

McClelland

# Co-operative Metatheatre: An Old & Unappealing Script? Charlotte's Account

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## ABSTRACT

This paper was originally written as part fulfilment of a Management BA degree at the University of Lincoln, United Kingdom, 2003. It is a mini-consultancy project, analysing the Lincoln Co-op using critical and postmodern tools and theories including Boje's (2002, 2002a) framework of metatheatre, storytelling (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000; Nymark, 2000) and the notion of reflexivity (Currie, 2003; Golding and Currie, 2000; Woolgar, 1991). It stems from undergraduate work and discussions with both academics and employees of the Lincoln Co-op at the University. It is based upon personal experiences, desk-based research and ethnographic type research within Lincoln Co-operative organisation.

## INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper is to consider the problematic perception of the Lincoln Co-operative's 'public image'. This idea was conceived in 2003 on a company visit to the University of Lincoln when undergraduate students were asked to undertake a mini consultancy project on this theme. This early meeting certainly left some wondering "Is the Co-op's image old and dowdy?" "Which customers is it trying to target?" "What is the 'co-operative movement, and is it relevant at all?"

Taking a reflective and critical (possibly alternative/postmodern?) approach to the challenge of organisational analysis lends itself to using reflective and critical tools. Boje's (2002) framework of metatheatre is thus presented as the main evaluative tool/theory within this paper, with reasoning forthwith. This is supported by other notions including reflexivity and organisational storytelling; their relevance and exploration also being uncovered in due course.

The paper begins with a description of the co-operative movement and an overview of the current position of the Lincoln Co-op, concentrating mainly on the grocery retail sector. This will provide the reader with some

context for the analysis. This will be followed by an introduction to Boje's (2002) framework and aforementioned theories.

I continue by presenting two 'organisational stories', encapsulating some contemporary interpretations of the Lincoln Co-op. They are the essence of the study, providing opportunities for analysis and deconstruction. The deconstruction itself will toy with the theatrical nature of metatheatre, employ language games, and at the same time attempt to cross reference with the Lincoln Co-op's ideals: this proving to be a useful way of grounding my assertions with reality.

Finally I will draw conclusions and make recommendations in order for the management of Lincoln Co-op to tackle what they perceive to be fundamental problems in perceptions of image and their organisational mission.

## THE CO-OP: SOME HISTORY AND CONTEXT

It was the Rochdale Pioneers (Reeve, Brooke, Henderson, & William 2002, p. 6-10) back in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century who were associated with the early co-operative movement, having developed an innovative way of retail trading which reflected their concerns about the social affects of the harsh capitalism and

industrialisation trends sweeping the UK and Europe. Their fundamental beliefs were in the values of equality, equity and democracy, self-help, self-responsibility and solidarity and they had a general social awareness unusual for the time (www.cooperativeaction.coop, 2003).

Proactively they built a foundation organisation that was (and to an extent, still is) distinctively different from other organisations in that it belonged to its members to meet mutual needs and had an integral social responsibility. The benchmark for the organisation was the introduction of a 'dividend' scheme for its members whereby members received shares or 'divi's' according to how much was spent on purchases, and any annual profit made by the organisation was shared out equally. Because the organisation was not profit orientated, it focused its attention instead on local community needs. This is shown through their concern for product quality and fair trading, the promotion of 'education for all' and of equality of the sexes (Reeve et al, 2002). This overall novel approach to retailing was indeed groundbreaking and this is why the movement was/is (still) often regarded as being ahead of its time (Brooke, 2003).

## THE LINCOLN CO-OP

The Lincoln Co-operative Society has been in existence since 1861, and modern times sees it as an umbrella for various different functions including most obviously grocery retail but also garage services, funeral services and others - all based within the trading area of Lincolnshire and Newark. Importantly, Lincoln Co-op still adheres to a modernised set of co-operative values and principles based on those original ideas of the Rochdale Pioneers. Their current mission statement reads:

### Our Mission

To be a successful co-operative business  
**Providing** the widest possible range of services for our members

**Maintaining** quality, value and ethical principles

**Building** for the future by generating profits to develop our services, pay dividends to members and support our local communities

