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Gifts Among Strangers: The Social Organization of Freecycle Giving

Sofya Aptekar

Abstract

The Freecycle Network, with its millions of members gifting objects to strangers, is a stalwart fixture of the increasingly popular sharing economy. Unlike the wildly profitable Airbnb and Uber, the Freecycle Network prohibits profit-making, or even barter, providing an altruism-based alternative to capitalist markets while keeping tons of garbage out of landfills. Why do millions of people give through Freecycle instead of selling, donating, or throwing away items? Utilizing participant observation of two overlapping Freecycle groups and a survey of their members, I investigate motivations for giving and the social norms that guide it. I find that while members of other internet-based groups have been found to exhibit altruism and solidarity, altruism and solidarity in Freecycle appear to be secondary. Instead, green-washed convenience takes precedence as members are motivated to give in order to de-clutter their homes in an environmentally friendly fashion and in a way that can expiate guilt from overconsumption. Embedded in local contexts and governed by powerful cultural expectations based on gift exchange and charitable donation, Freecycle givers create a set of social structures that combine with the organization's focus on the environment to downplay altruism and elide inequalities.

Keywords: conscious consumption, sharing economy, Freecycle, altruism, environmentalism

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Faced with skyrocketing inequality, worldwide economic recession, and the realities of environmental degradation and climate change, many twenty-first century denizens of advanced capitalist nations, such as the United States, have been exploring lifestyles and practices that pose alternatives to environmental and market-based status quo (Allard, Davidson, and Matthaei 2008; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Brown 2013; Carfagna et al. 2014; Cole 2014; Hinton and Goodman 2010; Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney 2011; Lorenzen 2012; Luke 1998; Peattie 2010; Pettit and Sheppard 1992; Schor 2010; Willis and Schor 2012). Many of these alternatives are being facilitated and shaped by online platforms and internet-mediated organizing, from online time banking and barter systems to smartphone apps that rate consumer goods based on sustainability of production practices. Some, such as the apartment-sharing website, Airbnb, and ride share applications, Lyft and Uber, have become ways of generating profits for venture capitalists, while being hailed in the public sphere as culture-shifting movements (Tanz 2014). The Freecycle Network, a non-profit organization in existence since 2003, has not joined this profitable branch of the sharing economy, and remains committed to its original goals of reducing consumer waste while helping neighbors help neighbors through giving gifts to strangers, no strings attached. With a few simple rules, a handful of staff, and little in the way of enforcement mechanisms, this decentralized collective facilitates a massive flow of goods among over 8 million people. Tons of specific articles, such as used clothing, furniture, and electronics, are advertised through online message boards, and distributed to interested individuals without exchanging money or bartering. With controversy gathering around its profit-making cousins, does Freecycle represent a purer form of sharing economy, providing an alternative to capitalist markets while promoting community and altruistic behavior? How does it fit in the debates over

the political potential of a proliferating field of alternative consumer practices, known under various labels, including ethical and conscious consumption (Willis and Schor 2012)?

To answer these questions, I investigate the motivations of Freecycle members and analyze the social norms that guide their giving. People who participate in this gift economy often do not know the recipients of their gifts, nor will they encounter them again. Why do so many give in this way? What explains the giving behavior of Freecycle members: is it altruism, solidarity, indirect reciprocity, concern about the environment, or some combination of the above? Moreover, what, in addition to the frills-free online platforms, structures Freecycle giving? What social norms and moral principles organize giving behavior through Freecycle? Results of the study indicate that altruism and solidarity are secondary when it comes to motivations of Freecycle members who give away things to strangers. De-cluttering one's home and desire to reduce environmental degradation are more salient, as well as gratification from a good deed that sometimes expiates overconsumption. I term this combination of motives 'green-washed convenience'. Internet-based structures of interaction and exchange refract and are shaped by dominant cultural schemata and material inequality.

Freecycle is part of the rapidly growing number of alternative consumer practices that reflect a preoccupation with the plight of the environment and, to a lesser extent, labor practices. The emergence and subsequent mainstreaming and commodification of fairly traded goods and organic food are indicative of a cultural shift – primarily among middle class consumers in wealthy countries – in the meanings attached to consumption (Brown 2013; Cole 2014; Johnston et al. 2011; Lorenzen 2012; Willis and Schor 2012). Freecycle is an explicitly environmentalist organization, with a mission to keep 'stuff' out of landfills, tapping into growing interest in practices that reduce one's environmental footprint, such as recycling, reusing water bottles,

buying local produce, taking public transportation or cycling (Hinton and Goodman 2010). Luka Carfagna and colleagues (2014) show that these new sets of tastes, meanings, and identities comprise an *eco-habitus*. The middle and upper middle class phenomenon of downshifting, or living a more balanced, simpler life by cutting back on excessive material possessions can be viewed as part of this *eco-habitus*, and has been demonstrated to operate in the context of Freecycle (Nelson, Rademacher, and Paek 2007). As I detail below, environmentalist concerns were foregrounded by Freecycle members in this study as well, although they were not the only reason people chose to give their used items to strangers.

Some view these newly popular consumer practices as a way for people to assuage guilt and anxiety without challenging the system that produces injustice and environmental degradation (Cole 2014; Cook and Crang 1996; Featherstone 2011; Luke 1998; Pettit and Sheppard 1992; Szasz 2007; Zizek 2009). A social psychological experiment even showed that buying green products is associated with subsequent ethical violations (Mazar and Zhong 2010). Others point to empirical evidence that ethical or conscious consumer orientations reflect a significant cultural shift and do not preclude collective action or genuine interest in change (Lorenzen 2012; Micheletti and Stolle 2008; Schor 2010; Willis and Schor 2012). Examining how Freecycle works can contribute to this ongoing debate. At the same time, it is important to note that Freecycle presents an alternative to the mainstream economy, while many other ethical or conscious consumer practices occur through the dominant market system. In this way, it is part of the increasingly popular solidarity economy, which distributes goods and services outside of the mainstream economy, sometimes by foregoing individual ownership, and often by building communities and solidarities, such as through local currencies, time banks, and barter systems (Allard et al. 2008; Botsman and Rogers 2010; Carfagna et al 2014; Herrmann 1997,

2006). While farther removed from the cycle of consumerism, these alternative practices may still depend on and reflect the dominant capitalist processes and hierarchies, which is what I conclude from my examination of why people give through Freecycle.

