we live in this society that produces enough food to basically feed the world over, right? But most of it ends up in the bin. And I think that it's a really radical act, even if it's not intended to be, to reclaim any part of that, reclaim any part of something that's otherwise just gonna be discarded. Because our culture is such a throwaway culture already. (Quest, 28, economically-constrained, houseless, genderqueer)

Quest reframes herself as engaging in a radical act in direct opposition to the mainstream “throwaway culture.” Stephanie (25, situational, housed, cis-woman) also describes her dumpster diving as a powerful way to “undermine” a system she felt was problematic:
It kind of felt like this really empowering thing at the time, like “fuck you, stop throwing all this food in the garbage, like I'm gonna like take this home and I'm gonna eat this and it's this small act it just felt like I was undermining something. Even when I didn't have the language to really like critique capitalism it gave me that feeling.

Eventually Stephanie did gain the language to critique capitalism and this criticism became central to her understanding of dumpster diving. Jordan (29, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, genderqueer) reported a similar revelation:

Well, yeah, I think it's like, it's weirder when you're young and first going through like systems and institutions, right, because you're trying to assimilate really hard in all aspects of life. Whether it be like through your social life, or your sex, or your gender, or whatever, or through school. Yeah, you don't want to be like the super dirty kid, right? Who's like starving and climbing into dumpsters. I think you give a lot less of a shit about that stuff when you start figuring everything out.

For Jordan, “figuring everything out” meant reframing their personal struggles with gender identity and poverty in a more systemic light. This was a strategy ubiquitous among dumpster divers regardless of how enduring or fleeting they experienced the stigma associated with diving.

Stella (19, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, transwoman) used the same strategy after reflecting on how pervasive they find the stigma of dumpster diving, especially as connected to other discredited identities:

It's degrading to think about actually putting your physical self, your whole self, into the bin. Because people call houseless people garbage already, all the fucking time. So literally putting ourselves into the trash bin is not on the top of everybody's to-do list. Even if we don't feel bad about it, or we don't have a whole lot of qualms about it. It is a thing that sits with you, even if it's only momentary. It's a thought that ends up crossing your mind.

Stella followed this statement with a lamentation that without larger structural problems, “there wouldn’t be the necessity of people actually putting themselves in a trash can.”
I want people to realize that the real reason that they have to dumpster isn't because they had bad luck; it's because capitalism forced them to. That is a really important thing for people to realize, because it took me a long time to realize that and I would not be the same person without that realization.

While Stella’s characterization as the cause of economic deprivation as either stemming from “bad luck” or systemic forces, the idea of “bad luck” is surprisingly benign as society often blames the houseless for their predicament, accusing the houseless of being lazy, and assuming that the houseless are drug addicts. These aspersions on the houseless are part of a paradigm Gowan (2010) calls sin-talk or sick-talk. The public or charitable organizations dealing with houselessness often hold understandings of houselessness as stemming from individual failings. Gowan observes that to combat the implications from the sick- and sin-talk paradigms, the houseless themselves often engaged in system talk. System talk located the real causes of houselessness and poverty as stemming from system inefficiencies. While not presented as a stigma management tactic, this is the same phenomenon present in reverse stigma. A marginalized group is able to regain a sense of agency and worth by recognizing their own stigma as the result of structural rather than individual forces. Reverse stigma is the rhetorical equivalent of the child’s retort “I know you are, but what am I” or framing their differences with larger society as “it’s not me, it’s you” and this can have profound effects of restoring agency and dignity to stigmatized individuals.

The function of this rhetoric as a stigma management strategy should not be interpreted as undermining the sincerity or conviction of this worldview. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is a compelling worldview among dumpster divers that happens to also alleviate stigma. Couching dumpster diving in anti-capitalist sentiment was endemic among the dumpster
divers interviewed for this chapter, 26 of 30 dumpster divers explicitly implicated capitalism in their decision to dumpster dive.

Active Defiance: “A Rebellion of Dirtiness”

Reverse stigma is primarily a discursive tactic that distances divers from specific parts of mainstream culture that they find problematic. Building on what they deem problematic moral standards, dumpster divers also engage in what I am dubbing active defiance to further accentuate their distance from these norms, especially the norm of decency. Active defiance is similar to other defiant and confrontational modes of stigma management but it is characterized as pre-empted assaults, largely using performative tactics, and served to actively undermine traditional standards of decency. For Toby (27, cis-man, situational diver, houseless), dumpster diving itself is a way of undermining some of the most fundamental social orders, resulting in a “rebellion:”

In a way it’s a rebellion of dirtiness going on in the country right now against, I think it's like this puritanical streak that started with the colonists. And it was like we have to be as clean as possible, and that's like holy good. And now there's a lot of people sort of grunge in the '90s and whatever. It's like now but voluntarily being dirty. Especially it's a way of destroying this puritanical thing which is responsible for a lot more than just being clean. It's like a very destructive force ultimately. It's like a form of describing visually the counter-cultural reaction to the puritan urge.

Economically-constrained divers felt this rejection as more personal, but had the same performative and destructive undertones:

I feel like no one's ever accepted me for who I am, and so that's why it's not a big deal for me to dig through trashcans, because no one accepts that. But what else is there? So, I think that makes it more of an accessible thing for me. I've come to a point in my life where I like doing things that gross people out. I like doing things that make people feel
weird, or makes people feel uncomfortable. (Anya, 24, economically-constrained, houseless, transfemme)

Most boundary work undertaken by marginalized groups involves negotiating what constitutes decent behavior (see Kusenbach 2009 and Purser 2009). However, when faced with general unacceptance, Anya, and other dumpster divers chose not to negotiate decency but to throw their indecency in the face of their would-be condemners. Anya performs this rejection of what is and is not decent by actively seeking out things “that make people feel weird” or “uncomfortable”.

Rather than attempting to “pass” unnoticed (Goffman 1963), dumpster divers often described asserting their presence in its full indecency. Hyacinth (19, economically-constrained, houseless, non-binary) and Rain (19, economically-constrained, houseless, transwoman), interviewed together, responded when asked if they experience shame related with dumpster diving with a strategy of active defiance against the sensibilities of those who would judge them:

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like—because it is so engrained that that's not what you do; that's gross—do you ever feel ashamed of [dumpster diving]?

Rain: Not anymore.

Hyacinth: No, I like to gross people out with it. I love to be like ‘yeah, I eat from the trash. Do you want to eat this?’ And they're all like—‘gross!’ I’m like ‘it's delicious, you're missing out. Your choice though.’

Rain: Or it's really funny when you just like do it in a very public place and you pull out something that's like gnarly and like barely edible and you just like act super excited.

Hyacinth: Yeah, like some places people will be like not into giving you food or whatever so my strategy for that is like I'll go around and pull the nastiest, barely edible thing I can find and just take a big bite of it in front of people and just be like yeah, look at this food we found and eventually someone's gonna be like don't eat that! Just eat this!

Rain: ‘Here's $20 stop grossing me out!’

Hyacinth: ‘Please, don't eat that!’
In this exchange Hyacinth also reverses stigma onto those who choose not to support the houseless or those in need, but primarily she performs her distance from this group in a way that challenges their norms and asserts her otherness.