**Encouraging** customers to become members and to be involved in running their Society

**Developing** the skills our staff need, to help achieve **Our mission**

(Lincoln Co-operative Society, 2002)

The blue and green logos, the standardised shop windows, the co-op branding and the dividend scheme are all current legacies of an uphill struggle for the company to remain successful in spite of vigorous market conditions, changing economies, changing politics, globalisation, the dynamic information age and importantly, shifting social trends and beliefs. Despite these core beliefs and intended messages it is questionable whether some age groups know or care if the organisation is differentiating itself. Similarly, the synergy of the co-operative movement is often disregarded. For example, although the Lincoln Co-op is a convenience store competing with other local small high street grocers (Turner 2003), a common misunderstanding is that it is actually a supermarket competing with such grocery giants as Tesco and Safeway. Having this misconception is problematic as customers would then expect the same choice and prices of the supermarkets, impossible for the Co-op who cannot expect to achieve the same economies of scale.

Even with yearly increases in profit, expansion and membership levels (Lincoln Co-operative Society, 2002), the Lincoln Co-op is now contemplating their latest challenge; the problem of corporate image and identity. Desperate to dispute the accusation of it now acquiring an *old and dowdy* image (in stark contrast to the pre-supposed image of the Co-operative movement), the Lincoln Co-op now finds itself having to answer the following questions; What is the current

## McClelland

public image of the company? How does the company promote its mission through its deep-rooted values and principles? How can the company unite both its image and values in order for it to place itself in a superior and distinctive position?

In order to answer these questions, it is useful to note that it seems to be the themes of perception, ethics and identity which are particularly problematic to the Lincoln Co-op. In juxtaposition, these themes also tie in strongly with the organisation's promotion of core values and mission – another perceived underlying problem.

### **TAKING A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE: STORYTELLING AND METATHEATRE**

Postmodern and critical ideas clearly benefit this organisational analysis, particularly when the themes under question are so subjective in their nature. Realising that everything is open to interpretation and being able to see 'beyond the looking glass' of everyday situations may help to raise those hidden agendas, raise those repressed individuals and then view the discourses that intertwine within the structures of organisation and hierarchy. Hence in adding another dimension to our sense making, this may help us find alternative answers to the questions we ask. By taking a more traditional linear and hard model of analysis it *could* mean being forced to 'make situations fit', hence possibly missing out on the complex and rich pictures that may actually be closer to reality. Hence I present the following theories to support my analysis of the Lincoln Co-op.

Organisational storytelling is something that we, as social actors and employ(ees/ers) engage in continuously. Further defined, storytelling can be understood as a cognitive sense-making tool by which the organisational stakeholders incrementally and collectively reinterpret their stories of events as an ongoing dynamic process (Nymark, 2000).

Boje (1995) suggests that we must consider

the collective storytelling organisation through its plurality of stories, voices and realities as well as a multiplicity of ways of interpreting these stories. This process will resituate the (usually) excluded voices and stories.

Boje's (2002) later study of Enron using metatheatrics presents a particularly convincing case for the use of metatheatre within this study (note however that I am not comparing Enron with the Lincoln Co-op organisation directly, I am instead noting that the use of metatheatre in the Enron study provided a meaningful and thorough organisational analysis). As described:

"(Metatheatre is) a multiplicity of theatres starring and supporting casts of characters who (1) affect the quality of products and services, (2) enhance or lower productivity, and (3) constitute the concentrated and diffuse spectacles in theatrical performances experienced by employees, investors, customers and vendors...it is the multiple and contending theatres that constitute organizations." (Boje, 2002).

Building on his previous work, Boje (1995) recognises that storytelling with its premise on text, narrative and involving facts, fiction, interpretation, language, metaphor, culture, morals, ethics etc can be a very effective organisational analysis tool. Metatheatre builds on his 'storytelling' by adding a more dramaturgical edge, taking into account the actors as well as the props, the set and the audience.