This study is less focused on what kind of people participate in alternative practices of ethical or conscious consumption than on explaining how the massive gift giving economy of Freecycle operates on the micro level and how members understand their giving actions. In this way, it contributes to cultural approaches to studying consumer behavior as life narratives, identities, and tastes (e.g. Brown 2013; Carfagna et al 2014; Lorenzen 2012). At first sight, giving on Freecycle appears to be driven by altruism, defined as desire to intentionally benefit another person without expecting a reward (Krebs and Van Hestern 1992; Macaulay and Berkowitz 1970). I rely on this widely shared definition and its emphasis on helping specific others (Simmons 1991), rather than a larger and more amorphous entities such as humanity or the planet. There are debates about the existence of altruism, with some scholars, particularly those working from within strict rational choice frameworks, pointing to implausibility of pure forms of altruism, and others seeking empirical evidence to prove its existence (Piliavin 2009). Following Kieran Healy (2004), my analysis departs from the assumption that altruism does exist as behavior and motivation, and focuses on its shape and social determinants. I examine how Freecycle members decide to give to strangers, and to what extent benefit to the recipient serves as a motivating factor, whether alone or mixed with other motivations, including the “warm glow” of giving (Andreoni 1990).

As shown by Healy (2004) in his study of organ donation, altruism can be driven by explicit efforts of organizations. Although the stakes are lower in the case presented here, giving through Freecycle does not happen in the context of established relationships, making it

especially important to consider the role of the organization in encouraging (or discouraging) altruistic behavior. Research on other online platforms shows that altruism does explain some of the helpful and giving behavior observed. For instance, in a study of open-source software support forums, Giangiaco Bravo (2010) found that a core group of participants were motivated by providing help to other users, ensuring the success of the forum.

Altruism is not the only way to understand Freecycle giving. Another possibility is that Freecycle members see their behavior as a form of charitable donation, which is predicated on an unequal relationship between givers and recipients. Donors often have the power to control the behavior of the recipients, and accepting charity comes with expectations of appropriate behavior, such as expressions of gratitude, proof of worthiness, and subordination (Zelizer 1997). Donations that take place in an organizational framework can become divorced from the actual needs of the recipients and operate largely on a symbolic level (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). When employed by large corporations, charitable donations become a marketing tool and a way for consumers to assuage guilt about excess consumption and privilege (Brown 2013; Zizek 2009). The leaders of Freecycle do not frame their organization through altruism or charitable donation, but as a gift economy. Gift exchange is constitutive of relationships between givers and receivers, and has long been thought to contribute to solidarity (Berking 1999; Carrier 1991; Komter 2007; Mauss 1990[1923]; Simmel 1950). By giving, the giver achieves a more powerful and morally superior position, placing the receiver of the gift in debt and obligating them to ritual expressions of gratitude (Berking 1999). Freecycle is not a system of direct gift exchange, but rather one-directional gifting within a (predominantly) one-time-only pairing of partners who do not know each other. Nevertheless, the gift-giving schemata are so entrenched that they affect

behavior of individuals and the organization of gifting systems even in a one-time, indirect exchange situation (Giesler 2006).

Since Freecycle members give predominantly to strangers and there is no barter, giving could be fueled by a generalized exchange rather than a direct exchange of gifts. In generalized exchange, people give gifts expecting to receive benefits from someone in the larger group or organization (Bearman 1997; Molm, Collett, and Schaefer 2007). There are different types of generalized exchange, from the chain-generalized exchange described by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), where the gifts flow in a circle, to pure generalized exchanges, such as reviewing journal articles or donating blood or organs (Healy 2004; Molm et al. 2007). Robb Willer, Francis Flynn, and Sonia Zak (2012) used Freecycle as an example of a generalized gift exchange to examine the relationship between the form of exchange and levels of solidarity. Comparing Freecycle to Craigslist's direct exchanges, they found higher levels of solidarity among Freecycle users, mediated by their identification with the group. Generalized exchange appears to structure the workings of other online groups, such as technical advice forums (Bravo 2010; Smith and Kollock 1999) and music sharing platforms (Giesler 2006), and can build a sense of community among the users. However, my findings suggest that generalized exchange does not provide much leverage in explaining the giving behavior on Freecycle.

While facilitating investigation of social exchange, altruism, and social solidarity, a study of Freecycle can also serve as an empirical barometer of twenty-first century trends in the way people embedded in complex and unequal contexts understand and grapple with ongoing climate change and growing economic inequality. How much of the giving is driven by altruism, entrenched gift-giving and charity norms, self-interest in a generalized exchange community, and environmentalist considerations? The explicit and implicit rules that govern relations between

Freecycle members help reveal the social structures that enable Freecycle to function and evaluate its potential for building alternative social systems.

In the following sections, I provide a brief overview of how Freecycle works, and describe the methodology of the study. Analysis is presented in two sections, one focused on why people give through Freecycle, and the other on the social structure of the gift giving and the rules and norms that govern it. I conclude by discussing how my findings fit into debates over ethical or conscious consumption and the sharing economy and contribute to understandings of online exchange platforms and popular responses to environmental degradation.

<A> Freecycle

Freecycle was started in Arizona in 2003 to help local recycling enthusiasts give away reuseable items. Its official mission is “to build a worldwide gifting movement that reduces waste, saves precious resources and eases the burden on our landfills while enabling our members to benefit from the strength of a larger community” (Freecycle 2013b). Members use one of the 5000 local online groups to advertise things they want to give away and request things they would like to receive (See Figure 1). Posting requires membership, which is free of charge. The handful of staff members are funded by sponsors, grants, and donations, while the local groups are managed by volunteer moderators.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Freecycle mandates rules to be followed by local groups, primarily concerning restrictions on what can be offered, namely objects that are “free, legal, and appropriate for all ages” (Freecycle

2013a). The job of the volunteer moderators includes taking down posts that violate these restrictions. Freecycle members are not allowed to trade or barter and are directed to other organizations that do so, with a reminder that with Freecycle, there are no strings attached. This is defined to mean that goods are handed over from one party to another without any expectation of a return gift, service, or payment. Rule violators are supposed to be banned, but in a semi-anonymous online context, even a geographically localized one, it is simple to rejoin under a new moniker. People post under usernames, and it is possible for members to look each other's posting history.