Thunder had the most direct example of a strategy of active defiance. They describe not being satisfied to just link their stigmatized acts with the shortcomings of capitalism, but to turn their stigmatized acts into opportunities to directly undermine problematic social structures:

My dream is to homestead. Have some land and some animals and some crops. That's my dream. But that's not really possible under capitalism. Like they're gonna make me pay property taxes. So, for now I'm just like screw you, I'm gonna salvage your dumpsters and I'm gonna steal from your grocery stores until you let me sustain myself without your bullshit system. They make it impossible to live without playing their little rat race so I'm gonna break their little rat race. That's how I feel about that. Ooh you got me all riled up. (Thunder, 20, economically-constrained, houseless, non-binary)

Thunder was not the only dumpster diver I talked to who routinely shoplifted. Malady (26, economically-constrained, houseless, transgirl) for example, reports that she specifically shoplifts from locally owned businesses (“I shoplift hella local”) as these are the institutions that she associates with gentrification. Shoplifting, in addition to performing dumpster diving, all serve to undermine the status quo.

While reverse stigma challenges specific assumptions of mainstream culture, the stigma management strategy of active defiance completely rejects the norms of mainstream culture in a way that is absolute and performative. Both the tactic of reverse stigma and active defiance help not only to reclaim decency in the moment, but to establish a group affinity among dumpster divers by subverting expected cultural repertoires. The notion of decency is one major narrative that dumpster divers challenge: rather than searching for ways to make their own acts seem decent using dominant narratives, dumpster divers often perform their indecency.
Embracing stigmatized identities is a powerful act of stigma management. Embracing stigma can take many forms, by taking back slurs like ‘queer’ or ‘dyke’ (Bronstema 2004), for example. For dumpster divers, the process of embracing stigma meant establishing and mobilizing their new cultural identity to combat the two main sources of stigma associated with dumpster diving, that dumpster diving is dirty (Savio 2017) and means that one has failed (Eikenberry and Smith 2005). Embracing stigmatized identities involved taking back the idea of dirtiness and redefining dumpster diving not as a failure, but as beating the “normies” at their own game. Dumpster divers actively challenged both sources of stigma through their discourse and through more outward symbols of differences (e.g., tattoos inspired by dumpster diving).

Embracing the stigma of dirt involved a process Thunder called “learning to love the dumpster slime.” Many dumpster divers expressed how dumpster diving was an “acquired taste” (Sunny, 26, economically-constrained, houseless, non-binary), but eventually even the once less-desirable parts of dumpster diving, including “dumpster juice up to your ankles” come to symbolize material accomplishment and identity. Meadow expressed that “I love being dirty,” rather than seeing this connection with dirt as a negative, she sees it as a part of her identity. Meadow (18, situational, housed, cis-woman) and her partner Eric (24, situational, housed, cis-man), interviewed together for this paper, relayed that they often refer to themselves as “trash people.” Monica (25, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, transwoman), whose quote opens this chapter, also reports identifying with trash, declaring, “I’m kind of a trashy person.”

Dumpster divers created further distance in references to the “normies” that underscored not only the otherness of dumpster divers, but the deficiencies of normal people. Malady for
example referred to normies generally as “… poor normies. Those poor sheep”. Additionally, dumpster divers described normies as “stuck in a rat race” (Tommy, 25, situational, houseless, cis-man) and as in this quote from Austin (21, situational, houseless, cis-man) generally “unexcited about life”:

> Sometimes I feel bad for people when I realize that they're not excited about their life. They're so tied up needing to make these expenses, I mean, yeah, needing to pay these expenses, needing to work to pay these expenses, needing to structure their lives around these expenses because they don't know how to throw off those expenses and eat food that is, yeah, are going to go to waste.

Austin’s quote implies that normies do not know how to live outside of a more structured, boring, and limiting system. Toby (27, situational, houseless, cis-man), who like Austin is a houseless situational diver, implying that he has intentionally dropped out of society in pursuit of alternatives also alluded to the rat race.

> A lot of people are working all the time because they think if they didn't work, they would starve. People feel pushed into a corner with that … I've spent the last summer and fall working and paying and getting food the other way [by paying] just to see what it was like and I think I've been able to do it much more effortlessly because I know at any point that I can go and live in the garbage and be happy. They can't really threaten me at all.

For Toby and Austin their reliance on dumpster diving and a lifestyle of traveling show how they have gotten beyond the sense of confinement associated with more conventional ways of living.

> Setting themselves apart from unimaginative “normies” was also a strategy used by economically-constrained divers who also view dumpster diving as a sort of secret knowledge that sets them not only apart but shows how they are superior. Quest (28, economically-constrained, houseless, genderqueer) declares “Why would you ever spend money on food?
That's just stupid.” while Nathan (25, economically-constrained, housed, cis-man), points out that “KFC from the trash tastes exactly how it does from the store,” indicating that there are no advantages to paying, only the drawback of having to pay. Anya (24, economically-constrained, houseless, transfemme) echoes this sentiment underscoring how using dumpster diving for necessities allows her to indulge in other ways:

Sometimes I forget there are people who still pay for that stuff. I'm not gonna pay for anything I shouldn't have to pay for. And the less money I spend on food, then if I'm getting paid at a job, then I go get a paycheck, all that money's mine. I'm not spending that on food, 'cause I'm getting food out of the trash.

Dumpster divers come to understand the practice not as evidence of failure but as being able to have experiences that “normies” do not get to have. Generally, dumpster divers use language indicating that they have something figured out that the “normies” have not. Dumpster divers bond as a group by sharing and valorizing this relatively rare experience and knowledge.

Divers also achieve distance through the tactic of limiting one’s social networks, a part of the observed stigma management strategy of restricting social contacts to those who Goffman calls “the own and the wise” (Goffman 1963:19). The own and the wise include similarly stigmatized individuals or those who were sympathetic. Siegel et al. (1998) observed this strategy among HIV-positive gay men who found interactions among non-infected and non-allies as so frustrating and problematic that they chose to self-isolate, even from their close family and friends. Dumpster divers expressed a similar frustration, Quest (28, economically-constrained, houseless, genderqueer) for example, when asked if they had friends who do not dumpster dive:

Yes. But yeah, I don't know. I try not to associate with people that can't wrap their minds around poverty. If somebody was to be like, ‘Oh my god, why would you eat food out of a dumpster?’ I'd be like, ‘I'm not gonna really answer that.’ Because fuck you. Why do I
need to put myself around people that make me feel shitty? Don't yuck my yum. I'm hungry.

For Quest, choosing to associate only with other dumpster divers or those known to be sympathetic limited the likelihood of interacting with people who would stigmatize them. While the previous quotes that show the advantages of dumpster diving, i.e., not having to pay, distancing oneself from the ‘rat race,’ Quest’s ongoing frustration with those who are not sympathetic to poverty underscores the reality of how society generally views dumpster divers and how embracing dumpster diving might help alleviate this stigma. Monica (25, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, transwoman), quoted at the outset of chapter, reported featuring her status as a dumpster diver on her internet dating profile to weed out those who “aren’t down to get a little dirty.” When presented as a hobby and identity, dumpster diving becomes shorthand to find those who share a common worldview.

