

THE CHARITY COMPLEX:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A MATERIAL AID AGENCY  
IN REYKJAVÍK ICELAND

JAMES G. RICE









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**The Charity Complex: An Ethnography of a Material Aid Agency  
in Reykjavík, Iceland**

by

© James G. Rice

A thesis submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the provision of charitable assistance in Reykjavík, Iceland. The project focuses in detail on the activities of one agency in particular, Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers' Support Committee). Mæðrastyrksnefnd formed in 1928 as a response by concerned philanthropists to the conditions of material and social inequality faced by women. Since this time, the organization has expanded upon its historic focus to include a wider range of clientele. However, over the many years of its existence this agency has also withdrawn from its key emphasis on social advocacy to focus mainly on the work of traditional charities that do not, as is argued in this dissertation, dismantle the status quo in relation to structural inequality.

This project is based on a period of ethnographic research which extended from February 2004 through to June 2006. The primary research method was participant-observation. With the permission of the staff I was able to work as a volunteer at Mæðrastyrksnefnd which allowed me to observe and participate in the practices of charity as well as to engage the staff and some of their clients in ongoing discussions about their experiences and views of charity. I extended some of these ongoing conversations into formal interviews with select staff members and clients. As the result of the widening social contacts I made as a volunteer at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I was able to expand the scope of the project to include interviews with senior officials from a number of other charitable organizations as well as officials with social advocacy organizations and governmental social welfare agencies. I also conducted statistical research and analysis on behalf of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in addition to historic and contemporary archival research.

The focus of my analysis centers on exploring the complex ways in which charities are imbricated with the state, business concerns, and the general public to form what I refer to as an interconnected 'charity complex.' The idea of the charity complex calls in question the notion that charities form an 'independent' or 'third' sector and suggests as well why charities become entrenched within wealthy societies. I argue that the material assistance these kinds of agencies provide makes short-term, often crucial differences for their clients. But in the long term, the work of the charity complex acts to maintain the status quo regarding structural inequality in a number of significant ways.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

In late May of 2004, while I was skimming through one of the national newspapers in Iceland, the headline of one story in particular caught my eye. It read: “*Fátæktin gengur gjarnan í erfðir*” (Poverty is typically inherited). The story turned out to be the summary of an interview with the *félagsmálastjóri* (Director of Social Affairs) for the city of Reykjavík, Lára Björnsdóttir (DV 2004a:9). At the time I had reacted negatively to the implied quasi-biological notion of poverty being inherited, which has the potential to render inequality an individual and behavioural issue rather than the result of basic structural inequalities such as the unequal distribution of wealth. When I first read this article I had only completed a few months of volunteering at a charity in Reykjavík which was primarily dedicated to supporting people in need with clothing and food assistance. I worked at Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers’ Support Committee) in Reykjavík as part of my dissertation research, which intended to explore how the staff of a material aid agency accomplished their goals of assisting the needy in light of the arguably dominant discourses which held that there was little or no poverty in Iceland. The newspaper article cited above struck me as contributing to the fairly common view among the public, as I would learn, that many of the clients who visited such charities or depended upon social assistance either chose not to work and decided to subsist by manipulating ‘the system,’ or else were the product of enculturation within the social welfare system and became immersed within the ‘*fátæktargildrunni*’ or ‘poverty trap’ and as such adapted to a life of dependency upon public and private assistance. In some ways,



for me these attitudes recalled the long-standing but often criticized theory of the 'culture of poverty' made famous by the work of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966, 1970) in which the conditions of poverty are held to be produced and reproduced as the result of the perceived deficiencies within the social life and 'culture' of the poor such as: lack of participation in social institutions, the supposed disorganization of the family as seen in the predominance of single parent or blended families and informal unions, lack of participation in waged labour, and a cynical or fatalistic outlook. In the 1960s and 70s social scientists mounted a sustained attack on the culture of poverty concept (e.g. Eames and Goode 1977; Stack 1997 [1974]; Valentine 1968), arguing that much of what Lewis posited as 'cultural,' such as unemployment and material deprivation, were the result of structural factors such as social welfare, economic and taxation policies, labour relations, and systemic racism and had little to do with the attitudes and adaptations of the poor to these external conditions. Lewis's assertion that rectifying these structural conditions would do little or nothing to alter the reproduction of the culture of poverty (Lewis 1970:68) particularly drew the ire of anthropologists for suggesting that culture is unresponsive to change and passed down in immutable form to successive generations, as well as for implying that the poor are essentially to blame for their own plights. As such, I have tended to view the discourses of the 'poverty trap' or the 'cycle of poverty' as rehashed versions of Lewis's discredited culture of poverty thesis, which is how I interpreted the newspaper article cited earlier. But this article also concluded with a quote by the director of social affairs for the city which, in my opinion, was an intentional slight against Mæðrastyksnefnd and other charities. She commented on the ineffectiveness of

such organizations: “It does not solve anything to have charitable aid agencies and charity” (DV 2004a:9).

Her comments stayed with me during the course of my field research. My initial resentment towards this official’s statement, with its implication that the hard work of the many dedicated volunteers at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities amounted to nought, diminished somewhat as the result of further research. I spent two years observing and participating as a volunteer at Mæðrastyrksnefnd speaking with the staff members, volunteers, clients, key staff members from other charities, academics and government officials in combination with conducting archival and literature research. What I learned planted further seeds of doubt in my mind about the role of material aid charities in contemporary societies, particularly in terms of the potential of private charities to redistribute resources to a significant degree. However, the argument that charities do not ‘accomplish anything’ can only be made if certain assumptions are held regarding the role of charities as organizations dedicated to the elimination, or radical reduction, of larger socio-economic inequities. I believe it is a mistake to assume that charities are intended to ‘solve’ or even to dramatically alter structural inequalities and that such an approach is perhaps not the most productive way in which to analyze charities and their effects.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd emerged in 1928 during a turbulent time in Iceland. The fisheries, a key resource and emerging source of wealth for Iceland, had been undergoing a process of mechanization and modernization while the primary reliance on agriculture and animal husbandry which had dominated Icelandic society for a millennium was quickly eroding in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rural areas saw a notable reduction in population as people moved at an increased pace into Reykjavík searching

for work. These changes will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three. The governmental social welfare system at this time was meagre to non-existent and charities had begun to fill the void in the provision of assistance to the poor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some material aid charities began to emerge in rural Iceland in the 1870s. These were primarily oriented towards addressing local needs and were generally organized by women to assist needy mothers and widows (Kristmundsdóttir 1989:81). This was shortly followed by the appearance of a number of other assistance agencies which were geared towards charitable work and were a mixture of local secular and denominational associations as well as the Icelandic branches of larger international organizations. They included, among others, Thorvaldsensfélagið (Thorvaldsen's Society) in 1875; Hjálpræðisherinn á Íslandi (the Salvation Army in Iceland) in 1895; Rauði Kross Íslands (the Icelandic Red Cross) in 1924; and Mæðrastyrksnefnd in 1928. Many of these organizations provided material support and assistance for those in need given the deficiency of formal governmental social services. Some of these organizations provided services that many Icelanders most likely take for granted in the present, such as health care. The Catholic nuns of the Order of St. Joseph were active in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland collecting money to build a hospital in Reykjavík while also pressuring the national assembly, Alþingi, to support their endeavours (Hákonardóttir 2000:184–186; see also Björnsdóttir and Malchau 2004). Active as well in the area of providing health care services were local Icelandic organizations such as Hringurinn (the Circle) formed in 1904 and Líkn in 1915. There is no question that these charitable organizations played an important role in providing essential services during this time. It has been widely noted in the social science literature of Iceland (e.g. Broddadóttir et al. 1997; Jónsson 2001; Njáls

2003; NOSOSCO 2002; Ólafsson 1999) that Iceland often ‘lagged behind’ other comparable Nordic and even other Western European nations in the development of a comprehensive social welfare system. It was not until 1956 that municipal authorities in Iceland assumed formal responsibility for health care (Hákonardóttir 2000:189) while comprehensive governmental services for the care of the elderly in the Iceland remained limited until the 1970s (K. Björnsdóttir 2002:6). The term ‘Icelandic exceptionalism’ has even been coined in the social welfare literature of the Nordic countries to describe the 1960s and 70s as a particularly marked time of unwillingness in Iceland to redistribute taxes toward social spending, as Iceland “dragged its feet in the development of public welfare provision” (Arter 1999:181).