As mentioned above, Michelle Nelson, Mark Rademacher, and Hye-Jin Paek (2007) used the organization to examine civic participation among 'downshiffters', and Willer, Flynn, and Zak (2012) compared it to Craigslist to investigate generalized exchange and solidarity. My study differs from these two in that I am interested in the everyday social and normative mechanisms that allow Freecycle to function, rather than using it as site for studying lifestyles or forms of exchange.

<A> Methods

This article reports on empirical findings of three years of participant observation (2008-2011) as a member of two overlapping local Freecycle groups, as well as the results of an online survey of their members conducted in the summer of 2010, an interview with the group moderator, and analysis of moderator handbook and other organizational materials. One of the Freecycle groups is based in a small suburban town close to two major Northeastern cities, and the other in the encompassing county. The town is surrounded by suburbs of various levels of affluence, as well as areas of concentrated poverty.

I joined Freecycle without intending to study it, but soon became interested in it as a sociologist after observing interesting patterns in social norms around giving and accepting gifts. There are two major types of posts on Freecycle: offer and wanted. As a participant observer, I posted in both categories, as well as responding to both kinds of posts. Over the course of three years, I posted offers of various objects (50 times total), selected recipients out of those who responded, and arranged for pick-up via email and phone. Most of these objects were children's toys and clothing, and almost every one of my posts elicited interest from multiple people. Less frequently, I responded to offers and wanted posts, connecting with other members to either pick up an item, or to offer an item that was wanted. For example, I responded to an offer of a dining room table, exchanged several emails with the member who posted it, and drove to pick it up from a neighboring town a few days later. On several occasions, I posted wanted requests, such as when I asked for a child's bicycle, which elicited suggestions of where to get an affordable used one, rather than any offers. As a participant observer, I also read through posts made by others in emailed digests three to four times a week, compiling a list of posts that were particularly revealing of members' attitudes and understandings. I noted patterns in the text of the posts, as well as in the messages emailed to everyone by the moderators.

Although participant observation sporadically revealed information on how some members understood giving, a more direct approach became necessary to gather additional material and supplement participant observation findings. To further explore the patterns I was identifying during participant observation, I developed a survey to collect data on how other members understood Freecycle giving. The survey was emailed by the moderators to people who were members of one or both overlapping Freecycle groups. The open-ended questions were designed to elicit reflection on giving through Freecycle, the boundaries of the Freecycle

activity, and history and extent of involvement with Freecycle. I prompted participants to explain how they chose recipients of their offers, and asked about other ways of giving and receiving goods: buying, charitable donation, informal networks of friends and family, and traditional gift giving. In all, 80 people responded to the survey, the vast majority within a few days following solicitation. To clarify responses where needed, I sent follow up emails to 26 respondents, of whom 13 responded.

Eighty is a small portion of the total membership of the two groups, each numbering around 7000 members, although the moderators estimate a one-third to one-half overlap between the groups. The purpose of the survey, with its open-ended questions, was not to be able to generalize to the entire population of Freecycle members, but rather to shed light on meanings attached to Freecycle activities and social norms guiding Freecycle interactions. Only a small core of people is actively engaged in posting, and most of these members post offers. The respondents of the survey were also predominantly posters of offers, which allowed me to analyze their understandings and regulation of giving through Freecycle. In order to compare survey respondents to Freecycle members who post through the organization website, I drew a random sample of 30 posters in one of the groups in 2010. For each of these members, I looked up the history of posts. The majority (63 percent) posted almost exclusively offers, 17 percent posted mostly requests, and only 17 percent had a relative balance of offers and requests. Similarly, most of the survey respondents were givers, participating in Freecycle to offer things, and I focus on analyzing the givers' understanding of Freecycle activity. Of the 68 respondents who identified their gender, 55 were women, similar to other studies that have highlighted the disproportionate participation of women in alternative consumption practices (Carfagna et al. 2014; Willis and Schor 2012).

The survey elicited textual responses that varied from a sentence to multiple paragraphs. I analyzed these responses, as well as the notes from participant observation, both deductively (e.g. looking for evidence of social norms) and inductively. I also quantified some responses, including the extent of participation in Freecycle by friends and relatives of the respondent and the share of posts that offered rather than asked for things. All names are pseudonyms.

<A> Green-washed convenience

Many Freecycle givers that I surveyed appeared to be driven by de-cluttering imperatives. They wanted to clear their homes of clutter, and they wanted it gone as conveniently as possible. Amy, who wrote that 99 percent of her Freecycle activity is giving, answered the question about the difference between Freecycle and giving through charity or to family and friends this way: “It’s win-win. I get to clean out my house, people get free stuff.” Freecycle was a time-saving device because the giving was done entirely at the giver’s discretion. In response to the same question, Barbara, who posted exclusively offers, explained:

It is quick, easy – you don’t have to find a person who might need your stuff among those you know – usually someone answers that needs it very quickly when you post it.

Why did people choose to give through Freecycle instead of donating to charities? Some charities even offer to pick up donations from the donor’s home. Again, it came down to convenience:

The ability to get rid of one thing at a time. I don't have room to store multiple items until there is enough for me to take to donate. There are trucks that pick up, but they don't always fit my time-line. I have bought a new piece of furniture and want the old one gone ASAP with minimal effort from me, Freecycle allows for that.

(Elizabeth, only posts offers, in response to question about the difference between Freecycle, charity, and giving to friends and family)

In addition, respondents explained that many items on offer through Freecycle are not accepted by charities. Selling used items, which can be done offline (yard sales, personal contacts) or online (Ebay, Craigslist), was also deemed inconvenient, including by the 20 percent who did report trying to sell things before offering them on Freecycle. In response to the survey question on whether she has considered selling things she posts on Freecycle, Allison, who estimates that 98 percent of her posts are offers, said:

I have had garage sales in the past. Yes, I make a couple hundred dollars, but it is so much work... items must be priced and all brought out at the same time [emphasis in the original]... and it's weather dependent.. it can always be a rainy day... and you get people who try to talk you down from 25 cents to a dime... really! ...Then, whatever doesn't sell has to be brought back in at the end of the day. With Freecycle, I can post a few items at a time and make arrangements for pick up. The post reaches so many more people than would come to a garage sale, so pretty random items can go with Freecycle that would never move at a garage sale. I guess if I lost my job I'd have a garage sale, but fortunately I'm in a position to give items away instead.