In terms of the Lincoln Co-op, we *are* interested in how the employ(ees/ers) affect quality service, how they may enhance or lower productivity, how they communicate, how they are perceived by others etc. But we as observers are also involved in the analysis: our stories, how we fit into the situation we are observing (e.g. "...it is through our own observation that we see the observation of the observation of the observer..") (Woolgar, 1991, p.16). We must also consider the 'theatre' itself: the Lincoln Co-op store buildings. How do they affect the

'performances' of the 'actors' (e.g. the actions of the employees)? How does all of this combined, present the image of the Lincoln Co-op?

If we need any further impetus to take up storytelling and metatheatre in terms of organisational analysis, consider that Currie (2000) argues that so-called fictional accounts of organisational events might actually be more 'factual' than apparently non-fictional accounts (Golding & Currie, 2000, p.141). In agreement, Nymark (2000) suggests that organisational researchers can treat stories as clues or signs leading closer to the 'truth' about that organisation (Nymark, 2000, p.54).

Thus follows two stories I have constructed to present some (my) views and experiences of the Lincoln Co-op, whereby I play the character Rebecca. The other characters are all 'real' people who are employed or are customers of the various stores (I have changed some names in order to protect the individual's identity). Both stories are based on 'real life' experiences I had, although they differ in terms of their position longitudinally; the first is 'pre' knowledge about the co-operative movement, and the second is after meeting with Lincoln co-op employees. This is intentional, in order to test my perception of the Lincoln co-op's image. I have also deliberately chosen to present different 'styles' of Lincoln co-op stores – i.e. a village store, suburban city store, central 'flagship' stores – again, in order to test perceptions of image.

Effectively taking on the role of ethnographer to the Lincoln Co-op stores seemed an easy task, but I need to consider the notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity describes the ability to be critical or suspicious of our own intellectual assumptions (Hassard & Parker, 1999). Basically the assumption is that observations are not 'value-free' and (as recently mentioned) the researcher cannot absent him/herself from the research situation (Currie, 2003) as they subconsciously impose their own imbedded values and reasoning into

any textual re-representation. According to Gabriel (2000), the most evident danger of story-based research is the selective use of organisational narratives to amplify or reinforce the researcher's preconceived ideas or assumptions (Gabriel, 2000), p.151). Although this danger is ever present, my awareness of it prior to writing the stories is at least some justification towards their validity.

Reflexivity in juxtaposition to metatheatre holds some weight as regards analysis. Myself as Rebecca in story one '(1)' had no previous knowledge of the corporate values and mission of the Lincoln Co-op, but in story two I had some idea of them. Hence, Rebecca in the first story was not conditioned to the Co-op ideals and presents an unbiased (?) account of how the organisation reflected on her – possibly demonstrating the general public perception. In story two '(2)', I had some idea of the co-operative values and Rebecca can be seen to be actively pursuing the things that reflect these values in two Co-op branches. Reiterating previous points, the focus of this paper is thus in considering my perspective of the Lincoln Co-op's image and there is a significant difference between the 'knowing' of the co-operative movement and business and the 'not-knowing' in my interpretation of this image.

What is missing from these stories is perhaps alternative perspectives, other voices – for example, a senior manager's account, another customer's story etc. I attempt to balance this by injecting in some unspoken narrative from the characters into the script – although it is the reader who will judge the success of this.

In terms of metatheatre itself, the stories fulfil to some extent the seven elements of metatheatrics which are: (1) Frames, (2) Themes, (3) Dialogs, (4) Characters, (5) Rhythms, (6) Plots and (7) Spectacles (Boje, 2002, pg. 2). Following Boje and Rosile's (2002a) definitions, 'Dialogs', 'Characters' and 'Plots' are most apparent: dialogue is seen objectively through conversational narrative

## McClelland

but is also unspoken between characters, characters are present throughout the stories although some in more detail than others and plots are particularly obvious in Story Two where corporate identity and mission statements are discussed. Frames, Themes, Rhythms and Spectacles are less obvious, but close inspection of the narratives may raise suggestions as to where these elements can be/are located.

In overview, what I am attempting to offer here are two stories that are part construction, part recollection that are designed both to reflect my pre-judgements and my developing understanding of organisational analysis, storytelling and metatheatre. I realise that their legitimacy and presence here maybe under question. They therefore should be considered as a tool I used to develop my own reflexive understanding and to challenge my pre-conceived assumptions and simultaneously present an invitation for the reader to do likewise.