The Icelandic social welfare system of the current day continues to suffer from numerous deficiencies in comparison with other Western European nations, in terms of the proportion of spending on social welfare concerns as per Iceland’s GDP and the comparably meagre social assistance pensions which are increasingly subjected to taxation, all of which has been explored in detail by the sociologists Harpa Njáls (2003) and Stefán Ólafsson (1990, 1993, 1999; Ólafsson and Sigurðsson 2000). During the time of my research, approximately 10% of Iceland’s overall population were estimated to be at risk of falling into poverty due to subsisting under the low income mark devised by the European Union (Hagstofa Íslands 2007a:1). But there is no question that what exists in Iceland today is a vast improvement over the conditions faced by the poor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Reykjavík. Yet many of these early charities and aid agencies which formed to meet these needs are still very much active in the present, such as Thorvaldsensfélagið, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Hvítabandið (the White

Ribbon), and Mæðrastyrsnefnd. While the deficiencies within the current Icelandic welfare system noted above may account for some of the ongoing work of these agencies, the scale and scope of the available charitable assistance that I explored in 2004 to 2006 struck me as somewhat disproportionate for a small island nation of 300,000 people where the unemployment rate has not surpassed the 4% mark since 1996 (Hagstofa Íslands 2006b) and which the United Nations ranked second overall out of 177 nations in 2005 on their Human Development Index (HDI), which measures the combined factors of literacy rates, life expectancy, education enrolment and GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (UNDP 2005:214–219). As the standard of living in Iceland continued to improve at the close of the Second World War, the ranks of these agencies still continued to grow to include such organizations as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar (Icelandic Church Aid) which was founded by the Lutheran National Church of Iceland (Þjóðkirkjan) in 1970 and shortly after by Samhjálp, a Pentecostal charity which began to operate a café for the poor in downtown Reykjavík 1982 and has since expanded to operate homeless shelters and rehabilitation programs for substance abusers. Other branches of Mæðrastyrsnefnd opened in suburban cities and towns across Iceland. Meanwhile new charities continued to emerge during the period of my research, such as Fjölskylduhjálp Íslands (Iceland's Family Help) in 2003 and Kærleikssamtökin (Organization of Charity) in 2004.

My first contention is that material aid agencies should not be seen and analyzed in isolation. Each agency needs to be seen as one node within what I am calling a larger, interconnected charity complex. It is often a matter of routine in the discourses of the social sciences and the public in general to make such distinctions between the 'public' and the 'private' sectors or the first (governmental), second (business) and third

(charitable) sectors, even though the historian Lawrence Friedman noted that the idea of an ‘independent’ or ‘third’ philanthropic sector is a recent one whose shallow temporal roots can be traced back to the early 1980s in the United States (Friedman 2003:1). In my experience as well such distinctions regarding delimited ‘sectors’ are problematic.

Mæðrastyrsnefnd was supported financially and in other ways as well by a wide range of interested parties including, among others: the national government of Iceland, the city of Reykjavík, area schools, and multiple businesses including financial institutions, food manufacturing and distribution firms, and retailers. Support also came from other aid agencies and fellow charities. The staff members of Mæðrastyrsnefnd each represented or were members of one or more of the eight women’s organizations that contributed members to the committee. These organizations were diverse, ranging from political to social justice to charitable associations. Support from the public at large came in the form of volunteers or donations of cash or goods. As such, Mæðrastyrsnefnd was one node in which goods, resources, labour and ideas circulated within a larger complex. It is my contention that charities serve a number of roles and uses for a wide range of interests which contributes to the stability and institutionalization of specific agencies and the larger charity complex itself. In Chapter Four I will detail the scale and scope of this charity complex in Reykjavík as seen from the perspective of Mæðrastyrsnefnd.

The continuing presence and activities of some of these agencies and this charity complex in Iceland in general has to do with much more than logistics and ‘usefulness’ in a material or practical sense. While many of the earlier roles of charity have been taken over by state and municipal governments, such as the provision of health care, charities do continue to provide some needed material assistance. I wish to be clear on this point.

However, as I will argue further, the measure of goods that the clients of these charities received in both quality and quantity does not seem to me to match the combined costs, efforts and labours of all parties involved within this complex. In the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, this assistance amounted to two or three bags of food and access to donated clothing and other goods on a weekly basis, with some additional assistance offered on the occasion of the holidays of Easter and Christmas. Yet efforts were still made to limit the client demands on their services through their eligibility screening processes. Other charities offered similar aid but on a reduced scale, such as once a month or three times a year or additional help in the case of exceptional circumstances. None of this limited aid struck me as having the potential to seriously alter the basic structural inequalities of Icelandic society or even to redistribute material resources in a significant way. After noting the extent of the aid that was available, documenting the weekly and monthly fluctuations in visiting patterns at Mæðrastyrksnefnd from 2003 until the first half of 2006, and talking with some clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to see how this aid factored into their households, I concluded that, aside from some unusual circumstances, most clients visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd when their monthly incomes began to run short. Details of this evidence will be offered in Chapters Four and Five. The charitable assistance the clients received was used to make up for short-falls in their budgets but also to improve their material conditions to an extent by freeing up funds for other purposes which enabled them to consume and participate in the larger society, albeit to a limited degree, beyond the level possible with the formal governmental assistance system or some of the lower-end wages. While this assistance did help in the short term, it seemed highly unlikely to me that two or three bags of groceries a week and some



clothing could do much to alter the nature of fundamental socio-economic inequalities. It is possible that the combined efforts of the charity complex allows the state and municipal authorities to maintain assistance benefits at a lower than sufficient rate, but I have no direct evidence to suggest this is the case. Janet Poppendieck (1998), in her study of material aid charities in the United States, expressed similar thoughts (Poppendieck 1998:158) but admitted as well that there is a lack of evidence, as researchers often do not have access to the inner circles of policy making to ascertain whether or not charities are a factor when considerations are made to cut-back or to neglect to raise social assistance benefits. But it struck me as very curious that the extensive nature of this charity complex and all of these efforts, time and expenses would be undertaken and maintained if there were not more tangible results to be had. Judging by the discussions I had with staff members and the media discourses that I charted and analyzed during my fieldwork, it seemed to be the case that the critics and defenders of charities argued back and forth as to the extent to which the clients were 'truly needy' and often speculated as to their 'motives' for seeking assistance. Another common theme which emerged during the conversations I had with charity workers was their concern as to the extent to which their work was effective in terms of helping their clients. But less attention seemed to be paid to the more important questions, as they appeared to me, as to the role that charities played in the realm of ideas and ideology and what the continuing support for charities from governments, business and the general public meant for the normalization and reproduction of inequality.

A little over a year into my research, I interviewed the *félagsmálastjóri* (Director of Social Affairs) for the city of Reykjavík, Lára Björnsdóttir, who had expressed her

views on charity in the article discussed at the opening of this introduction. Despite the fact that I had a high measure of respect for the staff and the work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities, I found that my views on charity had grown closer to Lára's views than I cared to admit at the time, but for somewhat different reasons. At one point in this interview I defended the work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd by arguing that I had become aware of the importance that this aid had for some of their clients. But Lára argued that in the long term doling out bread and other goods on a weekly basis does not substantially alter the social and economic situations faced by their clients. She then switched gears in her argument and stated something which caught me off guard but was similar to the suspicions about the nature of charity that I had begun to harbour myself:

We shouldn't be doing it. I think they [charities] are meant for those who give. Before, Mæðrastyrksnefnd used to do things quietly. You never heard about it. Now every time I see in the newspapers or on TV it is something about a businessman who has come to give something, shake hands and have his photo taken. I think it is horrible. They are getting fatter and bigger while those who are coming to get this assistance are becoming smaller and thinner. You glorify those who give, and in the process belittle those who receive. It is important that these ladies [of Mæðrastyrksnefnd] want to do good, but they could offer to do other things.

As she is a governmental official responsible for municipal financial assistance, I had suspicions that she would have to maintain a critical stance towards charity in general, as the existence of material aid charities in Iceland could communicate the message that all is not well and that the state is shirking some of their responsibilities for alleviating the conditions of poverty. One tactic by some political figures and social critics to explain the presence of charities, which I will detail further, is to question the motives of the clients and to suggest that the government assistance programs are adequate—it is the clients

who are at fault for using charities to simply ‘get something for free’ and for manipulating the goodwill of concerned citizens. But Lára’s criticism had nothing to do with such simplistic, and often unfounded, accusations. Rather, it touched directly on an issue that had been troubling me for some time. I had witnessed a number of incidents, and even participated in some, in which political dignitaries, representatives from businesses, organizations, and even school children had presented goods or over-sized novelty cheques to Mæðrastyrsnefnd, and after which hands were shaken, plaques presented and pictures taken. Time and time again when I wrote of these incidents in my fieldnotes I had asked myself whether all these efforts, the extensive donating, sorting and redistribution of goods and the accolades and praise passed around, were ultimately about the needs of the clients or the donors?