Note this Freecycler's reference to her class position, which allowed her to choose convenience over profit. Similarly, selling items online was also seen by many as inconvenient, involving listing fees and attracting unreliable people. Thus, giving through Freecycle appears to be more convenient than other ways of getting rid of unwanted used items.

But giving through Freecycle is not entirely hassle-free. One has to post the item online, field responses to the listing, and organize a pick up time and location. During participant observation, I found that it could take multiple email or phone exchanges to set up a time when a member could come pick up things I was offering. One of the reasons that Freecycle participants do not simply throw out their unwanted items is that it is a rewarding activity associated with positive emotions:

Freecycle is a way to give to someone whom you don't know, and yet see the reward. It is different than giving to charity, b/c there is a direct personal reward, in seeing the recipient. (Who often tells you how much they appreciate the gift. Or you get to see the kid, that will use the stuff). And there are no overhead costs (nor a charitable tax deduction). [parentheses in the original]. [*Jennifer, posts offers only, in response to question about the difference between Freecycle, charity, and giving to friends and family*]

Jennifer is expressing a common sentiment about the good feelings one gets when giving on Freecycle. The good feelings stem in part from the altruistic intent to help others, and in part from being the object of gratitude. It was not rare to contrast giving through Freecycle to charity

precisely because charitable donations, such as dropping off a bag of used clothes at a local Goodwill, do not provide an opportunity to 'see the reward'. I asked Amy, who was quoted earlier as referring to Freecycle giving as a 'win-win', to elaborate on her explanation:

With Freecycle you get the gratification of seeing who you have helped. Salvation Army, etc. is anonymous. Another example, I gave my grandfather's walker away on Freecycle, and the woman who came to pick it up was so overjoyed that she could receive such a nice walker for free. We had a very nice conversation, and I felt sure that she was going to thoroughly enjoy something that we had spent our hard-earned money on.

So a big component of giving to help others, which contains elements of an altruistic orientation, is tied to the enjoyment of the gratitude of the recipient. Even in the absence of an existing social relationship with the recipient of the gift, gift-giving is rewarding for the givers who construct themselves as generous people (Berking 1999).

The Freecycle organizational structure allowed for better circulation of information than would be the case for much of charitable giving. Respondents mentioned that they enjoyed having evidence that the item they were giving away was needed and wanted. Many referred to the 'match' or 'fit' that Freecycle generates between givers and recipients. Allison, who I quoted earlier on the inconvenience of garage sales, went on to recount a particularly poignant story of a great fit:

My favorite Freecycle story is a man who replied to my Mobile Oil bank offer. He had worked there when they gave them away, and he was very upset that his young daughter

had destroyed his ‘trying to get the pennies out.’ He said that, ‘she's still alive, but...’

Anyway, he could not believe that I was offering one (I actually had about 4!) and he said he'd leave work right then to come pick up if that meant he'd get it! And, he assured me that his daughter would be MUCH older before she was allowed to touch the bank. I almost didn't even post them, I thought they were so ‘random’ that they would get no replies. You just never know.

This fit was contrasted with the process of donating items to charity, with which, as one respondent put it: “you can never really be sure ... that it will get claimed.” One respondent even praised Freecycle as being better than giving gifts to loved ones because you really knew that the person wanted the gift.¹

Giving on Freecycle allows the gift giver to know that the gift is wanted and needed. Altruistic desires to help are gratified by the match of two parties over an object that is no longer desired by one party but is desirable to the other. At the same time as this desire to help others who really need what you have can be considered altruistic, it is important to remember that the givers are attempting to get rid of unwanted items, and that many are privileging this form of giving due to convenience and easily-attained emotional gratification. As I show below, demanding evidence that a gift is wanted and needed is part of exerting power.

None of my respondents appeared to be solely motivated by helping others. Instead, I observed green-washed convenience: altruism mixed with de-cluttering imperatives, as well as environmentalist orientations. In fact, my own initial motivation for giving through Freecycle was to avoid throwing away gently used items my child had outgrown and that others could use. As I discovered was common, giving made me feel good because my gifts helped others, but

even more so because I had a less cluttered home without the guilt of throwing still-good things in the trash. Freecycle does keep a huge volume of material out of landfills: estimated 500 tons each day (Freecycle 2013c). Even when the items seemed meant to be thrown out, Freecycle givers recounted how the online platform allowed them to keep them out of a landfill by connecting to someone who did have use for them:

I can't give a broken TV to charity. I can give it to someone through Freecycle. It's amazing how many people can repair broken electronics. I recently gave a broken TV to someone who was taking an electronics repair course. I like that he has a TV to fix and use and that my TV is not sitting in a landfill somewhere.

(Vincent, posts 90 percent offers, in response to question about the difference between Freecycle, charity, and giving to friends and family)

Except for one notable exception – a respondent who railed against recycling in general – Freecycle users I surveyed appeared to emphasize the environmentalist component of Freecycle, namely keeping things out of landfills. In stressing environmentalism and connecting emotional rewards of Freecycle giving to saving the environment, these Freecycle users were similar to the ethical consumers who see environmental responsibility through individual lens of identity (Carfagna et al. 2014). At the same time, theirs was a conservationist activity characterized by minimal effort, as stated by a respondent who only posted offers:

I approach Freecycle from a somewhat selfish position. I want to get rid of my stuff fast but I don't want it to fill up a landfill. (*Sidney, in response to question on choosing the recipient of Freecycle offer.*)

Freecycle enabled de-clutterers to avoid adding to the iconic landfills, and they felt good that someone else avoided buying new, reducing overall societal consumption, even if not their personal consumption.

In fact, giving on Freecycle can sometimes aid a consumption-driven lifestyle. For example, someone may buy a new couch knowing how easy it will be to get rid of the old one through Freecycle. More directly, hyper-consumption can be morally cancelled out by giving away the excess:

This is why I don't shop at Sam's Club any more: I'm never going to need all of these.