### TWO TALES OF LINCOLN CO-OPS

#### **Story One: The Village Co-op - new building, old values?**

This story is based upon a 'typical' and recollected experience of shopping in the Lincoln Co-op shop in the village of Collingham near Newark (Nottinghamshire).

It is Thursday. Jane is at the Co-op having decided to buy some food and milk just before the store closes at 8pm. The shop is only just a short 10 minute walk across the football field from her house, a route walked thousands of times before. There isn't a car in the family, so the shop has been the main provider of food for her growing family for many years (actually since 1985 when she moved to the village) and although her children are all grown up now, it's still a part of her daily routine. Recently, the village bus fleet has been upgraded and Jane has changed her routine a by visiting the Morrisons supermarket in nearby Newark on

a weekly basis. There's a lot of choice there, and Jane believes some things are cheaper to buy there than at her local Co-op.

The other local (traditional?) village store is even pricier, and Jane completely boycotted it a few years ago when the new Co-op building was built, which had longer opening hours and was more convenient. Of course, another recent addition to food retail in the village is the 'One-Stop' shop – a chain - and that's open till really late every day. It's at the other end of the High Street so Jane rarely goes there. Emma (20) and Vicky (13) - two of Jane's daughters - often go there because there's a cash point. They also don't like the boring queues of the Co-op. 'One-Stop' is also the village's video hire place as the old video store closed down, so when there's not much to do they go and flick through the latest films.

The Co-op building itself, having being built in 1996 is light, modern and clean. This contrasts with its old location, a building which is just across the road. Rebecca is Jane's oldest daughter (21), and can remember the old place as being darker, cramped and untidy. The queues were always bad too. Rebecca remembers the cardboard that they used to cover the shop floor with to stop the rain from outside making the floors slippery, and the huge chest freezers that were the focal point of the store, right in the centre of the rectangular room. Another distant memory was the dividend books. Rebecca and Emma used to love sticking their mum's carefully collected dividend stamps in the books to save her some money – in fact they used to fight over it! Rebecca remembers that Divi stamp collection was always important at Christmas times... her mum would use maybe a few full books in part payment towards the Christmas turkey, which of course, she would order, and they (the Co-op staff) would 'save it in the back' for her.

Today Rebecca (who is a student and doesn't live in the village anymore) has driven her mum around to the shop to save time. She

is annoyed already as it's really difficult getting a parking space – the Co-op is in a small retail area with an established library, doctor's surgery and pharmacy, and it seems the staff take up most of the spaces!

Just in the shop and Jane's already got her shopping list out and is in full 'Co-op' mode – stopping to chat to everyone she knows – there a lot of elderly shoppers in there that have known Jane for years. The shop is relatively busy for its size with about 15 customers – who seem to be either the elderly or mothers who are towing around their children, just out of school. Rebecca decides to stop and browse the magazines whilst Jane slowly makes her way down the aisles. Pauline (58) and Christine (62) – both Co-op staff - are having a hushed conversation whilst flattening boxes. Pauline and Christine are quite close friends (partners in crime you could say!), although they are also quite different. Pauline has worked here a lot longer than Christine – over 20 years and seems fairly passive but efficient, whilst Christine is Assistant Manager and is of a bossy, harsh character with a particular penchant for gossip. Their favourite game is to constantly watch those troublesome teenagers, who must definitely be shoplifting (!).

*(Christine: Oh, great, that bloody family again. I don't know why she doesn't do all her shopping in one go, once a week. What does she do all day? Some of us have to work for a living, not just produce kids!)*

On the tills are Cathy (55) and Nicola (17). Cathy is a friendly and kind assistant who is good friends with Jane, and takes the time to talk to and get to know the customers. Nicola is a new employee who, unable to finish her A-Levels, has had to fill a part-time position just to make ends meet. She does not seem happy at all.

*(Nicola: I hate this job. I'm so tired from standing up all day, this is just meaningless and such a waste of time. Can't wait till home time... how long now?...erm.. half hour)*

Felling bored, Rebecca decides to go hurry her mum up. Glancing through the staff door, she spots James who is filling in some form. James (34) has been the manager here for 5 years. He's a very quiet and polite person, seems nervous when approached, but runs the shop well.