As I noted above, my first contention is that charities act as nodes within a larger, interconnected complex. My second contention is that the continued existence and maintenance of particular charities and the complex in general partly depends upon the ‘usefulness’ of charity. As I will document further, this covers the interests of a wide number of parties, such as allowing companies, stores and individuals to dispose of unwanted goods in a socially positive manner, leaving the charities responsible to receive, sort and in some cases dispose of unusable goods at their expense. The city of Reykjavík also depends upon material aid charities to help clients for emergency assistance needs, often for those who do not qualify for full or immediate governmental assistance. All of these functions help to cement the place and work of charities. In an obvious sense, charities depend upon the conditions of inequality for their existence so that the extent of the charity complex may be taken as an indicator of need. But it might also be the case

that charities act as indicators of the extent to which the conditions and degree of inequalities are rendered as acceptable and normal by the general populace, as well as their clients. Charities can be seen as agents in the maintenance of the status quo of the larger socio-economic order through contributing to the production and reproduction of hegemonic views in which the work of charity, and the underlying inequalities they seek to address, are rendered as routine, commonplace and normal. The fact that private citizens and organizations have to do the work of the state within a wealthy society should be read as the failure of a government, and by the extension a given society, to take a serious interest in bettering the situations of vulnerable sectors of the population. Charities could easily symbolize the collective failure and indifference towards seriously addressing root inequalities in such a society. But judging by the positive associations that cling to the acts of volunteering and donating one's time or goods to charities, based on my observations of practice and media discourses, it appears that charities symbolize something else entirely for the public at large. The fact that the relative ineffectiveness of charity in fighting structural poverty is generally overlooked can be understood if the analytical focus shifts to the benefits to the donors rather than the clients. This analytical focus sharpened for me during my participation in the Christmas holiday allocations. There was a startling increase in the number of businesses and individuals donating goods and members of the public donating their time. Throughout the rest of the year the operations of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were maintained by a core of dedicated staff members and associated volunteers. Yet each day of the holiday allocation brought volunteers whom I had never seen before and never saw again. I do not believe that this upsurge in charitable efforts during Christmas was coincidental. As I will argue, these efforts can be

interpreted as a way for members of the public to alleviate some of the discomforts that are felt with the realization that fellow citizens have to struggle even to celebrate a holiday. These struggles are, of course, ongoing throughout the year but are thrown into sharper relief during the holidays—a time of high consumption which is also a high time for charity, aided in part by the numerous media reports on poverty and charity which seem equally to appear and disappear with the season. However, the role of the charity complex not only provides a means for the alleviation of guilt or the discomfort over inequality. My third contention is that the involvement of members of the public in the collection of gifts for the needy, donating goods, or even volunteering their time teaches moral lessons, especially to children, about goodwill and charity. But this participation also appears to help to render charity, and by extension inequality, as accepted parts of the social landscape and as inevitable and re-occurring as the passing of the seasons—the charity complex becomes a hegemonic framework in which inequality is explained, justified, as well as normalized in complex ways.

My understanding of hegemony is drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci (1999 [1971]), as well the interpretations offered by other scholars who have been influenced by his work (e.g. Anderson 1976; Crehan 2002; Roseberry 1994; Williams 1977). Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who produced much of his key work from prison in the late 1920s and early 1930s, broke with the orthodox views at the time of Marxist-inspired thinkers who sought to replicate the results of the Russian Revolution elsewhere. Gramsci extended the application of hegemony to shift his inquiry to “the mechanisms of bourgeois rule over the working class in a stabilized capitalist society” (Anderson 1976:20). Hegemony is often portrayed as a dominant ideology or common sense, in

which alternatives are not presented as reasonable choices or not even presented for consideration at all. The ideological component of hegemony is important to be sure, as Gramsci argued that at a decisive point in the creation of hegemony the struggle between competing ideologies reaches a point at which one ideology becomes ascendant and prevails “to propagate itself throughout society” (Gramsci 1999:181). It is critical to remember that for Gramsci hegemony is always a story of class struggle and that ideologies are always linked to class interests, such as the justification and normalization of the unequal distribution of wealth which benefits certain sectors of society over others. Stephen Gaetz (1997), in his analysis of non-governmental youth organizations in Ireland, draws upon Gramsci to argue that the State, the Church and voluntary organizations all form part of a ‘historic bloc’—a coalition of institutions which work to ensure the continuation of the dominant political and economic order, even if their interests at times clash. Following Gaetz’s lead, I am also situating material aid charities within this ‘historic bloc,’ as there is a historical and structural linkage between charities and the organs of the state, even if these relationships are at times ambiguous. I will demonstrate that Mæðrastyrsnefnd, particularly in its early years, challenged some of the interests of the Icelandic state. However, I will also argue that charities and the various levels of governments and the business sector are intertwined in complex ways. Their activities ultimately produce and reproduce the existing socio-economic order, as there are oftentimes mutually-dependent ties within this ‘bloc’ and they share many of the same interests. As Gaetz argues, the fact that charities and governments are bound together through personal, political and material linkages does not preclude non-governmental organizations from creating a space which allows forces to emerge to challenge the

dominant social order (Gaetz 1997:16). However, such seeming contradictions are indeed a critical feature of the nature of hegemony.

For Gramsci, hegemony is always in flux and held in tension, under assault from the challenges posed by counter-hegemonies which emerge. Hegemony is maintained in part by concessions made to the subordinate sectors of society, so that it appears that the interests of the ruling class represents the interests of a given society as a whole (Crehan 2002:96). Crehan continues that hegemony must be understood as an inclusive field of power; hegemony is not accomplished and maintained solely in the realm of ideologies, values and beliefs but in 'practical activities' as well, which are lived day to day in the very fabric of social existence. I will explore Gramsci's ideas in more detail in Chapter Four, but suffice it to say at this point that his work appears to be very pertinent in terms of analyzing the effects produced by the work of material aid charities. Charity is very much a practical activity given the extent to which the staff, donors and volunteers are immersed within this complex, giving their time, labour, money and goods. Though I have begun to argue that charities are primarily about those who give rather than those who receive, the fact that all of these activities and energies are ostensibly geared towards helping those who are in need is not forgotten; this understanding is in fact critical. Unlike the governmental forms of the redistribution of wealth (such as social welfare benefits funded through taxation), charitable work is a practical activity in which concerned citizens can participate first hand. By volunteering or giving to charity, individual members of the public can take part and feel they are 'doing good' and 'making a difference' in a way that is not possible through governmental appropriations. Otherwise concerned, well-meaning and active citizens are therefore reassured they have



helped their needy fellow citizens and are re-directed away from activities that are much more threatening to the status quo such as pressuring members of parliament, starting petitions and writing letters, or engaging in demonstrations. Charities can be seen as an outlet for dissent and the uneasiness felt by the public about inequality in Icelandic society, but this dissent is channelled into an activity which has little potential for rupturing the status quo. The level of interest and support from the public that I encountered at Mæðrastyrksnefnd speaks volumes about the desire to help and the tacit recognition that things are not as well as they should be. That being said, this level of charitable support can also be interpreted as indicating there is less support for governmental redistributive measures which entail more financially painful costs to be paid by average taxpayers than does the donation of a gift at Christmas, old clothing and past-due food goods.