What was I thinking? Please help me forget this painful episode of over-buying by giving these DVD cases a good home.

In this post that appeared during the period of my participant observation, the environmentalist orientation of the Freecycle member made her feel bad about an episode of 'over-buying', yet she did not return the excessive DVD cases to the store. Her consumerism and her altruistic impulses came together in an offer of new items to fellow members of the online community. We cannot be sure how much of this decision was due to convenience of someone picking up these DVD cases compared to returning them to the store. But it does allow this Freecycler a measure of consumer redemption: canceling out overbuying by being green and altruistic (Zizek

2009). In this case, like ethical consumption, Freecycle provides an outlet that redeems consumerist practices that have come under criticism among those with eco-habitus (Carfagna et al. 2014; Cole 2014)

The desire to preserve the environment was common among respondents, and it was something that many felt made them a like-minded community. But this orientation served to hide inequalities between those who gave and those who received Freecycled objects. The following quote from Barbara, who was quoted earlier on the convenience of Freecycle giving, explicitly works to equalize such inequalities:

The idea of Freecycle – that of keeping the items out of landfill and – to help people not to have to buy new – is really ecologically based, and that is a difference too. People don't have to be needy – they just need to want your item. *(In response to a follow up question to elaborate on how Freecycle is different from other forms of giving.)*

Indeed, recipients of Freecycle gifts do not necessarily have to be needier than the givers. In principle, they could just be more interested in using recycled goods or a particular item. But analysis of how Freecycle members in my study explained their giving reveals that they did not really think of the two parties in Freecycle giving as the same:

I think it is a whole new economy - I sometimes give to charities that are on Freecycle. I hardly ever go to stores like Kohls or the mall anymore. I am really excited about this lifestyle. Poor people do not have to struggle as much. Others can just be environmentally

conscious or frugal. (*Diane, posts 99 percent offers, in response to question about the difference between Freecycle, charity, and giving to friends and family*)

Note the reference to ‘lifestyle’ for those like Diane, who avoids stores that evoke ordinary, unethical, non-green consumption. Diane was enthused about a downshifting lifestyle that reduces consumption (Nelson et al. 2007). But she also identified two distinct groups who use Freecycle: poor people who benefit from the gifts or people who are frugal on the one hand, and the environmentally conscious like herself on the other.

The social distance and inequality between the givers and the recipients became especially apparent in responses to questions about Freecycle and the respondents’ social circles. I asked the respondents whether they have given items similar to what they give away on Freecycle to friends, coworkers, or employees. Slightly more than half said that they have not. Their responses indicated that giving through Freecycle is an activity transacted outside the boundaries of one’s social circle. Ellen, who estimated that 99 percent of her posts are offers, responded to this question as follows:

Others [in my social circle] don't really need anything of the nature that I give away.

They need to get rid of things just as much as I do.

People in the givers’ social circles were like them in that they were not interested in acquiring used goods of the type commonly found on Freecycle. The rest of the respondents had given items away to those they personally knew, but in about half of the cases, they specified giving a particular type of item (children’s clothing) to a particular type of personal contact (friends). One

respondent noted that ‘only like-new goes to friends’. In fact, some respondents indicated embarrassment and potential social censure were they to offer items commonly offered on Freecycle to those they knew personally. Gifts bear meaning about the giver and the receiver (Berking 1999), and sometimes, these meanings were best kept among strangers. This was the case for Gabrielle, who posts offers 95 percent of the time:

I suppose I feel more comfortable offering them in an anonymous forum where people don't know me and aren't asking why I have the item in the first place and why I'm giving it away. Plus sometimes I give away things that friends and family have given me, so obviously I wouldn't want them to know that I gave away the things they gave me.

Thus, social as well as an economic distance appeared to characterize Freecycle gift giving. The arm's length, semi-anonymous, one-time quality of Freecycle exchanges built on class inequality to produce a rewarding situation for givers who wanted to de-clutter their homes conveniently while feeling good about helping others and the environment. As mentioned, surveyed Freecycle givers rarely got anything through Freecycle themselves; only two said that they wanted to give things through Freecycle because they have gotten things through it in the past. Most Freecycle givers examined here did not appear to be making their offers in order to reap benefits later when they needed something. For that reason, Freecycle is not a good example of generalized exchange, although its members might feel a sense of community (Willer, Flynn, and Zak 2012).

While not particularly interested in receiving goods on Freecycle and oriented strongly toward de-cluttering their homes, Freecycle givers did show interest in lessening the volume of goods that ends up in landfills and helping people in need. They liked experiencing the gratitude

of those who received their cast-off things, and the feel-good environmentalism that may at times have exacerbated consumerist behavior.

<A> Rules and norms of Freecycle

Having gained some insight into the reasons why people give to strangers, I now turn to the social norms and moral principles that structure Freecycle giving, both formal and implicit. Unlike organizations studied by Healy (2004), Freecycle actively downplays forms of altruism that directly help people in need, hiding inequalities embedded in Freecycle giving and emphasizing environmental imperatives instead. This becomes especially apparent around holiday time in response to ‘sob stories’, in which people describe the dire financial straits in which they find themselves, and list items they need for the holidays. The central organization discourages this practice. Moderators are provided with several versions of a form letter they can send to members to remind them that helping the less fortunate is not the mission of Freecycle, even if it does happen in the course of its normal functioning. One such letter went out to one of the local group examined here:

We understand there is a lot of hardship in our area. There are many people with needs. With that being said, we must remind our members of the mission of The Freecycle Network(TM). We were founded as a recycling community. The fundamental mission of this group is to keep useful items out of landfills. This, alone, is a critical mission with long-reaching global effects that will positively effect [sic] generations to come. There are many charities that deal with specifics of helping families and individuals with temporary needs during times of hardship. Even though the side effect of giving items

away with no strings attached is that we fulfill needs at times, this is not the reason our group was formed. [Freecycle 2013a]

The organization redirected the focus of the giving activity away from discomfoting encounters with relative deprivation and onto an environmentalist goal. There was a sense of a zero-sum game between striving to help those in need and the green goals of reducing landfills. The organizational players delineated the scope of their organization as specifically distinct from charities.