**Dumpster Aesthetics: The Marks of Belonging**

The final way dumpster divers set themselves apart is by adopting outward symbols that make their allegiance to dumpster diving clear. Much like a subculture might have a distinct aesthetic to alert other participants of a group identity, dumpster divers often made outward signs of their participation in and affinity for dumpster diving. Several participants had tattoos inspired by their love of dumpster diving, including the word trash spelled with the anarchist “A.” Two divers had raccoon tattoos; raccoons, affectionately referred to by dumpster divers as “trash pandas,” epitomize the phenomenon of urban scavenging. Tommy had the letters “DLF” ornately tattooed on his forearm. When asked about it, he boasted that it stood for “dumpster liberation front” and was meant to look like the tattoos one would get in honor of military service. Several dumpster divers were in bands either named for their interest in dumpster diving or with songs
celebrating dumpster diving. In participant observation as well as in interviews, it was clear that dumpster diving was an important part of many people’s identities.

In the case of dumpster divers, both economically-constrained and situational, dumpster diving serves roles beyond resource acquisition, even if this was the initial catalyst to dumpster dive. Dumpster diving serves as an important group membership, even if the divers interviewed do not participate in a formal group or identify as a subculture. These divers form a group identity by creating distance from “normie,” identifying those who are left as the “us,” or valuable in-group members. Lamont et al. (2016) accurately observe that the saliency of group membership can have an important mitigating influence on an individual’s experience of stigma. In the case of dumpster divers in Olympia, this group identity is critically important to mitigating persistent and intersecting stigma. In many ways, this group identity is the sort of class consciousness that Marx (1978 [1847]) imagined as the necessary precursor to a political revolt. Divers mitigate stigma through maximizing distance from “normal” society rather than seeking to close the distance between un-stigmatized groups. Dumpster divers maximize distance by redefining cultural narratives through applying group-specific values and norms as constructed in opposition to the values of ‘hard-work’ and market competition and reified through symbols of group belonging.

Agency Among Economically-constrained Divers

While the tendency to maximize and capitalize on distance from normies was common among both situational and economically-constrained divers, there is an added significance for economically-constrained divers. Economically-constrained divers talked about dumpster diving in frank terms of what it meant for their survival. However, rather than describing the act of
dumpster diving as something they were reduced to, many divers identified their survival as a source of pride:

So, I definitely consider it a, like, part—one of the skills that I'm proud of, something that is definitely part of my identity. I'm proud of my ability to feed myself, like I'm proud of the fact that I got over what a lot of people don't and I feel like I got away from, that I'm not like 100% away from it, but I got away from that idea that you've got to work to live. It's definitely part of my identity. An important part of my identity. I'm proud of my ability to dumpster. (Thunder, 20, economically-constrained, houseless, non-binary)

It's definitely a moment of pride for me because I took care of myself, I did what it took, I didn't let myself suffer. I made sure that I took care of me and I took care of the people that I cared about at the time. (Hannah, 29, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, cis-woman)

I just run through life eating garbage, but I'm still kicking, and that's the kicker. So, I guess dumpstering is just one of the many griny things that I do to just stay on the face of the earth. And I'm proud to still be alive. (Stella, 19, economically-constrained, formerly houseless, transwoman)

More institutional forms of getting resources were also quite popular with dumpster divers including food banks, shelters, and other charitable organizations. However, dumpster diving, and the ability to feed oneself without relying on others enabled dumpster divers to view themselves as agentic actors and gave them an enduring source of pride.

I conclude this section with an exchange with Malady (26, economically-constrained, houseless, transgirl), who earlier we heard refer to people who do not dive as “poor sheep.” This quote in full context shows the extent to which her new cultural identity, formed in opposition to these poor sheep, has shaped her ability to maintain a sense of self-worth in the face of adversity. Malady, a self-identified transgirl, without a high school diploma found herself houseless when she aged out of the foster care system. I had heard snippets of her personal biography as we both
volunteered for Food Not Bombs in the weeks leading up to this interview and was initially surprised to hear her account during this exchange:

Interviewer: How do you feel about people who get things in more conventional ways? People who buy things?

Malady: Those poor normies. Those poor sheep. Well, I guess we can't all be weird, or whatever. Not everybody can drop out.

Interviewer: Has that been your intention, to sort of drop out?

Malady: It was. Well, actually, I was never really given a choice. I didn't drop out, I was kind of booted out the door, but then I just went with that, just took it in hand. Now here I am.

What Malady took in hand was the ability to rewrite her personal narrative based on inclusion in a new social context. Like Thunder, Stella, and Hannah, for Malady the benefits of dumpster diving were twofold: offering first valuable resources, literal survival, and subsequently, an identity based on that ability to not only survive, but thrive, in an adversarial social context.

Discussion

This chapter has explored how dumpster divers manage stigma, how stigma management strategies varied only slightly depending on social position, and how these specific strategies of stigma management are part of larger marginalized resistance given multiple and intersecting stigmatized identities. While most cases of boundary work (and stigma management strategies specifically) among marginalized groups involve some sort of defensive othering, maintaining dignity, and defending decency by denigrating other groups, dumpster divers opted for strategies that explicitly rejected conventional standards of decency and shamed wider society. This strategy allowed dumpster divers to create their own sense of cultural identity based on their stigmatized practice. In the case of dumpster divers, especially economically-constrained
dumpster divers, the viability of this new cultural identity as a sustained source of dignity outweighs the table scraps of dignity they might find invoking the cultural repertoires available to them in mainstream culture.

This discussion situates the stigma management strategies of dumpster divers within the growing literature on de-stigmatization to highlight the ways dumpster divers face significant challenges that would be difficult to overcome using traditional stigma management techniques. I then discuss dumpster divers’ unique stigma management strategies as challenges to moral hegemony with implications for theorizing agency and cultural creativity among marginalized groups. I also highlight the ways that a strong cultural identity was necessary for this strategy and how future research should look into the role that subcultural identities play in stigma mitigation. I conclude with a call for more nuanced research into stigma management especially among groups experiencing intersecting and compounding forms of stigma.

A recent trend in the stigma literature is to discuss the process of a stigmatized group gaining esteem from wider society, termed de-stigmatization (Clair et al. 2016). In comparing cases where stigmatized groups have systematically gained ground – people living with HIV/AIDS, African Americans, and people labeled as obese – Clair et al. (2016) find that de-stigmatization generally hinges on a groups’ ability to reconstruct their stigmatized identity by drawing equivalences (minimizing the distance between themselves and non-stigmatized groups) and removing the blame associated with their identity. However, the real success of such work comes when this new construction is 1) deemed credible; 2) the construction interacts favorably with existing ideologies; and 3) there is a perceived link between the fate of the stigmatized and more dominant groups. However, the likelihood of meeting these three criteria is almost non-existent for dumpster divers in a neo-liberal context. Scholars argue that the stigmatization of the
houseless is intrinsically tied to the structure of capitalism (Belcher and DeForge 2012), which precludes the credibility of new constructions. Existing ideologies and cultural repertoires are rife with the shibboleths of hard work, personal responsibility, and decency. Even in times of general economic downturn, such as the recent recession, Americans, even those facing job-loss due to structural forces, construct their inability to retain or find work as the result of personal failings (Kenworthy and Owens 2011). Finally, the link between the stigmatized and dominant group is clear: the houseless, especially those who have stooped to digging through the trash, are the boogeymen of capitalism. This is the group that those relatively higher on the pecking order compare themselves against to salvage their own decency. They serve an important function of showing the consequences of choosing to be useless in the capitalist structure (Belcher and DeForge 2012).