*(James: Wow, look who it is! What's she doing here? Would love to talk to her, but I've got this auditing to do.. well, better say hello at least..)*

"Hi Rebecca!" James says, smiling. "Yeah, hi!" Rebecca is surprised James remembers who she is - she hasn't been in the shop for over a year. Still smiling, she continues down the next aisle and observes that Christine is glowering at her. Maybe she is still sees Rebecca as a child? Both Pauline and Christine stop talking as Rebecca passes.

*(Christine: What's that woman's daughter doing loitering around? If you're not here to buy anything, then you shouldn't be here. And why is she talking to James? He's got enough to do. I would have had the auditing done by lunchtime myself)*

*(Pauline: I wish Christine would leave me alone to get on with this shelf packing.. still, better talk to her anyway, as she is above me..)*

"Come on mum"  
"Ok, just can't decide whether to get this or not. No, it'll wait till I go down town next week, probably save 30p or something"

Taking up a position in the queues, Rebecca observes Nicola. She has her head down, and doesn't make eye contact once. She seems nonchalant with her position. "Right, is that everything? Who's next?" she mutters.

Cathy, on the other hand, seems happy, and pauses to stop to chat to Jane. "How are you Jane? I was wondering when you would pop in!! The weather's nice today, isn't it? Soon be spring! Oh, and Rebecca! Haven't you

## McClelland

changed? So how's it going at university then? Oh, Jane, your kids aren't half growing up fast! Have you got your dividend card love?" There are some people waiting who seem annoyed about the suddenly slowed process, so Rebecca hurriedly packs the shopping. Dragging Jane out of the door, Jane falters to make a promise of meeting up for a coffee sometime soon and leaves chuckling.

"I like the Co-op. It's nice seeing your friends!"  
"It's not a social visit mum; you came to get the tea!"  
"Well it's always nice to stop and have a chat."  
"Gossip, more like! That's villages for you..."

### Story Two: Anonymity in Lincoln's flagship stores

This story is based on more recent experiences of visiting three Lincoln Co-op stores in Lincoln itself. The first is the Moorland Centre (out of town), the second a small Co-op (serving a resident catchment), and the third is the main Sincil Bank Central Co-op (in the centre of the city).

Rebecca has since been studying the Lincoln Co-op organisation as part of her management degree course. She has decided to visit the main stores in Lincoln and her partner Alex goes with her.

They decide to drive to the Moorland Centre, which is a big new development for the Co-op. It is more of a shopping centre, selling holidays, furniture, food and drink, gardening equipment etc. On entering the car park, Alex observes the size of the shop – it is a lot bigger than it looks from the road. The car park is empty. He decides to start a conversation.

"I have never been here before. I never expected it to be quite so vast – look, it sells everything! Still, I would never shop at the Co-op"  
"Why not? Are you a bit of a food snob?!"  
"No, but you're right, I do prefer shopping at

Sainsburys (next door). Their fruit and vegetables are much better quality than you get in the Co-op. Last time I went the quality was appalling."

"What about ethical reasons? The Co-op is all for the Fair Trade, and they help out in the local community and charity organisations..."  
"I don't know enough about Fair Trade. What I do know is that they have no organic food range, or it is at least, very limited. That's what I like to buy"

On entering the store, Alex and Rebecca discuss the ethics of the co-op movement, and why Alex is a member of the Co-operative bank. He says that they are a lot more proactive on their ethical stance than the Lincoln Co-op – in fact they hardly compare. Rebecca decides to look for the company mission statement; she has seen it on display at the Burton Road Co-op (Lincoln). Perusing the aisles, she notices how well the store is laid out, and how much they have fitted in. It's clean, bright and modern. Giving up, she asks Suzanne about the statement, who is working in the furniture section. Suzanne is probably in her late 20s and has worked there for less than 2 months.

"Well, I've not worked here long, but I think there's a copy in my car. They aren't very good at inducting the staff (!). I'm not sure where it is in the store though. It's funny, I never even knew this place existed till I applied for a job here! You think 'Co-op' and 'old biddies' springs to mind! Its amazing, you can buy everything here!"