Not everyone agreed about the place of sob stories. The posters of sob stories had defenders and detractors, who engaged in debate over the appropriateness of members sharing their dire economic needs. Such debates were taken down from the site by the moderators as being outside the purview of the organization. Critics of sob stories disliked the seeming greediness of the supplicants, or even chafed at having to see an explanation of needs at all:

Please do not include a story of why you want something, or who it is for. You don't have to justify your request. We kindly ask that you help us to keep the site objective, and simply post WANTED: Item. [*From another example letter provided to moderators, Freecycle 2013a*]

There was a resistance to acknowledge and give voice to inequalities in the local community. Keeping the site 'objective' would allow those browsing through their local listings to avoid being confronted with evidence of need. While downplaying altruism, Freecycle reassured its

members that they were doing good, but through environmentalism, not by helping those in need:

Freecycle exists as a forum to help people give away items that they would otherwise be throwing away. We are here to OFFER things that we have but no longer want or need.

We do not object to wanted posts and in fact, this is an integral part of the cycle of gifting. When we are able to meet needs, as does happen on occasion, that is a wonderful blessing to us all. *[from a sample holiday letter to members, emphasis in the original, Freecycle 2013a]*

The emphasis was on keeping things out of landfills. Helping strangers was a byproduct of the primary mission. Note also the stipulation that offered things be not wanted or needed by the giver, which does not have to be a prerequisite for helping someone.

Although the central organization downplays giving and helping in this way, there are limits to its control of what goes on in the local groups, each of which can have hundreds of postings every week. Freecycle is reproduced via a set of norms, only some of which are explicitly stated in the rules. An examination of these norms reveals a reliance on familiar cultural schemata of gift-giving and charitable donation, even as the central organization strives to distinguish between Freecycle and charity.

Freecycle giving is intended to have no strings attached, but analysis of actual giving contradicts that claim. This is the case even though gift giving occurs between strangers and is often a one-time event. In making offers of objects to strangers, Freecycle users exhibit a mix of expectations common in gift giving and charity. Ordinary gift giving among people who have

pre-existing ties to each other takes place within a complex system of obligations and expectations (Berking 1999). Giving to charity is accompanied by expectations about appropriate behavior by the recipient of charity, as well as measures of control over this recipient (Zelizer 1997). Within the world of Freecycle, these familiar cultural patterns are recreated, despite a lack of social ties and minimal contact between parties.

Freecycle encourages its members to take their time in selecting a recipient of their gift in order to give everyone a chance (Freecycle 2013a). In the survey of local members, I asked how gift givers chose the recipients of their gifts. While the majority of respondents said they generally followed a first come first serve rule, most people simultaneously used a range of strategies that extended their control over the recipient. Many offers receive numerous responses, and givers evaluate how polite, friendly, or personal they are:

I never give to Freecycle people who write - I want that. Or give it to me. I am offering an item and if you would like it, you should have enough manners to ask for it politely.

[Vincent, posts 90 percent offers, in response to question about choosing recipients]

If I get a batch of e-mails at the same time, I look at them to pick the person that writes the friendliest and/or most customized note, and I offer it to that person, 1st. *[Jennifer, posts offers only, in response to question about choosing recipients]*

Expressions of gratitude, proper manners, and appreciation for the giver are the strings attached to Freecycle giving, as in ordinary gift exchange. Such conditions of appropriate behavior are sometimes spelled out in the offers alongside the description of the gift.

As we saw in the case of holiday-time ‘sob stories’, it is considered unacceptable to express urgent need in asking for things through Freecycle. Yet, expressions of need were welcomed and even encouraged by many givers who wanted to know that their gift was wanted and needed, and were seeking gratitude:

I choose the recipients either because they are the first to respond or in some cases, I base it on their explanation of why they need or want the item. With things like baby items I base it on the perceived need of the person asking. My most memorable offer was my 30 year old saxophone. I received over 20 requests for it, most from people who had a saxophone that they were either forced to sell or it was stolen or they couldn't afford an instrument for their child. It was truly heartbreaking. One person wanted it as a decoration, so I would never have given it to them. I ended giving it to the first person who responded who had been forced to sell a saxophone they had. *[Yvonne, posts offers only, in response to question about choosing recipients]*

As in charitable giving, the giver was the judge of how needed the donation was by the recipient, and how the donation would be used. Those who may have seemed more similar in class position to Yvonne, such as the person who wanted the saxophone as a decoration, were rejected in favor of people who showed that their economic situation made it difficult to purchase the instrument. According to the group moderator, sob stories are acceptable in responding to offers because they are private messages that only the givers see. As such, they serve to make givers feel good about their generosity, without having to remind the larger membership of class inequalities.

Evaluations of need and appropriate behavior were often combined in how Freecycle givers chose the recipients of their gifts.

Gift givers exerted control over the recipients of the gift in the narrow window between posting the offer and the final pick up of the object. In addition to properly expressing gratitude and good manners and articulating a need that resonated with the giver, recipients of objects had to avoid appearing to want the item too much. Freecycle givers were wary of people who acted like ‘vultures’ by responding quickly to many different offers. Giving to strangers was an occasion for social censure of behavior that contradicted values held by the giver. I asked respondents whether there were people they would never give to. Laura, who only posted offers, responded:

Never give to? That's a tough one. I guess the only people I would have a problem with are the ones who constantly post that they NEED things without ever OFFERING things and pregnant women looking for baby things who already have children, but cannot afford such things as strollers, high chairs, clothes, etc. I guess that's mean, but with all the forms of birth control out there, women should not be having more children if they cannot afford them.

Another respondent recounted her scorn when she delivered food to the home of a woman she believed to be a poor single mother only to encounter a man with gold chains there, which, to her, signaled that the woman was an undeserving scammer. This is strongly reminiscent of the way charity providers have historically exercised control over the beneficiaries of the charity

(Zelizer 1997). Selection of worthy recipients is sometimes couched in explicitly moral terms, as can be seen in this excerpt of an offer posted on one of the local Freecycle sites:

I plan to email each of you separately who responded to my offer by tonight. But, I want to think of an algorithm first, and how to implement it. The way one would normally do this is to give you a moral quiz, without giving you the answers. The one who gets the highest score would win the item. But, I just can't stand creating mystery about what my moral views are. I prefer to tell you the answer up front and then rely upon your honesty. Your passion for the worth of the cabinet will then decide.