In a way, the process of de-stigmatization relies on a stigmatized group’s ability to reconstruct their stigmatized identity using conventional cultural repertoires. However, cultural repertoires are narratives written by the dominant group that ultimately function hegemonically to perpetuate systems of inequality. The conventional forms of stigma management, such as defensive othering, “involve accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group” (Schwalbe et al 2000; 425). While there is room within conventional cultural narratives to negotiate these constructions and preserve dignity, the underlying assumptions about what is worthy and decent persist. In the case of dumpster divers, we see more radical approaches to problematize the dominant group who write new cultural narratives in a radical, even political act that bears further study. This rewriting reflects an expression of agency among a particularly marginalized group that rejects moral hegemony rather than simply renegotiating decency.
Lamont et al. (2016) argue that the experience of stigma and the choice of stigma management strategy is dependent on the political and social institutional context vis-à-vis the stigmatized group, the availability of dominant cultural repertoires to aid in boundary work, and the extent to which the bearers of stigma feel connected as a group. Dumpster divers face what is perhaps an insurmountable institutional context. Dominant cultural repertoires often serve to further their stigmatization. However, their ability to redefine themselves as a group is their saving grace when battling stigma. In setting themselves apart from wider society—not a difficult task considering the already perceived distance—they are able to fashion themselves a distinct cultural identity using many of the trappings of a subculture.

This chapter has stopped short of discussing dumpster divers as a distinct subculture. Participation in the same practice, no matter how rare, is not enough to mark a subculture. The ways in which dumpster divers adopt a common cultural understanding and even cultural identity suggest that there might well be a subculture here. However, while the situational divers might meet the often overly strict definition of a subculture, modern thinking on subcultures seems to explicitly preclude the idea of economically-constrained divers as subculturists:

Many, maybe even most, contemporary subculturists are not structurally marginalized but rather in a sense ‘choose’ their marginalization. Presumably no one forces someone to adopt a goth identity, yet that chosen identity marks one as an outsider, even potentially generating social stigma. (Haenfler 2013; 17; emphasis added)

Yet, middle-class youth choose to accept that social stigma, as it enables them a space to test society’s boundaries, create an identity, and feel supported by a group. There is no reason to accept that more marginalized groups would not also seek out and benefit from these functions of subcultures. Indeed, there might be comparatively more benefits to belonging to a subculture for more marginalized groups like dumpster divers, because of the potential to hide forced
stigma under the veneer of chosen stigma. Others have examined subcultures with an eye to how “working-class youth (mainly boys) join together by virtue of their marginalization from and resistance to the class struggle” (Haenfler 2013 ;7), noting how exaggerating their otherness allows marginalized actors to challenge cultural hegemony and gain subcultural capital (Thornton 1996). It is a limitation of this work that dumpster diving in Olympia does not rise to the level of organization and distinctness required of a subculture, but future research should examine how subcultures appeal to marginalized groups. Studying dumpster diving as a subculture in other contexts could address this gap. Similarly, future research into subcultures would do well to look at how adherence to a subculture can offer wider stigma mitigation advantages.

Perhaps the largest limitation of this chapter is the lack of true engagement with the construction and negotiation of intersecting sources of stigma. I mention many dumpster divers’ statuses as transgender, non-binary, and houseless merely to contextualize their struggles of stigma management as particularly daunting. Had the interviews here probed further into the experiences of stigma related expressly to houselessness and gender non-conformity, the result would be a more nuanced discussion of the roles of alternative cultural identities. Research related to intersecting and compounding stigma is limited, though gaining in popularity (see Remedios and Snyder 2018 and Imogen and Slater 2018). Future research should examine how stigma management tactics vary in the face of these intersections, including looking at how distancing strategies such as reverse stigma and active defiance play roles of dignity preservation. However, this study has set a precedent for considering agency and creativity in
marginalized groups’ responses to norms of morality and decency that should follow into future studies.

The tactic of *active defiance* that I advanced in this chapter will strengthen studies of stigma in the future by offering an alternate method of maintaining dignity that does not fit well with the traditionally invisible forms of stigma management or those forms of engagement that are more closely aligned with constructing a dialogue (e.g., confronting sources of stigma). Existing literature tends to overlook the tactic of rejecting widely-shared social norms in favor of performing difference as a strategy to minimize stigma. This is an especially important strategy in relation to the larger theoretical finding of this chapter: marginalized groups have considerable agency in challenging moral hegemony.

**Conclusion**

Dumpster diving is a discrediting identity, and for the majority of my participants, this was not their only discrediting identity: the intersection of houselessness, gender non-conformity and status as a dumpster diver would suggest a bleak outcome with regards to maintaining dignity. Most studies of stigma management show how groups attempt to minimize distance between themselves and non-stigmatized groups; for many of the participants in this study, this would be no mean feat. However, when faced with these objective obstacles to maintaining a positive identity, dumpster divers responded by rejecting societal standards of decency and traditional systems of valuation, stressing instead their belonging to an alternate cultural identity of dumpster diving. This cultural identity allowed dumpster divers to recreate a new set of value markers and construct symbolic boundaries that would benefit themselves and those in their group. This is a powerful example of agency in marginalized resistance.
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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

By examining the discourse and practice surrounding consumption in marginalized spaces, I have made several theoretical contributions to the sociologies of consumption, waste, and culture, as well as to a broader conversation on the relationship between belief and action.

Speaking to the contributions to consumption, waste, and culture, the cases of both second-hand shopping and dumpster diving have provided meaningful avenues to apply and refine theories of culture and action. First, Chapter Two on thrift shopping observes that distinction is still maintained and patrolled even within a marginalized consumption space and that this process is much more connected to discourse and practice than to any particular item or category of item. Not only is distinction still present in marginalized consumption spaces, but, as Chapter Three discusses, these spaces can also allow for different interpretations of what is legitimately viewed as political. Chapter Three shows how marginalized groups, engaged in the same act as more privileged groups, might conceptualize the political nature of consumption differently. Finally, Chapter Four argues that rather than a significantly limiting marginalized groups the tendency to define not only what is political, but what is worthy, on different terms highlights the agency that marginalized groups have in challenging hegemonic norms. In its own way, each chapter probes the renegotiation of waste as a creative process to either patrol and enforce, or circumvent, symbolic boundaries. Studies of consumption find similar processes at work (e.g., Holt 1998; Johnston and Baumann 2007); however, the uniquely stigmatized avenues of consumption examined in this dissertation have complicated the usual straightforward application of cultural repertoires as marginalized groups actively redefine their own narratives. I discuss this in more detail in the next subsection.
Turning to summarize the contributions to the relationship between belief and action, in using a dual-process framework to understand how culture, action, habit, and belief are mutually reinforced, the cases of thrift shopping and dumpster diving open the door to examining the renegotiation of waste as a marker of group belonging and distinction. In the case of thrift shopping we see how an embodied practice can complement the rhetorical and justificatory elements of culture to present a coherent thrift shopping experience that varied by social class. The third chapter looks at how a rupture to habitual routines creates an opportunity to challenge existing worldviews. The final chapter picks up on this significantly altered worldview to explore how marginalized groups can resist conventional cultural narratives. The case of dumpster diving explored in Chapters Three and Four also speaks to the unique political imaginaries and avenues of political resistance available to marginalized groups imploring future research to adopt more nuanced views of what it means to be political.