The creation and maintenance of hegemony involves practical activities as well as the realm of ideas. The maintenance of hegemony depends upon justifying, explaining and normalizing certain contradictions. In order for charities to act as an outlet for the public concerns about inequality it is critical that the clients are rendered as 'deserving.' My fourth and final contention is that in order for charities to be able to perform the roles that they do it is imperative that the volunteering and donating parties must be reassured that their efforts are going to help the 'truly' needy and that these charities are themselves 'responsible' organizations. The veneer of responsibility is created in part through the use of screening processes to filter their clients, put in place for logistical purposes as well as for reasons of appearance. This image needs to be maintained and reproduced. Mæðrastyrksnefnd, along with other charities, have eligibility processes in place in order

to sort, classify and screen clients based on a number of factors. In the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd this has partly to do with the organization's historical orientation towards aiding mothers and widows which, to an extent, is retained in the present. There is also the logistical consideration in terms of rationing limited supplies. These practices can also be linked to the dividing and classifying practices that emerged in the human sciences, medicine and modern governments in the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as analyzed by the philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault. I will explore some of Foucault's work in greater detail in Chapter Five to argue that charities and their formal governmental counterparts in the social welfare agencies and social work share much of the same bureaucratic approaches to the governance of their clients, even if some of the specific aims differ. In the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, both the staff and the donating public need to maintain the image that the clients are 'deserving,' as the continued interest in the efforts and work of charities hinges on this point. One way in which to do so is to demonstrate that the clients are evaluated before assistance is provided, in order to detect fraud. Media accounts of their work also draw attention to their clients in terms of certain demographic categories which have positive associations (as the 'truly needy'), such as struggling single mothers, lonely and isolated elderly people, and the temporarily unemployed among others. Overlooked are categories which tend not to arouse such public sympathy such as childless and homeless men, substance abusers and, to an extent, 'foreigners.' In Chapter Five I will explore how the clients were classified and sorted depending on the basis of competing and conflicting understandings of what it means to be poor in the context of contemporary Iceland. Some of these factors considered the behaviour of the client in question as well as judgments based on appearance and

perceptions of consumption practices to determine whether the client in question was 'needy.' In Chapter Six I will explore the factor of gender. Mæðrastyrksnefnd was historically oriented towards assisting women with children and the organization has retained much of this bias. Yet, the justification for excluding men was based on more than the factor of gender. It also included evaluations of their ability to work. Clients had to demonstrate their need but also justify why they were not engaged in waged labour. Those providing care for young children, those who suffered a temporary job loss, those who were unable or had difficulty working based on physical, developmental or psychological disabilities or advanced age were generally seen as eligible for assistance. Men who displayed these characteristics were usually helped without question; those who did not were sent elsewhere or in some cases denied help outright. While women were by and large spared the same level of scrutiny as prospective male clients, women were not provided a carte blanche for help. The category of 'single mother' can evoke sympathy and can be a positive descriptor in terms of soliciting support for a charity; alternatively such categories can also be interpreted in a number of other ways.

These classifications of the clients in terms of specific demographic categories all communicated ambivalent messages, as these categories were interpreted both as evidence and counter-evidence to the claims the clients were 'deserving.' The 'deserving single mothers' can alternatively be construed as fraudulent manipulators if questions were raised, as they often were, as to whether or not these women were truly single—despite the fact that marital status alone is not a useful indicator of need and the concealment of marital status may in certain cases be the result of a purposeful and understandable strategy of low income people in the face of bureaucratic restrictions to

accessing resources. The process of the maintaining and reproducing of hegemony and the resultant condition of status quo in terms of structural inequalities was not static but fluid and had to accommodate changes and recent developments in Icelandic society. In Chapter Seven I will explore the issue of disabled clients and Mæðrastyrksnefnd. In part, the classification of a person as an *öryrki* (recipient of disability pension) was an exercise in bureaucratic governance and ‘bio-power’ as argued by Foucault. This was a bureaucratic designation which appeared to have emerged as a social category and, in some cases, transformed into a label of identity. However, these categories are not stable and are filled with meaning and as such may be read in a number of ways. During the time of my research there was a notable measure of public debate within political circles and the media about disability pensioners and the pension system. Many of these arguments were quite similar in nature to the claims made about welfare benefits and suspicions about the poor in general, in that these benefits were sometimes said to enable a life of dependency through providing disincentives to work. The presentation of the identity card certifying its bearer as receiving the state disability pension was not entirely adequate as evidence of need for the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as suspicions continued to linger about some of these disabled clients. While appeals for donations and support from Mæðrastyrksnefnd would make reference to many of their clients as ‘disabled,’ the staff were well aware that the category of disability pensioners also encoded certain negative evaluations, doubts, and suspicions among the public about the authenticity of the claims of disabled people as to the veracity of their status. As such, in order to ensure that their resources only flowed to the ‘truly needy,’ these clients were often subjected to further scrutiny.

Chapter Eight will explore a category of clients which only emerged as a concern rather recently in the history of Mæðrastyrsnefnd and Iceland in general—that of ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners.’ A certain measure of uncertainty, ambiguity, and concern revolved around the issue of immigrant clients at Mæðrastyrsnefnd. In my interpretation this partly had to do with Icelanders in general coming to terms with the changing nature of Icelandic society as the result of immigration, which is still a fairly recent occurrence in Iceland. But the suspicion about foreign-born clients concerned a number of issues, some of which had to do with conceptions of the ‘truly needy’ as the proper recipients of charitable aid. The Icelandic-born clients were often denied assistance if their status as a non-working individual was cast into doubt. But even for those who were routinely granted assistance there was a measure of suspicion and doubt about their characters. These reflected the larger discourses which cast the clients of charities and recipients of social assistance as spendthrifts, slothful and indolent. Ironically, a common criticism of non-Icelandic born or ‘foreign’ clients was that they were hard workers, thrifty, clever and were involved in mutually assisting, dense kinship ties—all of which are normally positive denotations but within the context of a material aid agency these stereotypical characteristics worked against the immigrant clients’ claims for needing help.

The practice of classifying and sorting the clients acts to distinguish those who are acceptable as clients of this particular charity from those who are not. The charitable project in general depends upon emphasizing the fact that the clients are screened for eligibility within a society often suspicious of those who seek governmental and charitable assistance. Ostensibly motivated by concerns about the abuse of charities, despite the fact that the rewards for ‘abusing’ charities are meagre and that few would

subject themselves to the scrutiny of the staff and the stigma associated with charity if they did not need the assistance, the acceptance or rejection of certain individuals or demographic groups as the clients of charity ultimately does little in terms of altering the basic fundamental inequalities found within the larger society. Those who were turned away as clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd or told to limit their visits were forced to continue their reliance upon other charities, government agencies, friends and family or low-waged jobs. Yet those deemed as acceptable for charitable assistance were also unlikely to see substantive changes in their respective socio-economic positions. The ‘acceptable’ clients of charity become construed as the ‘normal’ clients of charity, normalizing in turn the structural factors which propelled them to seek assistance. While charity workers and their supporters would not hold that it is ‘good’ that people have to turn to charities in a wealthy society for assistance, positive associations nevertheless cling to the acts of charity. The desire and will to assist the elderly, single mothers, disabled people and the poor in general is of course laudable but, more importantly, in the process charity becomes a routine, unremarkable and accepted feature of the social landscape and a key component of the hegemonic views of the larger society which tolerates such inequalities. The state has the resources and power to make substantive changes in these regards but this is dependent upon political will; the focus on charitable solutions to structural problems draws attention away from where these well meaning members of the public should focus it the most. I will now turn to Chapter Two in order to outline the methodologies employed in this research project.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Methodology**

#### **2.1 Getting started**

My focus on Iceland grew out of a number of variables that I suspect are common for many graduate students in anthropology: personal relationships, finances, logistics, research interests and above all, chance. My research interests had largely been established before, and were further solidified through, my Master's research on the contradictions and politics of 'community' from the perspective of a community centre in a social housing project in St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland and Labrador (Rice 2002). This project was born as the result of my key interests in urban anthropology, social welfare issues and inequality. I had taken Laura Nader's well-known call to 'study up' to heart. As she pointed out some time ago, social scientists have tended to study the poor and the disempowered. It was time for social scientists to raise our collective scholarly gaze upwards in terms of the power structure (Nader 1972; 1980).

I was personally concerned about how the lives of the poor are much more open to the examining gaze of social welfare workers, law enforcement, health care professionals and scholars. For my doctoral research I retained my interest in studying the effects of bureaucratic power from the perspective of an organization, but also desired to conduct this research outside of Canada and in a personally unfamiliar cultural and linguistic context. I had settled on Japan, as I have a longstanding interest in Japanese history and society. I found that some of the potential advisors I spoke with who had worked in Japan, but were not native to the country, pointed out that it is one thing to study spoken

Japanese beforehand and to continue to learn in the field, but it is another altogether to master the written language which would be a must, given the amount of policy and archival research that my kind of interests require. I cursed my lack of foresight, given that I had already invested an amount of work in producing research and funding proposals. I was commiserating with Erla Björg Hilmarsdóttir, a friend who at the time was an undergraduate in psychology. She asked about my project's intended focus. After I explained, she commented that it was unfortunate that I could not do this kind of research in her native Iceland, as I would have a place to stay and the beginnings of a social network in place. As soon as she said this I began to feel my interest pique. I asked what she meant by 'not being able to do this project there' and she replied, "Well, there aren't really any poor people in Iceland."