Despite the push to emphasize environmentalist goals above all else, the examination of exchanges made through Freecycle reveals a developed moral framework. Some Freecycle members used giving to exert control over recipients and to judge their lifestyles and behavior. The latter had to conform in order to be chosen, by straddling the line between needy and deserving.

There was also widespread concern and scorn regarding 'no-shows': people who said they would come to pick up the gift and did not do so. The no-shows violate the social order of Freecycle by failing to demonstrate the match between the unwanted object and their need, and by failing to express gratitude. Some members attempted to patch over this breakdown in Freecycle operations by compiling lists of offenders, which they shared with others or used themselves to blacklist those who responded to their offers but did not come to pick up. The semi-anonymous nature of the online platform, however, limits the effectiveness of such measures. There were two other shunned categories: those who were suspected of selling and

those who did not themselves make offers. Several respondents to the survey expressed worry about their gifts being sold. Most admitted that there was no way to tell with certainty whether someone intended to sell, although asking for many different things often was seen as a clue. The sanction of selling reveals how much the familiar patterns of ordinary gift giving are relevant within Freecycle. Selling gifts from friends and family is considered extremely inappropriate. Likewise, charity recipients are expected to gratefully use the donation, not sell it. Along with disliking sellers, a couple of Freecycler givers checked the group archives to see whether potential recipients of the gift ever offered anything themselves, though this concern was rare.

All the attempts to control gift recipients and weed out potential violators do not mean that there was no sense of community. A sizable minority said that they liked offering things on Freecycle because it was a community of environmentally like-minded neighbors, echoing Willer, Flynn, and Zak's (2012) findings on a sense of identification with the group among Freecycle users. While not bringing together those who were already socially close or embedded in the same offline networks, Freecycle created a sense of community, at least among those who gave. However, the growth of community defined by concern about the well-being of fellow members and feelings of solidarity and obligations toward them (Wright 2010:79) conflicted with the work of the organization to frame giving as an environmentally sound way of getting rid of unwanted things, with helping those with fewer resources delegated to a side effect.

<A> Conclusion

This study investigated why people give to strangers through Freecycle, and how formal and informal social structures shape Freecycle gift giving. Rather than expecting to benefit from gifts

from fellow members in the future, most Freecycle givers were interested in de-cluttering their homes in the most convenient manner, and felt good that they were simultaneously being green and helping others. By greenwashing convenience, the organization worked to elide inequalities and downplay altruism by redirecting explicit accounts of need to charities and refocusing the giving on keeping things out of landfills rather than helping out others. But Freecycle members often were interested in more than environmentalism, imbuing giving through Freecycle with additional meanings. Helping others was not simply a byproduct of Freecycle giving, as the Freecycle leaders framed it, but operated in a context of class inequality, with givers attempting to control the recipients' behavior, holding expectations common to charity, or drawing moral stipulations about need and deservingness. This became evident especially in selecting the person who would receive the gift, when moral boundaries and inequalities were drawn and enforced. Members who gave through Freecycle used the simple online platform and basic rule structure to fulfill needs and interests that extended beyond the desire to keep things out of landfills.

Freecycle organizes and facilitates a set of alternative practices that is part of the growing field of ethical or conscious consumption in wealthy countries. Freecycle's mission of giving instead of throwing away is indicative of the shift in the meanings attached to the cycle of consumption. Those who give through Freecycle are conscious about the fate of their discarded consumer items, and see it as their responsibility to dispose of them in a way that maximizes their use value – by others. Do such practices and awareness challenge the system that creates environmental degradation? It might reduce individual environmental footprints by adding tons of items to the pool of consumer goods that would have otherwise exited it when they were thrown away. Yet, Freecycle also aims to channel a flow of goods, rather than address its source,

by stressing what happens to items already acquired, rather than reducing consumption in the first place. In some cases, it was evident that Freecycle giving allowed people to assuage their guilt over excessive consumption. While one can argue that Freecycle does pose challenges to the status quo in environmental stewardship, there is less doubt that it fails to challenge local economic inequalities. Rather, it may even rely on these inequalities in the flow of good from givers to recipients, with social distance and differences in need paramount in understanding the behavior of the givers. This is reminiscent of Keith Brown's (2013) findings about the tendency of most consumers of fairly traded goods to avoid explicitly engaging with inequalities between producers and consumers. Although Freecycle activity does not in itself preclude collective action or interest in changing the system, at least in the case of the groups studied, it appeared to operate in conjunction with the mainstream consumer economy and existing sets of inequalities, even occasionally tamping down member attempts to grapple with needs of others.

Unlike buying fairly traded coffee, organic produce, or shoes from a company that promises to donate half of its profits to charity, Freecycle circumscribes its realm of activity to exclude buying. Of course, the acquisition of new consumer items is necessary to have things to give away through Freecycle and things to keep out of the landfill. Nevertheless, this demarcation of Freecycle activity sets it apart from ethical or conscious consumption practices that are more centered around choices to acquire items. By emphasizing giving rather than buying, Freecycle places itself into the category of sharing or solidarity economy, which includes a myriad of practices, from local currencies to urban farms, food swaps, and skill exchanges (Schor 2010). Recently, some of these practices have become opportunities for profit, most notably Airbnb. One could argue that Freecycle, by insisting on excluding monetary payment and framing its scope as community building (unlike the very similar Craigslist, which has a free

section), is a purer form of sharing or solidarity economy. However, the ease with which some elements of the sharing or solidarity economy have become sources of profit, critical examinations of alternative economic practices (e.g. Dubois, Schor, and Carfagna 2014), and findings presented here point to the ways in which this activity is embedded in existing economic relations and cannot be considered apart from the larger social context in which it operates.