This conclusion first summarizes the most important empirical findings and theoretical insights presented in each chapter. I then discuss the broader theoretical implications implicit in these works. I conclude by discussing limitations as they relate to future research.

Theoretical Implications: Understanding Consumption, Waste, and Culture

This dissertation uses two cases of reuse to investigate the boundary processes used to define and redefine waste and to negotiate a sense of self in relation to waste. The first case shows the reproduction of classed-based distinctions observed in other consumption contexts (e.g., political or green consumption (Carfagna et. al. 2014), consumption of art (DiMaggio and Useem 2017), music (Coulngeon and Lemel 2010), food (Johnston and Baumann 2007) in the second-hand setting, and the exaggeration of these boundaries in relation to second-hand goods.
Previously theorized dichotomies in consumption between those with higher levels of cultural capital and those with lower levels of cultural capital including differences in prioritizing authenticity among HCC consumers and functionality and more commercial tastes among LCC consumers (Holt 1998) are all substantiated in my analysis of thrift shoppers. However, thrift shopping, as a subtly-stigmatized form of consumption owing to its association with waste and economic deprivation, is also constructed in morally-charged terms. The moral justifications of thrift shopping are also classed; those in more privileged groups are more likely to explain their consumption at thrift stores as evidence of civic engagement and environmental concern, while those in less privileged groups are more likely to emphasize the personal discipline and savviness associated with saving money. This chapter establishes how the same practice can take on significantly different meanings between social groups and how morality becomes an important marker of class-based differences in distinction processes. This finding promises to animate scholarship in the sociology of consumption by adding new depth to our understanding of how both specific items and entire narratives of valuation become privileged.

The theme of different meanings associated with the same practice is taken up again in the third chapter, in which I compare understandings of dumpster diving held by situational divers, those who could provide for themselves outside of dumpster diving, and economically-constrained divers, who turned to dumpster diving to meet basic needs. Using a dual-process framework this chapter presents dumpster diving as a catalyst for redefining previously taken-for-granted assumptions that led nearly all dumpster divers to question the efficacy and morality

28 The objects at thrift shops are in a sort of limbo as to their status as waste; while the original owner has made the decision that they no longer want said object, they have recognized that this is an object which could still be useful in a different context. The items wait, neither used nor wasted, for a new owner to deem them worthy again; a classed process.
of capitalism. While both groups entered a critical state of belief, situational-divers experienced
the “surprise” to their worldview as less lasting and problematic as the economically-constrained
divers who experienced a “shock.” This difference meant that the interpretation of this new
meaning differed between the two groups. Situational divers were better able to reconcile their
diving with existing worldviews by reconceptualizing their diving as a political act.
Economically-constrained divers, on the other hand, were unable or unwilling to categorize
dumpster diving as political. I argue that this is because economically-constrained dumpster
divers occupy such a marginal social position that they embody the social problems they critique,
meaning that anything short of structural revolution is inadequate. With regards to the sociology
of waste, these observations show just how interacting with the waste stream is innately
politicized and intrinsically linked with marginalized groups.

The marginal social position of dumpster divers figures centrally in the discussion of
stigma management and boundary work in Chapter Four. This chapter observes that dumpster
divers are stigmatized owing to their association with poverty, waste, and indecent behavior and
the compounding of this stigma by their status as houseless and/or transgender. However, rather
than accept this stigmatization, or even diminish this stigma by minimizing distance between
themselves and those without stigma, dumpster divers actively worked to set themselves apart.
This distance allowed dumpster divers to form a distinct and valuable cultural identity replete
with new cultural narratives that they used to situate their own self-worth. Having established, in
Chapter Three, that these dumpster divers were all in critical states of belief – either creativity or
hysteresis – these new narratives are necessary complements to these divers’ new embodied
knowledge and world-views. This chapter shows how marginalized groups can have
considerable agency to renegotiate dominant narratives and challenge moral hegemony in this case by rejecting norms of decency. This theoretical argument contributes to the cultural sociological literature on stigma by showing a new tactic of stigma management and suggesting a yet untheorized level of creativity among stigmatized groups.

**Theoretical Implications: Understanding the Relationship between Belief and Action**

Dual-process models have been a tour-de-force in cultural theorizing over the last decade (Lizardo et al. 2016), however, their empirical application is relatively rare (see Hoffman 2015, Leschziner and Green 2013, Miles 2015 and Srivastava and Banaji 2011 for exceptions). This dissertation contributes empirically to this theoretical tradition first by successfully applying this framework in two separate cases, and second by offering insights into how dual-process models can be refined to better account for power and privilege, by showing how culture is both internalized and expressed differently based on social position. Chapter Two on thrift shopping shows how the same practice can vary based on class, but ultimately how justification and durable habit mutually reinforce one another, in this case they both reproduced class-based differences. Chapter Three on dumpster diving explores how justification and durable habit can be at odds. In this case, it was a mark of the privilege of the situational divers that they were able to mobilize a cultural repertoire to return to a more automatic understanding of culture.

The substantive chapters of this dissertation are also a case study in the states of belief. First, I presented the case of second-hand shopping as an example of practice and discourse working together in the state of illusio (Strand and Lizardo 2015). Thrift shoppers were in a social environment where they were able to act as competent actors going through their lives in a habituated manner. The practices and discourses surrounding thrift shopping were so attuned that
they both varied predictably along class lines. The next chapter introduces dumpster diving as a trigger to the more critical states of belief. Both economically-constrained and situational-divers experience a disconnect from the world they anticipated; both groups “grab” for a reality that they anticipated (e.g., trash is dirty and useless; you must work hard and buy what you need) and “miss” (i.e., find that this is not the case). Situational divers, however, are ultimately able to “grab” at an existing cultural narrative and climb back to a state of illusio.

The final chapter on stigma management, then, is a look into the new possibilities available when in a critical state of belief. Namely, with few ties to the status quo, dumpster divers reject conventional means of establishing self-worth and create a distinct cultural identity with more favorable cultural narratives that better fit with their post-illusio-consciousness. The revelatory process through which dumpster divers understand themselves not as ‘useless,’ but as survivors, skilled actors, and bearers of specialized knowledge and experiences is similar to the process through which dumpster divers come to realize that trash is also not as ‘useless’ as once thought. This is the same process detailed in the previous chapter as transitioning to a critical state of belief, either creativity or hysteresis. These critical states of belief have primed these social actors to reject conventional cultural narratives, paving the way for alternative forms of stigma management.