*(Suzanne: What an odd question to ask! Still, it's a nice opportunity to talk about what I think of this place. I wonder what she's studying?)*

The manager has overheard, and intervenes:

"No, the mission statement is not on display here. It's in the staff room though. We don't need it on display, our mission is shown through everything we do for our customers".

*(Claire: Phew, think I got away with that one! Why is this girl being so nosey anyway? Customers don't usually ask to see the mission statement!)*

Later in the week, Rebecca visits the revamped Co-op Central store, in order to make a comparison with the Moorland Centre. This place boasts a coffee shop, a new electrical store and also the city's main Post-Office, which has recently moved there. The building is large though the actual food store now seems a lot smaller in comparison to before the revamp, and has been pushed to the back of the store. It is mid-week and the middle of the day, yet the place is teeming with people, characteristically elderly and mothers. Noticeably, everyone seems in a rush, and there is no-one smiling other than the old couples who are taking a rest on the benches.

Rebecca notices that there is a feeling of anonymity in the shop as the customers seem to hurry about trying to buy last minute or forgotten items before they catch their bus. The employees aren't communicating with each other much, and they seem to be in a continued battle to stay on top of their jobs. What is most obvious is that even though the store is bright, this is undermined by both the dark, oppressive and dirty bus station that is adjacent to the shop and also the empty and dingy retail units next door. Rebecca decides that the atmosphere is far from relaxed, and the long queues in the Post-Office at the entrance to the store only seem to exaggerate this feeling.

Feeling subdued, she leaves without buying anything.

## THE LINCOLN CO-OP AS THEATRE

### L'Entrée

Using the idea of theatre as a metaphor, I present this section as if it were a play with a beginning, unfolding scenes and an end. Here I seek to deconstruct and find answers to the questions posed earlier. The scenes themselves use the broken-down Lincoln Co-

op mission statement in order to assess whether 'contemporary Co-op' (as presented in the stories) is espoused with its modern mission (a version of the traditional co-operative movement and ideals) (Lincoln Co-operative Society, 2002).

### La Matinée

The relevance of the Lincoln Co-op and the co-operative movement has, arguably some bearing today. The massive problem is that somehow, the true ideals have been lost amidst a façade of consumerism and over-ruling capitalism. It is more than likely that the realisation of the Co-op having to act 'within capitalism yet not taking on its exploitative character' (Reeve et al, 2002, p.18-19) has projected the image of the co-op as being a supermarket and competitor. All three (key) branches mentioned in the stories have been recently built or revamped in order to replace 'inadequate stores' and have possibly introduced improved stock ranges and pricing policies as a response to 'unprecedented competition' according to the Lincoln Co-op history (www.lincoln.coop, 2003). There is little wonder then, that customers such as Jane and Rebecca (1) see only the surface environment of the Collingham branch and go there merely to make small purchases and engage in some social interaction. With no idea about the history of the movement and its mission, and perhaps no inclination to finding out about it, the Co-op might as well be a small Tesco or Morrisons competing on price, choice and loyalty points – this card scheme being no different than the dividend card in Jane's eyes.

### Scene One: The Providing Co-op

Rebecca (2) is aware of the choice of services offered by the Co-op before she visits the city stores, but does not inform Alex deliberately in order to gauge his reaction. He is surprised at the size of the store, and then at the many diverse operations as she anticipated ("it even sells cars?!"). His conversation is exemplified by the discussion with Suzanne later where she highlights some critical points including her unawareness of the stores existence until



## McClelland

recently and general comments about 'old biddies' contrasted with the shopping centre appeal of the store. Is the store presenting a community (core value) feel though? Its location is away from large housing developments, on a major retail trading estate and next door to Sainsbury's (perceivably a competitor). Surely in considering locations for stores, these factors must have been plainly obvious?

The provision of services is less obvious in Sincil Bank and Collingham (1). Although both have a busy community feel, the major services are food and the post office. Without advertising of its services, the customers remain unaware of them. It is almost like the 'poorer' or 'older' customer / store is excluded from the bigger picture. 'Providing a service' for Jane (1) is saving her a turkey at Christmas time.