I quickly began to consult the readily available social science literature on contemporary Iceland and was quite intrigued to learn that there was a native discourse which holds that Iceland is a relatively egalitarian society without notable divisions based on class or very much in the way of poverty. But I also learned that critical Icelandic and foreign scholars have disputed these contentions.<sup>1</sup> With further conversations with Erla, researching the literature, and a two month long pre-fieldwork trip in the summer of 2002, I learned that the capital city of Reykjavík indeed has a social welfare infrastructure in place which is similar in certain ways to what one would expect in North America and other parts of Western Europe. There were also numerous charitable organizations to deal with the effects of poverty, some of which are branches of international organizations such as Rauði Kross Íslands (the Icelandic Red Cross) and Hjálpræðisherinn á Íslandi (the Salvation Army in Iceland). A number of domestic agencies also provide food and



clothing assistance, such as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar (Icelandic Church Aid) and Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers' Support Committee). I later learned that over the years other branches of Mæðrastyrksnefnd opened in other towns across the country, such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the suburban city of Kópavogur and Mæðrastyrksnefnd of Akureyri, a town in northern Iceland.<sup>2</sup> I also had been in contact with the anthropologist Gísli Pálsson at the University of Iceland. He generously read through an initial funding proposal and we met again in person during this trip to discuss some possible research sites. I began to envision a project that was based on participant-observation and which focused on the tensions and contradictions between the discursive construction of Iceland as a society 'without poor people' and the experiential realities the staff of these frontline assistance agencies would face in their work. I decided to stay at Memorial University as it is one of the few anthropology departments which maintain a strong North Atlantic focus and I wished again to work with my M.A. advisor, Dr. Sharon Roseman, whose attention and advice successfully guided me through my previous degree.

I arrived in Iceland in mid-December of 2003 and stayed with Erla and her family in Reykjavík. After the holidays had passed and everything returned to normal I set about making contacts with private social aid agencies in the city. I had no idea of what kind of reaction I would encounter to my requests to conduct research at one of these organizations, especially as a foreigner with only a rudimentary knowledge of Icelandic. In case language might be an issue I decided to use e-mail as the first means of contact. After starting an Icelandic language course, which built upon some earlier language study, and some initial archival research, with Erla's assistance with the language when needed, I decided to make contact with the managers of two organizations that seemed to

be key providers of aid in Reykjavík: Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands (Iceland's Family Help) and Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers' Support Committee).

In response to my inquiries, I received a phone call early Monday morning on February the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2004. The call was from the *formaður* (chairperson) of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Hildur Eypórsdóttir.<sup>3</sup> Hildur seemed a little uncertain about my request but agreed to meet with me the next day at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, located in the *Vesturbær* (west end) section of Reykjavík and quite near the downtown core. She showed me around the building, which consisted of a main office area connected to a kitchen where the food is distributed, along with a two spaces in the back for packing and storage, and a clothing room which looked like a small thrift shop. Hildur offered me coffee and we discussed my research plan. Hildur has her M.A. in library sciences from McGill in Montreal and still did some teaching at the University of Iceland and as such was quite open and interested in the academic aspects of the project. As we talked she seemed to come to a decision and agreed to allow me to volunteer on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, their main days of operation, for my research. As this day was a Tuesday, I was put to work right after the interview and remained a volunteer at Mæðrastyrksnefnd all through my research and into the dissertation writing stage in the spring of 2006 and on into the first half of 2007 as an independent volunteer during the conclusion of the writing process.

## **2.2 Participant-observation**

The anthropologist Paul Rabinow remarked in a well-known treatise on fieldwork within the discipline (Rabinow 1977) that there is a disciplinary prejudice towards anthropologists who have not conducted fieldwork. They were generally seen as 'not

really' anthropologists if they opted for the so-called 'arm chair' approach to scholarship (ibid.:3). What Rabinow also implies, but perhaps did not feel it necessary to explicitly point out in 1977, is that this preference is for a particular kind of fieldwork, distinctively that of long term participant-observation at a specific site and which has generally been regarded as the defining method of research in socio-cultural anthropology (Barrett 1996:75; Dewalt et al. 1998:259). Since this time, the discipline has seen changes in terms of the movement towards 'multi-sited' research (e.g. Marcus 1995). As had long been apparent in anthropological research on the historical political economy (e.g. Mintz 1974, 1977, 1985; Wolf 1959, 1966, 1969, 1982), as well in research in the last decade on topics such as the multiplied pace of transnational migration (e.g. Ong 1999, Parreñas 2001) among others, it became increasingly apparent that the traditional fieldwork site of the 'tribe,' village, neighbourhood, or community was no longer the sole option for anthropological research. The specific nature of the 'object' of inquiry also demands that certain methodological adjustments had to be made. What may have been an appropriate research method for a 'traditional' site may not be appropriate for others. Further, such traditional fieldwork sites came to be regarded by some as reified 'fictions,' as the anthropological world became envisioned as being a relatively unbounded 'global ecumene,' as a 'network of networks' (Hannerz 1992), or as a series of '-scapes,' such as ethnoscaples or mediascapes (Appadurai 1991).

I felt and continue to feel, despite the rupture of the traditional fieldwork 'site' and the important role of historical anthropology, that Rabinow's comments regarding the anthropological preference for long term participant-observation at a specific locale still resonates for many areas of inquiry. Even though I intended to incorporate archival

research and media analysis in my project, I still aimed to ground the project's methodology on a solid foundation of participant-observation at one primary site. I was initially asked by the chair of Mæðrastyrsnefnd if I was planning a comparative study in terms of doing a series of shorter fieldwork projects in more than one agency. Despite the possible comparative advantages of doing so, I explained that the message I had received time and time again as a student was that fieldwork is about building relationships based on rapport and trust and that takes time. I decided to opt for a long term study at one primary site with the hopes of gaining ethnographic insights that I felt would be richer than perhaps would be possible with a multi-sited project, though every methodological approach has both benefits and drawbacks. But it must be pointed out that my ability to do so was not so much a choice as the result of happenstance and good fortune. The *formaður* (chair) of the committee at time, Hildur, as an academic herself was open and supportive of research endeavours. Further, the staff not only tolerated my presence in the beginning but seemed to come to welcome it, as I also began to look forward to the usual routines at Mæðrastyrsnefnd.

I was quite relieved to have been able to secure permission to conduct research at Mæðrastyrsnefnd on a regular basis. Charitable organizations are by and large dependent upon voluntary labour. As such, working as a volunteer put me in regular contact with the staff, clients and donors and allowed me to observe and participate in daily practice. Above all, having a role in the organization gave me a reason to be there in such a way that once my presence became routine I was able to observe the workings of the charity as naturalistically as possible, as both the clients and staff (as well as myself from time to time) eventually took my presence for granted.

When the chair of the committee, Hildur, allowed me to conduct my research at Mæðrastyrksnefnd we did not agree on a time period or duration, opting to 'see how it went' instead. As the first weeks turned into a month there was a measure of surprise among some of the staff members that I was still there, as perhaps some assumed that these kinds of research projects are weeks rather than months in duration. As the months passed it was humorously remarked by some staff as well as clients—'so you're still here?' Almost without exception I volunteered my labour as early as possible on the packing day on Tuesdays and the distribution days of Wednesdays and stayed until most of the work was complete. I also made myself available to help with additional labour needs, such as coming in on other days to unload a truck, move furniture, or to tear up the old carpeting. The Christmas holidays are the highlight of the committee's work and a time of additional assistance. The operating hours are expanded to accommodate the increased demand and I found that I was working three to four days a week and sometimes as much as nine hours a day. I knew that the staff needed my help for much of this and I also did not want to 'miss anything' in terms of observational data. As such, it seemed to me that my presence eventually became assumed and included in the mental calculations of the staff when planning on labour needs. Once there was a change in management and Hildur left in late September 2004, and replaced by Ragnhildur Guðmundsdóttir, I had asked if it was possible to continue my research. My query was treated with a measure of humour; in other words it appeared that the regular staff members hoped that I was not going to leave. I continued to maintain that I was benefiting much more than the committee from being allowed to volunteer—a charge which most of the senior staff denied. I often heard discussions about what to do once

‘James is gone,’ as even after a year had passed the staff knew that one day I would leave. I commonly heard a few key staff members say that they needed to ‘clone me’ to ensure I would be there once my research was finished, to which I replied that the committee has been around since 1928 and would continue to be after I was long gone.