Reading this dissertation as a foray through the states of belief has important contributions to understanding the cultural underpinnings of social change. The lack of similar critical insights and sustained action observed among economically-constrained dumpster divers

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29 The “grab and miss” example was originally used by Strand and Lizardo (2015) to describe the states of belief. It is based on the classic study of object permanence by Piaget (1954).
continues to plague scholars and activists of ethical consumption (Maniates 2001). For example, Evans (2011) finds that despite making appeals to a “green order of worth” many self-proclaimed sustainable consumers struggle to incorporate ecological sustainability into their everyday lives. Additionally, Maniates (2001) criticizes political consumption as a force that individualizes responses to consumption and obscures the role that institutions and political power play in perpetuating environmental degradation, thus stunting the potential for critical insight among political consumers.

To explain the lack of critical insight among ethical consumers, we must look at the necessary preconditions of a critical paradigm shift. For economically-constrained dumpster divers, a paradigm shift is preceded by a fundamental disjuncture between a lifetime of habit and their present situation. In contrast, ethical consumers are promised that they can be a productive part of the change they want to see by minimally altering their established routines (e.g., choosing organic over conventional produce). While triggering a similar shock among consumers in more privileged positions might not be feasible, this observation still serves to point to the importance of disrupting and problematizing routines rather than simply attempting to change beliefs.  

The attention to routine rather than discrete beliefs is an important consideration currently guiding the work of social practice theorists (see Shove 2010).

Theoretical Implications: Motivating Environmental Behavior and Understanding Morality

This dissertation also contributes to existing understanding of environmental behaviors, in part by casting a wide conceptual net to incorporate insights into how ethical consumption conveys morality and at the role of pro-environmental behaviors in establishing social worth.

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30 The attention to routine rather than discrete beliefs is an important consideration currently guiding the work of social practice theorists (see Shove 2010).
First, picking up on the discussion above about how to shift social routines to a more sustainable trajectory, I add to the existing critique of the attitude, behavior, change model (or ABC model for short) that has been prevalent in environmental psychology and sociology. Looking beyond the ABC model for changing beliefs is crucial for actualizing environmental sustainability (Shove 2010). The ABC model focuses on environmental intent, that is, actions undertaken with the aim of reducing one’s impact, while neglecting actions that might have impact reducing effects without clear impact reducing intentions. This is problematic for two main reasons both highlighted by Stern (2000): first, “environmental intent may fail to result in environmental impact” (Stern 2000; 408), and second, “environmental beneficial actions may come from nonenvironmental concerns, such as a desire to save money” (Stern 2000; 415). Scholarly and popular neglect of these two limitations has resulted in a problematical account of environmentalism where declaring environmental concern has become a status marker among elite consumers (Carfagna et al. 2014; Elliot 2013; Kennedy and Givens 2019). Ironically, studies of actual impact show that this same elite group that is more likely to confess their environmental concern (i.e., those with higher incomes, more education, etc.) are also those with the highest carbon footprints (Huddart Kennedy, Krahn, and Krogman 2013).

Second, this dissertation better integrates environmental topics (consumption, waste) with conversations about morality and social belonging. Defining and categorizing what makes something pro-environmental or what makes someone an environmentalist is a political project defined in problematically hegemonic terms privileging an elite experience of the environment (Anantharaman 2018; Taylor 2000). This narrow definition has, in turn, limited our political imaginaries as they relate to solving environmental problems: the undue limitation of this
discourse to individual acts of consumption is undertaken in an explicit attempt to be “green” (Anantharaman 2018). In the realm of consumption, ethical consumption has become the new shibboleth of morality (Elliot 2013).

While Boltanski and Thevenot (1999) describe orders of worth in a largely value-neutral way (i.e., the different orders of worth are merely different, they are all potentially culturally valuable ways of justifying action), there are clear connections with value, worthiness, and power. For example, Stamer’s (2018) finding of class-based differences in the application of specific orders of worth, with those with more cultural capital appealing to the green and civic orders, parallels the findings of the elite nature of ethical consumption. Given these classed differences in applying orders of worth, Sassatelli (2004; 180) argues that a key task for researchers is to “… consider how differently people from distinct institutional positions may act and, especially, how certain themes and evaluation criteria get entrenched and become hegemonic over time, that is, how power and history shape the conditions for mutual understanding.” This attention to social class and power is crucial because, as Lamont states, the “ability to impose criteria of evaluation, or the power to consecrate, is the major stake in symbolic fields as it allows actors to reproduce their own positions” (Lamont 2012; 8).

Lamont (2012) argues that such hierarchies of worth are a key way that inequality is maintained. A hierarchy of worth, according to Lamont, is a system of evaluating entities based on one hegemonic standard. A key to a more inclusive and egalitarian society is the creation of heterarchies, or systems of evaluating entities that can be based upon multiple hierarchies existing simultaneously (Lamont 2012). By employing a heterarchy rather than a hierarchy of worth we can see how differences in engagement with ethical consumption may reveal objective
differences in environmental concern but also how different accounts of the environment based on specific orders of worth are privileged over others. For example, lower-middle-class thrift shoppers were more likely to highlight the role of limiting ‘waste’ both material and economic, while, upper-middle-class thrift shoppers explicitly used the language of environmentalism to explain their practice. Despite the classed nature of the specific order of worth within each group, the result was the same: both groups used thrift stores to keep their material impact in check. More generally, describing sustainability using a stool metaphor is common (see Newport, Chesnes, and Lindner 2003). The three legs – the environment, economics, and social concerns – must all be considered equally to ensure a balanced stool. In recognizing a plurality of valid experiences of the environment and rejecting one hegemonic standard of the environment’s value the stool will have a wider, less elitist, base on which to stand.

Finally, this dissertation serves as a reminder of the larger applications of heterarchical thinking primarily through the alternative political imaginaries and cultural repertoires offered by economically-constrained dumpster divers. Economically-constrained dumpster divers hesitated to refer to their actions, and ultimately their survival as political, as conventional political action exists in a context that does nothing but further their marginalization. Despite their hesitancy to identify their acts as political, these divers were not less political, if anything they were more revolutionary. Economically-constrained dumpster divers reject traditional political tactics that would ultimately reproduce the status quo (i.e., shopping for change serves to reify neo-liberal logics). Likewise, I have also alluded to the revolutionary potential of rejecting cultural narratives as both a way to challenge capitalism (Chapter Three) and as a form of stigma management (Chapter Four). Looking at how marginalized groups resist the status quo might
well hold the answers for how to radically re-think society’s addictions to waste and consumption (Scott 2008). More generally, appreciating heterarchies leads the way for accepting new standards of valuation, central to the project of redefining waste. This is a potentially radical act considering how many of society’s hierarchies are based on preserving the dichotomy between what society considers clean and dirty. These are not just physical classifications but the very basis of sorting people and groups into social categories which shape long-term life chances.