This pessimistic assessment of Freecycle as an alternative to capitalism does not mean that organizational forms such as Freecycle cannot help create new modes of social relations and build solidarity in communities. Freecycle does seem to operate hand and hand with consumerism by pacifying consumer anxiety about their personal role in environmental degradation and draws on cultural forms like charity, which reproduce inequalities between those who give and those who receive. At the same time, I uncovered the work that goes into circumscribing its potential for deeper forms of altruism and social solidarity in local communities. If keeping things out of landfills and helping those who have less were not purposefully framed as competing imperatives, Freecycle could directly encourage altruism and redistribution of resources by acknowledging local realities of inequality. It could also deepen commitment to reducing consumption by promoting looking for goods on Freecycle before buying new, bringing it closer to a generalized exchange, where members give expecting to receive a gift in the future, intensifying social solidarity, community building, and valorizing alternatives to consumption itself, not only alternatives to disposal. Allowing Freecycle members to engage with each other on issues of local class inequality, moral considerations, and environmentalist priorities instead of deleting posts that do not pertain narrowly to offering or asking for items, would increase Freecycle's promise as a collective alternative. Both in terms of environmental stewardship and reducing inequality, the organization can promote moving away

from individualistic solutions, such as recycling or charity, to addressing more systemic problems. Modifying organizational structures could maximize Freecycle's potential for encouraging altruism (Healy 2004) and reducing consumerism, although given its structural dependence on consumption within the mainstream capitalist economy, its ultimate impact may be limited.

The Freecycle Network allows members to efficiently dispose of unwanted items in a way that maximizes their utility for others, which would be much more time consuming without the online platform that facilitates it. The technology that creates this interface has clearly tapped into an interest shared by millions of people worldwide. Yet, there are features of Freecycle that further set it apart from similar online platforms, such as the free section of Craigslist, which allows users to post unwanted items. Unlike Craigslist, Freecycle requires membership prior to posting, features a palpable presence of moderators and reminders of the organizational mission, and allows members to look up the history of each others' posts. It allows users to combine anonymity and the fleeting nature of connections with some ability to control the exchanges through the selection of gift recipients. The resultant sense of community and control encourages an easy fit with familiar tropes of charitable donation and gift giving, with their concomitant moral and emotional rewards. Unlike in several previous studies of online exchanges and communities (Bravo 2010; Diekmann et al 2014; Giesler 2006; Smith and Kollock 1999; Wright 2010), which explored reciprocity and altruism, I show how online exchanges are inextricably situated in the offline social contexts of the participants, especially the inequalities that become reproduced through the online activities.

The study of Freecycle, a thriving and growing organization with an environmentalist mission, contributes to our understanding of how residents of affluent societies deal with

environmental degradation. Through tireless labor of numerous local volunteers, Freecycle diverts tons of garbage from landfills and has spread like wildfire across the world, gaining millions of new members in just a few years, all on a shoestring budget and with only a handful of paid staff. Findings presented here support previous research on Freecycle in connecting participation in Freecycle giving to elements of eco-habitus, such as downshifting lifestyles (Nelson et al. 2007) and increased consciousness about environmental consequences of consumerism (Carfagna et al 2014). At the same time, in its present shape, Freecycle is emblematic of the American environmentalist movement in its reliance on individualistic rather than collective cultural framing of environmental problems and solutions (Markle 2014; Szasz 2007). Most importantly, analysis of Freecycle shows how environmentally-conscious consumers pay attention to the disposal of consumer goods, rather than only their production.

The findings of the study were based on research conducted primarily on those who give through Freecycle, who are the most easily reached and visible group of Freecycle members. Future research should explore the other side of Freecycle exchanges, particularly the material situations and cultural understandings of those who receive things on Freecycle. The two Freecycle groups studied here may be similar or different from other Freecycle groups in the United States and other countries. It is possible that the social order in these two groups relies on class inequality to a greater extent than other places, since they are located in an area where affluence and poverty exist in close geographical proximity. A comparative study of Freecycle groups would elucidate the role of local inequalities and cultural patterns such as eco-habitus and ethical consumption in shaping the motivations and identities of Freecycle members.

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¹ The emphasis placed on not wasting echoes Gould's (1993) analysis of social movement participants and their concerns about wasted efforts. However, the Freecycle context is different in that information about what others do is desired not from movement participants in analogous positions, but from gift recipients who are the less powerful party in the exchange.

Figure 1. Example of postings on the local freecycle website. More details are available to members by clicking on the a heading. Information identifying the local group has been blocked out.

74086 **OFFER: [redacted] Food & Wine magazines**
OFFERING 2 Food & Wine magazines from 2009 Find some great new recipes! Easy pickup outside garage door, off Route 1 [redacted]...

74088 **Thank you, Freecycleers!**
We just wanted to say thank you to the [redacted] Freecycle network for having been so generous with us during our brief time in [redacted] Over the past five...

74089 **PPU: OFFER: [redacted] - Bon Appetit food magazines**
These magazines are pending pickup. ... OFFERING 12 Bon Appetit magazines from 2009-2010 Find some great new recipes!...

74090 **OFFER: Booster seat for kitchen table [redacted] North**
We have a booster seat to give away. It was used by our two-year-old at the kitchen table. It sits right on top of a regular chair. We have really liked it...

74091 **Reoffers: give as Christmas gifts?!**
72 oz [redacted] Mug plastic with straw 4 Bissell vacuum cleaner bags (fits digipro canister vacuums 6900 series) Assorted Candles - never opened, never used...

74092 **Re-offer: girls coat size 6x. [redacted]**
Due to no-show again, I have a girls black coat size 6x. Pretty nice and think. It does need to be wash since I was giving to my by the school to offer here...

74093 **Wanted - Queen-size Mattress and/or bedframe**
We need a queen-size mattress and/or bed frame. We are trying to replace our futon because the mattress that comes with it is not comfortable for prolonged use...

74094 **OFFER: Moving Boxes [redacted]**
Hello All: This is my last and final call for anyone moving and needing boxes. If noone comes to get them tonight, they're going in the recycling bin!...

74095 **OFFERED: De Longhi coffee maker (broken)**
Anyone interested in this 14 cup coffee maker that just stopped working (is only a few yrs old)? Maybe someone handy can fix it. Has gold filter so don't...

74096 **Offered: Grey plastic edging bricks, [redacted]**
Used in landscaping beds. Also have most of the stakes you will need to secure them. Fast pick up appreciated...