### **Scene Two: The Maintaining Co-op**

Quality and value issues are brought out in stories one and two. Jane (1) is quite happy to shop at the co-op as opposed to other local shops as they are cheaper, but not as cheap as Morrisons. The saving of 30p may seem trivial but to Jane, living on the breadline, making ends meet has always been key. Elderly people – without transport and possibly with mobility problems but who still wish to maintain their independence also rely on their Co-op. Accessibility is one of the main reasons why there is an abundance of over – 50's within the Collingham and Sincil Bank branch. Co-op's, being primarily located in either isolated rural areas or central shopping areas make them convenient to people who don't have the luxury of personal cars. As disposable income rises within the working population, car use increases yearly. However, rising prices of public transport equally deters those who previously relied on it (Department for Transport, 2002).

Of course, loyalty to the organisation is another reason for attracting older customers. This group of people have grown up with the Co-op and lived through the politics of old labour and socialist values in

contrast to the high consumerism and capitalist environment of today. Alex and Rebecca (2) are typical of a younger generation that buy into the high gloss and pretty labels of 'trendy' products and brands, and have the freedom to choose where and how they shop.

The Lincoln Co-op is a complex interplay of societal, professional and individual ethics (Brooke, 2003) and it is through this medium that the true values of the co-operative movement are carried, and perceptions are formed. Although the Co-op promotes its ethics within the bounds of co-operative business the message is not as strong as the Co-operative Bank which differentiates itself by its strong ethical principles and controversial advertising campaigns (Reeve et al, 2002, p.17-19). Although the Lincoln Co-op and the Co-operative bank are *not* the same organisation, the Lincoln Co-op can learn from the success of the bank. By taking a radical and discontinuous change strategy (*Discontinuous change strategy* could be defined as change within an organisation that has happened in a sudden, revolutionary or abrupt manner, and is implemented through managerial intervention. It could be either planned (experimentation in corporate 'turnaround') or caused by unforeseen external pressures exerted on the organisation, forcing sudden change.), the bank has effectively targeted and captured the interests of the young working population; arguably the same group asserting that the Lincoln Co-op is 'old and dowdy' in its image.

Alex (2) has already strong individual opinions over environmental concerns, a reflection of his upbringing, education and job. Although the Co-op cannot possibly meet the requirements of every individual (e.g. introducing a large organic food range), some market research highlighting the ethical and moral values of a slice of society would enable a new marketing drive, thus turning around the incremental strategy which has made it so hard to adapt to changing conditions.

### **Scene Three: The Building and Encouraging Co-op**

The Co-op is most proactive on its ethical stance and this can be seen through its links with the Fairtrade movement, "As the country's leading fairtrade retailer, we're committed to selling Fairtrade products wherever and whenever we can" (www.cooponline.coop, 2002). Jane (1) and Alex (2) are both unaware of the commitment the Co-op has made to fairtrading and other worldwide, national and local ventures concerned with welfare and ethics. Jane is simply ignorant to the cause. Particularly disappointing is Alex's inclination towards not shopping at the Co-op because of its lacking organic range; a view contradicted by the following statement:

"..the Co-op is supporting The Organic Food & Farming Targets Bill. This argues for 30 per cent of UK land use and 20 per cent of UK consumption to be organic by 2010" (Ibid, 2002)

The organisation undisputedly supports the local community by offering a number of services and providing donations to good causes and charities, £40,000 being distributed within the last four years (Ibid, 2002). This is not an issue raised by either Jane (1) or Alex (2). Rebecca (2) uses the argument for local community development merely to back up her basic knowledge of the Fairtrade practice, but in truth knows little.

There seems to be an overall problem with the Co-op communicating their mission through to the customers. Stephanie (2) worried by the unusual questions posed by Alex and Rebecca, 'covers her back' by professing that visible mission statements are unnecessary on view as "our mission is shown through everything we do for our customers". It seems to me that the immediate beneficiaries of the Co-op are the *only* people who realise the mission (e.g. Co-op members, charities etc.)