**Limitations and Future Research**

I conclude with a discussion of some of the limitations of this study in order to contextualize the results presented here and to discuss what work left undone. My relatively short stay in the field (six months) limits my analysis, a limitation that is exacerbated by the “Olympia Paradox” that relatively few people were actively dumpster diving. This introduced limits to my participant observation of the act of dumpster diving. To address this limitation, I could have either chosen a different field site with a more active dumpster diving population (my participants suggested either Seattle or Portland as more active dumpster diving scenes) or I could have adapted my research strategy to the case of the transient dumpster diving population in Olympia. About half of the dumpster divers interviewed for this project did not permanently call Olympia home, many spend the relatively mild winters in Olympia, or were just passing through as part of their travelling lifestyle. To get a more complete sample I would have had to remain in Olympia for longer, to hopefully run into more travelers, or I would have had to travel myself, ideally with a key informant.31 The understudied traveling youth subcultures including

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31 I could have also timed my field work differently to coincide with the winter months when more travelers might have been in Olympia.
The Dirty Kids Couch Surfing Coalition, who according to their Facebook Group are those who “choose a home free way of living” (The Official Dirty Kid Couchsurfing Coalition ND), “Oogles,” “Hobos,” Deadheads, and less formally associated groups, would require an ethnography based on traveling with these groups, work that I eagerly await to see from a future researcher.

Lengthier and more in-depth ethnographies of these traveling subcultures would likely problematize the veneer of cohesiveness between and within the dumpster diving factions that I have reported here. On the whole, the dumpster divers I interviewed made contrasts between themselves and wider society or “normies” (see Chapter Four) however, there were some comments and observations that lead me to believe that there are internal ways of maintaining distinction within the dumpster diving subcultures that I remain ignorant of. Understanding these internal processes of distinction would contribute greatly to the subculture literature, as well as the wider literatures on culture, consumption, and in the cases of these specific dumpster diving subcultures, the distinction relative to waste.

A further limitation of this analysis of dumpster diving is a relatively small sample of 30 dumpster divers further divided into two subgroups. Many of my findings speak primarily to the 16 economically-constrained divers, while the remaining 14 situational-divers serve merely to contextualize the larger findings. My theoretical contributions highlighting the agency that marginalized groups have in contesting larger cultural narratives does not discuss how this process might only be possible owing to the presence of more privileged individuals performing the same act and running in the same social circles. The economically-constrained dumpster divers might have only been successful in contesting wider cultural narratives because they were
following the lead of situational divers or, to use Goffman’s (1963) language, because they were able to pass as more privileged individuals themselves. While there is no objective answer to how many cases would have been enough (Small 2009), I believe more interviews and a longer stay in the field would have given me greater insight into the differences and dynamic between the situational and economically-constrained divers.

A lack of racial diversity also limits this study. The relevance of Mill’s (2001) black trash hypothesis – in short, that people of color are already so associated with waste that the addition of the word “trash” as in the slur “white trash” is not used when talking about low-income blacks because it is implied - stands out as a possible explanation for why people of color might be less enticed by the prospect of dumpster diving. While holding several discredited and stigmatized identities, my participants at least had white privilege, which might have more easily facilitated their dignity preservation while dumpster diving. A related limitation is that the gender diversity that I did find in my study was largely beyond my scope to fully analyze. Future research into compounding stigmatized identities and stigma research using an intersectional approach is a necessary and missing component of this study.\textsuperscript{32} The role of intersectional and compounding stigmatized identities in influencing experiences of stigma and stigma management strategies is not well understood in the literature and likely influences some of the themes explored in this dissertation. For example, in Chapter Four I note that marginalized dumpster divers have considerable agency to contest conventional cultural narratives, but do not specify how this agency is influenced by my sample holding multiple stigmatized identities; it is not clear that the dumpster divers in this case were more likely to choose distancing strategies because they face

\textsuperscript{32} Some very recent publications in psychology are hopeful signs that this is a topic growing in academic concern. See Remedios and Snyder 2018.
multiple stigmatized identities or because they hold some specific combination of stigmatized and privileged identities.

An additional limitation is the format I chose for my dissertation. Early in the dissertation process I decided to use a “three-article” format. The alternative, a “book format,” seemed daunting and ill-suited to the case-study approach I had envisioned. I could see the end result of a three-article format much more clearly than the nebulous task of writing something that could be compared to a book. Today, I see the advantages that opting for a book format focusing solely on the case of dumpster divers would have offered. I see now that qualitative work needs all the words it can get, keeping my chapters short enough for academic journals meant ruthless editing and cuts to ideas that might have merited further exploration. For example, there was very little room in this dissertation to discuss dumpster diving as a social practice which was originally how my interview guide was oriented and has fascinating theoretical implications for discussing the adoption of social practices and how social practices diffuse between social groups.

A book format would have allowed for a deeper dive – pun absolutely intended – into the dumpster diving case study. This is perhaps the point I most regret in my choice of the three-article format, while these are only the first of many chapters and articles I plan to write on the dumpster divers observed here, it feels frustrating to have only scratched the surface of these compelling stories. However, I am currently preparing Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation for submission to journals and I plan to adapt Chapter Four into a proposal for an academic press so that I might have the chance to present this information in book format in the future. The focus of the book would build on the notion of active defiance and also explore the daily lives of dumpster divers in more detail than was presented in this dissertation. In discussing
the daily lives of dumpster divers, including how they interpret their own self-worth in relation to their devalued identities and sustained connections with marginalized objects (e.g., trash) and spaces (e.g., alleyways and abandoned buildings), I would give a more complete picture of the depth of the stigma dumpster divers face and the strength of their newfound cultural identities to renegotiate problematic cultural narratives.

A book format would also give me the chance to dedicate more space to the methods, to offer a more complete positionality statement, and to discuss the nuances of the Olympia case in full in a dedicated Methods Chapter. These components would have greatly streamlined the writing and editing process and improved readability. It is also possible that I have not fully caved in the generalizability of my findings given the unique cultural landscape that is Olympia, Washington. In many ways I have not even fully acknowledged to myself the ways that this social setting influences my theoretical contributions. However, the Olympia context of abundant institutionalized alternatives that made dumpster diving less necessary also raises important and interesting avenues of research. For example, the institutionalization of waste appropriation is itself a prominent and interesting theme in the data collected for this project that warrants further analysis. This dynamic includes many examples of how different entities in Olympia institutionalized waste recovery including:

- How some dumpster diving and thrift shopping is replaced with a FreeStore run by the Olympia Food Co-op billed as “Goodwill with no prices.” (“Welcome to OFC’s FreeStore.” ND);

- How Evergreen State College students sold dumpstered food in the quad to protest the corporate monopoly of food services on campus, eventually resulting in a student-owned campus co-op called the Flaming Eggplant (The Flaming Eggplant ND);
- How the local pizza shops now donate their leftovers – even baking fresh pies – to the Emma Goldman Youth and Homeless Outreach Project (EGYHOP), a volunteer-run, bicycle-powered, homeless-outreach, and needle-exchange (The Emma Goldman Youth and Homeless Outreach Project; ND)

All are fascinating stories of repurposing waste that, while not what I expected out of my choice of field sites, might contribute substantially to the literature on institutionalization and cooptation of consumer movements. This is one of the more promising avenues for future research that I hope to pursue in the future using my own field notes documenting several months of volunteering at the FreeStore and interviews with several long standing FreeStore volunteers and by analyzing secondary documents related to EGYHOP and the creation of the Flaming Eggplant.