I continued regular volunteering up until I took a break in late May 2005 for my upcoming marriage to my partner Erla. I returned to visit in late June with my wife to thank the committee for the generous wedding gift they had given us. I found it very difficult to break the volunteer ‘addiction,’ as some staff members also referred to it, as both Erla and I stayed until closing that day to help out. I knew all too well the uncertainty of the labour supply—a situation quite typical of many material aid charities—and I felt obligated to continue to assist when I could, well into my dissertation writing phase. My volunteer duties concluded by helping the committee with the move to their new location in the Tún area of Reykjavík in June of 2006 and, after a brief teaching opportunity abroad, I resumed volunteering for the first half of 2007 during the final writing stages.

I discovered that Tuesdays required an emphasis on the participant element of participant-observation. The morning usually began with maintenance duties, such as mopping or sweeping, followed by stocking shelves with goods. In the clothes room the staff would work at sorting clothes that had come in, stocking shelves and accepting donations. Once the food arrived it was usually a matter of putting the dairy in the refrigerators, frozen goods in the freezers, sorting usable produce from the unusable and then packing the bags for the next day. I always finished up on garbage detail, breaking down cardboard boxes and disposing of unusable food goods in the garbage bins outside.

Conversations among the staff, either during coffee or cigarette breaks or during work-related duties, were a valuable source of information. If I overheard something which caught my interest I usually verified in English what was said with a staff member to ensure that I did not misunderstand, which I would then later jot down in a little notebook I kept with me. My early conversations with the staff were usually procedural, such as asking where donations came from or why things were done in a certain way. As I learned more, this expanded into some philosophical discussions about a variety of issues the staff encountered at work and in terms of Iceland in general. As more time passed I found that my opinion was consulted on certain logistical issues. When new volunteers would arrive, such as at Christmas, I found that I was asked questions about the operation of the organization much as I had posed in the beginning.

The Wednesday distribution day shifted my role largely from participant to observer in some respects. Once the leftover maintenance and packing duties were complete and the doors opened there was initially no role left for me to fill. There were usually adequate staff members in the clothes room where the clients were greeted and, during most of my research, given a numbered ticket while they sat on chairs or else browsed the clothing items. Once the client's number was called, she or he would proceed into the main office for an interview. Here a staff member would ask the client to complete an information form, examine their identification and determine their eligibility. From this point, usually, the clients would take the ticket to the table by the kitchen to receive their food goods. Before leaving they would browse the available goods on the tables, such as books, excess food goods, toys and assorted bric-a-brac. The first Wednesday I was there I raised the issue regarding my role with Hildur, as I pointed out

that all of the jobs were more or less spoken for on Wednesdays and there was little for me to do once the doors opened. She thought about this and asked me to stand by the exit, where I could help the clients with items on the tables, open the doors and assist those who might need help taking their bags to their cars. I was also cautioned to make sure that clients did not 'take too much' from the tables, which is a theme I will return to in greater detail. As it turned out this was an ideal place from which to observe as well as participate. There was a little alcove by the exit from where I could observe the entire interview and distribution process. I was able to interact with the clients when they asked about the items on the tables. I found that as I got to know some clients better we would have entire conversations in the alcove, outside on the sidewalk or by their cars parked on the street. From time to time I could retreat into the alcove and watch the proceedings inside the building or outside on the street, where I would also jot down field observations or narratives in my notebook. All of the staff, as well as the clients I spoke to, were aware that I was there doing research. However, I felt uncomfortable taking notes in the open unless it was at a formal meeting and avoided doing so.

I also participated in a number of internal meetings as well as meetings between Mæðrastyrksnefnd and visiting dignitaries, which included a delegation from a municipal political party as well the outgoing and incoming mayors of Reykjavík during the time of my research. In July of 2006, the committee invited me to a small dinner hosted by the Minister of Health and Social Security (*heilbrigðis- og tryggingamálaráðherra*), Sív Friðleifsdóttir, which was held to honour the board of Mæðrastyrksnefnd. In the latter half of my fieldwork period the committee had asked me to speak at some of these events about my research. I was also asked to speak with a number of undergraduate students



who were dealing with issues of poverty in their own research projects. I found that my role at Mæðrastyrksnefnd came to be a conglomeration of volunteer, quasi-staff member, in-house scholar and statistician and at times public relations assistant. I came into contact with a few members of the media, as there was a steady stream of reporters coming through the building looking to do pieces on poverty and charity. Towards the conclusion of my research I took advantage of the generous offers from various scholars at the University of Iceland to present some of my research in seminars, classrooms and a public lecture.

### **2.3 Interviews**

From the outset of the project I had planned to conduct a number of interviews with key staff members and clients, as well as some officials at other social aid agencies. Though participant-observation was the primary research method, I had always felt that interviews would be a useful way in which to discuss issues in greater detail with staff members in particular who were usually too busy working during operating hours to have extended conversations. It has been pointed out that informal conversations are essentially 'unstructured interviews,' which everyone does in the course of daily social interaction (Bernard 1994:208). These 'unstructured interviews' did provide an ample source of data, but it must be remembered that informal conversations within the context of an organization were to an extent self-censored. Some staff members preferred to discuss certain issues in a café, on the telephone or through email, or in their homes rather than at Mæðrastyrksnefnd lest another staff member overhear. There were numerous instances, however, when I found myself working alone with a staff member when concerns about being overheard were lessened. The concern about being overheard was even more the

case for clients, as I was often given the proverbial ‘earful’ of criticism once we moved outside by their cars. Interestingly, these criticisms of Mæðrastyrksnefnd became more tempered and intermingled with praise for the staff during formal interviews, as I supposed that the ‘unstructured interviews’ by their cars were often a case of clients’ ‘blowing off steam’ as the result of an incident which had just occurred. Some clients proved to be less than circumspect when it came to their concerns about other clients or the staff overhearing their comments. In these cases I tried to gently guide the client outside, as I was always aware of the staff members observing my interactions with the clients. Within the building I attempted to minimize, as much as possible, the obviousness of those clients with whom I was building a relationship, as I did not want it to be apparent to the staff which clients I was most likely going to interview. In some cases I felt that it was apparent to the staff which clients I became friendly with. In other cases it was not likely the staff were aware of whom I interviewed, as these interviews were arranged outside of operating hours or off of the premises.

My interview requests to specific staff members were ordered on the basis of how familiar I was with the staff member in question and how fluent they were in English; a similar pattern held for the clients as well. The often noted ‘fact’ in media and travel accounts that all Icelanders speak fluent English appears to be an assumption rather than documented practice. While a basic command of English was fairly common in my experience, I also found that English competency ranged from perfect and practically unaccented to practically non-existent. Younger Icelanders generally had a good grasp of English but there were some I spoke to who struggled and were not able to express the kind of complex ideas I was interested in exploring. As I was better able to comprehend

written and spoken Icelandic than I was able to formulate my own complex sentences, the same seemed to have held for some of the staff and clients in the case of English. I realized that it was doubtful that I would be able to conduct an interview solely in Icelandic without assistance before the conclusion of my research. While I was able to understand and engage in basic task oriented language scenarios as well as casual discussions, I knew that I would need help for the expression of more complex ideas that would arise within formal interviews. Later interviews with present and former staff members were largely in Icelandic with the assistance of a staff member who had generously donated her time to help with them.

While I had conducted numerous unstructured interviews during the course of my participant-observation, I limited formal semi-structured interviews to select staff members and clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as well as senior officials in other similar charities and relevant government agencies. During the course of my research I conducted a total of 28 semi-structured interviews of this nature. Some of these interviews were in local cafés or restaurants, some at Mæðrastyrksnefnd during off-hours, and others in the staff member's home. Interviews with the officials from other charitable organizations, government agencies, and some local scholars were usually conducted in their respective offices or place of operations. The interviews with clients often took place in the client's home or a local café and one client, who was also a friend of the family, was interviewed in my kitchen. One interview with a client lasted several hours, starting in a café and then in her car as she ran errands around the city and concluded sitting around her kitchen table. Most of these interviews were 'semi-structured,' as this interview style has been recognized to allow for a more free-flow of ideas and exchange of dialogue as well as

encouraging spontaneity (Barrett 1996:191; Fife 2005: 94–95). Most of these interviews resembled long conversations, as I used the questions I prepared as a guide but allowed the interview participants to explore themes that they felt to be important. Some of the interviews in Icelandic were taped with the purpose in mind of having them on record to return to, in particular to deal with any complexities relating to the assistant's translation. However, from the very earliest interviews I noticed a marked chill, for lack of a better word, when I would ask to tape record the interview. Upon sensing this I put the recorder away and the interviewees would often return to their original comfort level. This was less the case for the heads of organizations, but was fairly common among the regular staff members and especially the clients. I did not experience this level of discomfort towards taping interviews in my previous research in Canada, regardless of whether participants were officials or the residents of a social housing project. I am not certain if this is a cultural difference, but the pattern was common enough to warrant discontinuing using the tape recorder altogether. In the latter part of my research I did not bring the tape recorder with me to interviews in anticipation of this reaction, as I opted to lose some accuracy in order to gain research participant comfort, rapport and a richer interview outcome as a result. I took detailed notes for all interviews and specific noteworthy comments were recorded verbatim, as I would request a pause in order to accurately record these comments.