Taking an almost obstructive attitude towards encouraging customers to become members seems commonplace: sometimes the only conversation you may have with an employee

might be them asking if you have a Dividend Card and in response to 'no' continue with the transaction without the offer of one. As I have never been offered one, there is no inclination for *me* to join. Making the benefits clearer would be a wise move; younger people are attracted to things that are 'individual' or 'different' and as a marketing campaign, it would not be too difficult to promote the idea of 'becoming a shareholder of a business'. It is rather unfortunate that this, in itself, brings with it the implications of capitalism and profit making - which seems to clash with the original ideas suggested by the Rochdale Pioneers (at the very corner stone of the modern Co-op mission).

### *Scene Four: The Developing Co-op*

People make organisations and it is the staff of the Co-ops visited that, in particular, portrays its public image to myself as Rebecca within the narratives. Rebecca (1) sees the staff who have worked there ever since she can remember, giving her a sense of familiarity whilst simultaneously transferring the image of 'tradition', 'old' and 'personal'. Whether their behaviour (1) is poor or not, they suggest to their customers that the Co-op is 'worth sticking with' through their long-term commitment and dedication to the store.

The staff are predominantly female (there being only one male character within both stories). There also seems to be a division between young staff and those over 45 (which is perhaps not unusual). Apparent in both plots is a lack of projection of the Co-op mission, particularly with the younger staff. Nicola (1) acts as if she'd rather be somewhere else and Suzanne (2) claims that the staff are poorly inducted and are unaware of the mission statement.

As the stories suggest, it is possible that older staff appeal to older customers, and similarly younger customers respond to younger staff (e.g. Jane and Cathy (1), Rebecca and James (1)). Perhaps by making job opportunities more appealing to youngsters just finishing their education, and

## McClelland

teaching them about the distinctiveness of the organisation tied in with both educational and promotional incentives would have a positive effect on customer service and image?

### Fin

Initially, the question 'Co-operative metatheatre: An old and unappealing script?' posed to undergraduate students, perhaps subconsciously suggested that the 'old and dowdy' image was a perception of a predominantly young/professional group of people. The paper henceforth sought to find recommendations that would entice such a group into the stores and promote a co-operative way of doing business.

Having pre-determined ideas about the history and context of the Lincoln Co-op is problematic but paradoxically beneficial when writing stories, as they can then move on from being simply 'stories', to narratives of reality; the author is able to relate his or her learnt understanding of a situation to his or her reality and experience of it. In addition, Boje's (2002, 2002a) framework of metatheatre has both inspired and supported the presentation of organisational stories as a means for understanding the said organisation - "our pre-understandings (competencies and prejudices) are a precursor to our ability to follow the plot of a story, and finally our ability to fill in all the gaps and discontinuities with our understanding of layers of context" (Boje, 2001, p.121).

Unsurprisingly, I too appear to have the (presumed) perception that the Co-op has an 'old and dowdy' image and that this perception is prevalent in both of my plots. This last point should not be understated. In reflection of story two, I could have been *conditioned* to look for and think about the Co-op as being old and dowdy; seeking out the symbols that represent what 'old' and 'dowdy' mean to me. However, in reflection of story one where I have tried to remain as true to reality as my memory serves (ever aware of my own assumptions), even here I reflect on

the stage (building) and actors (staff) in terms of 'old', 'boring', 'elderly' etc.

### THE SCRIPT OF THE CO-OP: UNAPPEALING? NOT NECESSARILY...

The key issue for the Lincoln Co-op is the direction it now decides to take. Continuing as it is means attracting the more mature person who is loyal, or the family shopper who is concerned with location, price and convenience. The other direction is towards targeting the younger market, and the recommendations supporting this are threaded into the former deconstruction (specifically found within each scene's concluding paragraph). The Co-op may find itself in a no-win situation, particularly when acting within today's society where we find the term 'capitalist' is liberally applied in communicable context to *all* organisations that appear to be doing well. For the Co-op, it will be a difficult challenge indeed - appealing to all without tangibly marginalizing the few. And it will be even more difficult continuing to espouse the true mission of the organisation when it is being increasingly viewed through this malevolent eye of capitalism.

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