Finally, less related to theoretical limitations and connected instead to the ethics of studying marginalized people, I acknowledge my tendency throughout this work to portray dumpster divers and dumpster diving in a flattering light, highlighting the creativity and agency of this practice, while perhaps glossing over the rougher edges. The reality of dumpster diving is often bleaker than what I have described here. Stella began dumpster diving at age seven when her family could no longer consistently afford food. Jordan was 11 when they learned the dumpsters provided better access to food than their cupboards at home. While dumpster diving highlights individuals’ amazing adaptability and persistence, larger issues remain. Dumpster diving, whatever else it may be, is a testament to the dysfunctions of capitalism and if I glamorize dumpster diving as an act, I hope that I also pathologize the systems that got us here. I am incredibly grateful to the dumpster divers who shared their complicated, empowering, and all-too-often devastating stories for this dissertation. It would be impossible for me to leave this project unchanged.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX A. THRIFT STORE SHOPPING FULL DEMOGRAPHICS

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H = Higher status marker; L=Lower status marker

*Final determination made using references made during the interviews

1 John is a retired USPS employee whose current financial standing did not seem to reflect his working-class roots.
2 Kim’s prior employment was professional and paid considerably more; she currently works remotely to spend more time with her children. She is also partners with Shelby and together they make enough money to be considered more middle class.
3 Tom has a bachelor’s degree that he has yet to make real use of opting instead to repair bicycles part-time. He is relatively young, 29, and appeared to the interviewers to hail from a higher-class background than these indicators suggest.
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE – THRIFT SHOPPING

Do you ever shop at second-hand stores?

IF NO:
Any particular reason why not?
Does anyone in your household ever get second-hand goods in any other ways?
Have you ever thought about the environmental impacts of buying second hand?

If YES:
What motivates you to shop at thrift stores?
What sorts of things do you usually buy?
Can you walk me through the last time you went to a thrift store? (Probes: Were you looking for something in particular? Who were you with? Did you enjoy yourself? Is this typical?)
When did you start shopping at thrift stores?
How would you say shopping at thrift stores is different than shopping at more conventional retail stores?
Is there anything you wouldn’t buy at a thrift store?
Do you tell people you shop at thrift stores?
Can you recall a time or incident when you reflected on the environmental impacts of buying second-hand goods?
Does anyone in your household ever get second-hand goods in any other ways?
## APPENDIX C. DUMPSTER DIVERS FULL DEMOGRAPHIC TABLE

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<th>Pseudonym</th>
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<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$20-$30/day busking; EBT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Seasonal work picking marijuana. Makes up to $4k in growing season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$20-$40/weekend busking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharma</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Nanny; $800/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Transwoman</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>About to begin job as cashier; $11/hr., no set schedule at time of interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Formerly Houseless</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Social Security/Disability; $800/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyacinth</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$50/week busking; shares income and expenses with Rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>Formerly Houseless</td>
<td>Some college/Student</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Student; ≤10k/ year from loans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malady</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Transgirl</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Offered job at homeless shelter the morning of interview; $14/hr., no set schedule at time of interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Transwoman</td>
<td>Formerly Houseless</td>
<td>Some college/Student</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Home Health Aide; $17k/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Houseless Outreach; $15k/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quest</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Drug Addiction Peer-Counselor; $12k/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rain</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Transwoman</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$50/week busking; shares income and expenses with Rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Transfemme</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$10-$15/day busking. Usually made with goal in mind (e.g., I need $10 for cigarettes and beer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Transwoman</td>
<td>Formerly Houseless</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Drug Dealing; Did not disclose income due to illicit nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudonym</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender/Identity</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Detailed Occupation, Income, and/or Survival Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$40-$50/weekend busking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thunder</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Less than High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Odd-jobs/Busking: Did not put a number to this. Reported “never planning on having money.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Odd jobs including catering, serving, and marijuana picking. Reports never having more than $1000 at one time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Community organizer; $15k/year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Variety of illicit activities including hosting illegal craps game. Described a “really good month” as $2k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>High School Teacher; $45k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>Some college; Student</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Student; Less than $10k/year from student loans and financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Union Organizer; Less than $10k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Part-time Nude-Art Model; approx. 1k/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meadow</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Server; approx. 2k/month depending on tips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michiko</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Small Business Owner; $38k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Small Business Owner; $35k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cis-woman</td>
<td>Housed</td>
<td>Some college; Student</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Server; $500-$750/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Seasonal work picking marijuana; makes up to $3.5/k in season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Cis-man</td>
<td>Houseless</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Recently worked as farm hand; living on savings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: DUMPSTER DIVING INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Background and Materials**
1. How did you become interested in dumpster diving? [Probe: What motivated you? Where did you get the idea?]
2. Was there a time in your life you used to shop and buy things at stores rather than dumpster dive?
3. Can you describe how the change occurred for you? What prompted the change?
4. Can you tell me about the first time you went dumpster diving?
5. What types of consumption do you see yourself participating in? How or where do you get material things like furniture? Clothes? How or where do you get food? Any other ways?
6. Could you walk me through an average day of yours; yesterday, for example?

**Identity and Narrative**
7. Are you a part of any groups that engage in similar types of consumption? Can you tell me about them?
8. Do you consider dumpster diving to be political? How engaged are you in political and social movements generally?
9. If you think about your identity, or your view of yourself, how important is dumpster diving [or freeganism] to that image?
10. How would you explain your motivation for dumpster diving to someone who was unfamiliar to the idea?
11. What do you think about people who consume more traditionally?
12. Do the people in your life know that you consume like this? Friends? Family? How do you think they think about dumpster diving?
13. What kind of impact does dumpster diving have on your life?

**Skills/Sorting Segue**
14. What kind of an impact do you think dumpster diving has on the environment? [Probe: Have you ever thought about the aspect of waste diversion? How do you differentiate between what is actually trash and what is useful?]

**Skills**
15. Do you think anyone could dumpster dive? What would they need to know?
16. How did you learn those things? [Probe: How do you know what plants are edible? How do you know when to dumpster dive?]
17. Could you dumpster dive anywhere? What in Olympia makes dumpster diving possible?
18. Are there any rules or etiquette associated with these sorts of things? How did you learn what was and wasn’t appropriate while doing these things?
19. Do you ever worry about safety when you’re dumpster diving? Can you explain that to me?
Other Impacts (From Alex Barnard – Making the City Second Nature)

20. Are there any other aspects of your life that have changed as a result of dumpster diving? The way you travel, get around, take vacations, your living arrangements?

21. Do you see yourself doing these kinds of things in the future? Is there anything you would like to start doing that you don’t already?

22. Can you imagine a scenario where you wouldn’t dumpster dive? [Probe: have kids, fulltime work, live elsewhere?] If you won the lottery tomorrow, would you still dumpster dive?

23. What are your hopes and fears for your community? Are there any ways you would like to see the natural environment in your area changed? What about beyond your community?

Demographics: That about wraps up the interview but I do need a few demographic details if you don’t mind. Remember you don’t have to answer anything you don’t feel comfortable with, but also all information will be kept confidential.

24. How old are you?
25. Are you currently employed?
26. What’s your income like?
27. Education
28. What racial or ethnic groups do you identify as or with?
29. What’s your gender identity and preferred pronouns?
30. Are you married? Do you have any children?
31. What are your living arrangements right now?

32. Is there anything else you feel I need to know to understand what it is you do? Any questions you expected me to ask, but I didn’t?