From the outset of the research I had decided that I would like to interview a number of clients but that most of my interviews would focus on the staff and volunteers. As mentioned earlier, I felt troubled about the bulk of the poverty-related research which focused on the lives of the poor at the expense of examining the machinations of power

which dominated their lives. I felt that the initial expectations of some of the staff members, journalists and scholars I spoke to about my research was that I was really using Mæðrastyrsnefnd as a stepping stone for gaining access to the clients. Nevertheless, I continued to fret about this despite the fact that I knew my project was heavily based on participant-observation rather than interviews and that interviews were also heavily emphasized on staff members at the expense of clients. I did receive some support on this matter from my supervisor and colleagues both in Canada and Iceland, as at one point I began to worry about whether or not I was interviewing 'enough' clients. I was also relieved to discover when I started to write this dissertation that I was not alone in the desire to focus on the staff of charities rather than the clients (e.g. Allahyari 2000; Poppendieck 1998). In her detailed and largely interview based research on emergency food in the United States, Janet Poppendieck (1998) points out that she decided as well to favour interviewing the staff and managers of charitable organizations at the expense of clients. She writes early in the book:

Purposely, I interviewed relatively few clients in this research. We have, on the whole, a great deal more information about poor people in such settings than we do about more privileged staff and volunteers, and I believe that we need to know more about the latter in order to understand how our society has made the transition from entitlements to charity that is explored in this book (Poppendieck 1998:vii).

I agree entirely that the lives of the poor have borne more than their fair share of scholarly scrutiny than those higher in the power structure. I feel that it is critical to understand the experiences of those who are subjected to power, but my interview pool reflects my particular interest in the exercise of power by focusing on the staff versus the clients.

The clients I interviewed formally did not reflect any particular demographic criteria. Rather, I had prepared a letter in both English and Icelandic (see appendix A) which explained who I was and what I was doing at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The clients, whom I came to know and see on a regular basis, already knew most of this information. In some cases I failed to see the point of formally interviewing them and chose not to as the result of the conversations we had inside or outside of Mæðrastyrksnefnd over a period of months. I felt that I came to learn most or all of what I would have asked in an interview in these instances of what were really conversations arising from the method of participant observation. There were a few client-volunteers with whom I worked over a period of weeks or months and was able to explore their backgrounds and views on a number of issues. This introductory letter was particularly important in the case of clients I knew in terms of brief greetings and conversations but with whom I felt that there was enough of a level of comfort to request an interview. A few clients who were quite open and eager to speak with me outside of Mæðrastyrksnefnd seemed hesitant in terms of participating in a formal interview. It must be remembered that some of the clients who came to Mæðrastyrksnefnd suffered from numerous emotional, psychological and physical issues on top of or in addition to their basic economic problems. A couple of staff members had cautioned me that 'shame' might be one reason why some clients might not want to talk to me more formally. One staff member felt that it was unlikely that any clients would speak to me at all because of the issue of 'shame.' I found the opposite to be the case, and most clients I spoke to dismissed the issue of shame as being a factor when I mentioned some of the general resistance to formal interviews that I encountered. The consensus was that these clients were too tired or sick or were

undergoing some kind of personal crisis to have the energy needed to talk to a relative stranger about their personal problems. A few admitted to me that because of issues of emotional or psychological health they did not want to commit to an interview until they were certain they were up to it. Some clients reached a point where they were able to grant me an interview, while others repeatedly apologized for not being able to do so. I always stressed that they did not need to apologize and that I was happy just to chat with them at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. One client in particular, whom I was very fond of, repeatedly shrugged off my request despite her initial warm reaction. I wondered if I had done something wrong to upset her. I decided that the interview was not going to happen and settled on casual weekly conversations outside of the building. About three months after my initial request, Sigrún (a pseudonym) told me to call her and a few days later we had one of the most productive and interesting interviews of the project. When I learned about what was going on in her life during the last few months, in conjunction with what I learned about the lives of other clients, I could easily see why people would be less than enthusiastic to talk about the very issues which are forcing them to turn to a charity for help. In retrospect, I came to the conclusion that my success rate for client interviews may have been higher if I was an outside scholar doing an impersonal survey project rather than as a quasi-staff member of the organization. Some clients raised concerns with me about whether or not their criticisms would reach the ears of the staff, which might have been less of the case if I was seen as an entirely independent researcher and not closely associated with a particular organization. While I gained a measure of closeness and intimacy within the organization and with several regular clients as the result of my approach, this very same closeness might also have worked against me in other respects,

illustrating that all research methods in the social sciences have both advantages and disadvantages.

#### **2.4 Archival research: Newspapers**

The primary source of archival research for this project has been newspaper accounts of the discussions of poverty and charities. It has been noted that while caution must be used in terms of the validity of certain facts reported in newspapers such as statistics, newspapers nevertheless open an interesting window upon the key issues and concerns within a society at particular historical junctures, as well as an indication of the longevity and form of these concerns over time. Wayne Fife notes that the “macro structures affecting social inequalities have specific histories and trajectories and newspapers can be of use in assessing to what extent these trends have continued into the present period” (Fife 2005:59). Newspapers have proven to be a valuable window onto both the historical and contemporary public debates regarding these issues in terms of policy announcements, requests for assistance and editorials. Very little has been written about charities in Iceland so I decided to turn to newspaper accounts to get some insights about the operations of charitable organizations in Reykjavík in the early twentieth century. As luck would have it, a project to digitize the early editions of the leading newspaper in Iceland, *Morgunblaðið* (the Morning Paper), in conjunction with the National Library of Iceland (Landsbókasafn Íslands), had begun shortly before my research commenced. Since the newspaper was founded in 1913, I was able to peruse digital scans of early editions from the comfort of my home. However it proved to be a daunting and time consuming task as these were scans of the original documents and not searchable transcriptions. As with originals or microfilm copies, I had to manually scan



each page looking for stories about poverty and charities in Reykjavík. Upon finding useful stories I would, with my partner's assistance, translate relevant passages or in some cases entire articles. As this project was not a work of history I decided that I could only devote a portion of my energies to this task. I opted to scan a random sample of three editions of the paper from each month and to focus on the period from 1913 up until the Second World War. My rationale for this was that I wanted a better grasp of the context in which Mæðrastyrksnefnd was formed in 1928. Further, most of my discussions with the staff about poverty invariably contained some reference to Iceland 'before the War,' which meant the time period from the turn of the century up until Iceland's emergent prosperity after the influx of British and American infrastructure building in the 1940s. I wanted to understand how poverty and social inequality were discussed during this period in contradistinction to the present and these undertakings proved to be worthwhile.

During the time of my research I also scanned daily editions of local newspapers, primarily *Morgunblaðið*, *Fréttablaðið* (the Free Paper), and occasionally the tabloid newspaper *DV* and the recently founded *Blaðið* (the Paper) looking for relevant articles. I engaged in a process of 'clipping' by saving and analyzing relevant articles to understand what appeared to be considered 'newsworthy' in regards to my focus as well as the apparent societal concerns that were raised in these articles (Fife 2005:54). I clipped these articles and, again with my partner's assistance, translated passages or entire articles. This was an important exercise for this project. In my impression Icelanders are particularly avid newspaper readers, or 'scanners' at least as some have admitted to me, and it was common for many of the staff members to keep a close eye on the dailies as well as listening to radio call in shows, news on the television and discussion panel programs.

Icelandic internet blogs<sup>4</sup> and web forums about local issues are becoming widely read as well and are an interesting source for opinion pieces. Many of the newspaper articles which touched on relevant issues were discussed by the staff in daily discourse. It was not unusual for a staff member to start the day at Mæðrastyrksnefnd with me with the seemingly mandatory coffee as well as a discussion which started with the phrase, “Did you see the article about so-and-so in *Fréttablaðið* today?” Newspaper articles which discussed Mæðrastyrksnefnd specifically as well as other similar charities always caused a stir and it was quite common to see staff members with a collection of articles about Mæðrastyrksnefnd which they clipped over the years and kept in clear plastic folders. A few former staff members also brought these article collections with them to interviews, which was another good source of information.

## **2.5 Archival research: Statistics**

Discussions about contemporary poverty and the situations of the clients of charities in Iceland invariably became a discussion about the levels of the benefits from social assistance schemes as well as quantifying the amount of ‘poor people’ in the country, in conjunction with the more philosophical ruminations or speculations as to ‘why’ people sought help at charities. In my experience it was far more common to hear from people outside of my direct research context ask the question about ‘how many’ people go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd rather than the more critical, to my mind at least, question of ‘why.’ Most of the data I present on these issues external to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, such as social assistance rates, demographic data for the city or country and so forth are largely drawn from the work and discussions I had with the sociologist Harpa Njáls (see Njáls 2003) as well as from other sources of data such as Félagsþjónustan í Reykjavík (the

municipal social services of Reykjavík)<sup>5</sup>, Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute) and Hagstofa Íslands (Statistics Iceland).

The issues regarding the statistical data drawn from Mæðrastyrksnefnd will be discussed further in subsequent chapters but a brief discussion of methods is warranted here. My training in anthropology was heavily qualitative in nature. When I became involved in tracking and analyzing statistics about the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd it was, so to speak, a case of learning on the job. Each client who passed the eligibility screening was given a hand written chit by the interviewer which she or he was to present to the kitchen staff in return for the food assistance. The tickets were no more than a small blank piece of paper on which the staff member would indicate the number of adults and children in the household so the kitchen staff could decide whether to increase the amount of assistance the clients were given. Some of these tickets included additional information, such as notations from the interviewer about additional assistance that might be required. These tickets were saved in a basket, counted at the end of the day and then discarded. I realized that there was additional demographic information which could be culled from these tickets aside from the simple count, such as statistical differences between the ratios of single adults, with and without children, as well as couples with and without children. I asked permission to take these tickets home each week to count and analyze this information, which was readily granted as there was no identifying information on these tickets which could pose ethical issues. This information was tracked and logged into an electronic database from which I could produce charts and graphs if warranted. With the addition of some archival information I was able to track

the weekly visiting patterns at Mæðrastyrksnefnd for the entirety of 2003 through to the first half of 2006.

My attention then turned to the client information sheets which included a wide range of demographic data such as gender, age, income, education, number of children, social status in terms of work, assistance benefits and so forth. The clients had to fill out this form every time they sought assistance at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I initially raised the idea of doing an analysis of this data with the chair of the committee at the time, Hildur. As a former archivist she admitted that she had similar ideas but this information was recorded by hand and simply filed into binders and generally collected dust on the shelves. She pointed out that it would take a serious investment of time to transfer this data into an electronic database from where it could be analyzed and it was time that she did not have. I pointed out that the received wisdom amongst the majority of the committee in terms of the client visiting patterns was the belief that 'it was all the same people each week.' Both Hildur and I felt that this was not the case from our observations, but we did not have the statistical evidence to counter this claim. I suggested that since each client is required to provide his or her *kennitala* (national identification number) on the form that it would simply be a matter of tracking the *kennitala* to determine how many times each person visited each month and then after a specific period express this as a percentage, such as 'x' percent of clients visited once a month, 'y' percent visited twice a month and so forth. This information cannot be linked to a specific individual and should not pose any ethical problems aside from agreeing to safeguard the raw data. Hildur agreed that this would be useful information but pointed out that while I was doing so it would also be interesting to cross-reference this with other

demographic factors to see if any other patterns emerged. I realized that this would be an enormous undertaking so we decided to do a test month of March 2004. We agreed that this also posed ethical considerations, so we decided that I would come to Mæðrastyrksnefnd on an off-day to enter the information and to track individuals by kennitala rather than name. Once the database was complete the edited version would omit the kennitala altogether and any presented data would only be in terms of percentages from which identifying any one individual would be impossible. The results of the test month of March 2004 were presented at a general committee meeting in September and were warmly received, resulting in a request for more statistical studies for further months for purposes of comparison. This was undertaken by myself for the months of October 2004 and April 2005.

This set of descriptive statistics was drawn upon by senior staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and used in some newspaper articles they wrote and in meetings with officials and business leaders when soliciting support for their organization. However some of this information, particularly so the process over the findings, was useful for myself as well and balanced the other methods I drew upon for this project. I will now turn to Chapter Three and a discussion of the research setting and the history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd.

## Endnotes for Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> The key works which formed my background knowledge at the proposal writing stage, but not exclusively, included: Durrenberger 1996; Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989; Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000; Hastrup 1990, 1998; Karlsson 1995, 2000; Koester 1995a; Magnússon 1986, 1989; Magnússon 1977; Njáls 2003; Ólafsson and Sigurðsson 2000; Pálsson 1989, 1995; Pálsson and Durrenberger 1992; and Wieland 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Aside from Mæðrastyrsnefnd in the suburban city of Kópavogur, I rarely heard the others mentioned and they seemed to have little to do with the original Mæðrastyrsnefnd in Reykjavík. Mæðrastyrsnefnd of Kópavogur and Mæðrastyrsnefnd of Reykjavík occasionally exchanged excess goods, but their co-operation rarely extended beyond this. It must also be noted that these smaller branches, from what I was told, only operated during the holiday season unlike Mæðrastyrsnefnd of Reykjavík.

<sup>3</sup> All research in Canada which is either publicly funded or conducted through a post-secondary institution must follow the ethical guidelines spelled out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canada 2003). Anthropologists in North America often follow the guidelines of the American Anthropological Association's *Code of Ethics* (1998) as well. Although I use a common anthropological convention in using pseudonyms for clients and staff aside from the director, as I had noted in my information sheet for research participants, which included both English and Icelandic versions, the use of pseudonyms for public figures is an exercise in futility. Therefore I had decided that easily identifiable heads of organizations would be named, with the person's permission, but we would discuss together ways to disguise or omit information that may be deemed overly sensitive. As such, for the heads of organizations actual names will be used in this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Blog is a neologism for 'personal web log,' essentially a publicly accessible online diary.

<sup>5</sup> Félagsþjónustan í Reykjavík was renamed to Velferðarsvið Reykjavíkurborgar towards the end of my research as the result of a departmental reorganization.

## Chapter Three

### **The Research Setting: Iceland, Reykjavík, and Mæðrastyrksnefnd**

“There is not very much puberty here in Iceland” the solemn voice declared to me in heavily accented English, slightly slurred due to alcohol and also oblivious to the chorus of laughter which erupted around the room in response to his statement, as he had mistakenly substituted ‘puberty’ for ‘poverty.’ I was in a hotel room in Selfoss, a town in south-western Iceland and a fairly short drive from the capital, Reykjavík, for the annual celebration (*árshátíð*) that the firm my wife worked for was hosting for their employees and partners. I had struck up a conversation with an undergraduate in sociology who was working on a project on women and crime in Iceland. She told me that there are usually between four to six women incarcerated in Iceland at any given time and that she more or less knew all of them. At this time, in late April of 2004, I still found myself a little disoriented about the smallness and dense social networks that are impossible to miss once one spends a length of time in this nation of 300,000 people. When I mentioned that I was working at Mæðrastyrksnefnd we began discussing how the existence of poverty is generally denied by the public at large when her companion wandered over and declared that there is very little poverty in Iceland. After her companion left we resumed the conversation. Contrary to what he had just stated she dismissed the idea of Iceland as some kind of egalitarian utopia by saying, “of course there are lots of poor people in Iceland.” The idea that there are no poor people was, in her opinion, a product of the media. The media plays a role, to be certain, but I would learn as well so do the factors of

Icelandic history, politics, structural economic issues, the social welfare system, consumption and constructions of national identity, among others.

I came away from this conversation pondering the resistance to thinking about poverty I had encountered so far, aside from among a handful of scholars, dedicated activists and aid workers who were willing to discuss inequality and its relationship to the social welfare system and structural economic factors. I was usually told, aside from these individuals, that there was no poverty in Iceland per se as there had been 'in the past.' In the present those seeking assistance at charities were often described to me or described in the media as people who 'wasted their money,' people who only wanted to get 'something for free,' or people who chose or were encultured to live on social assistance rather than working; in other words behavioural rather than structural factors explained the existence of socio-economic inequality and as such could not really be seen as 'poverty' as it was generally understood. In and amongst this group of people were to be found a handful of the 'truly needy,' such as the elderly, visibly disabled, the seriously ill and so forth. It appeared that the term 'poverty' (*fátækt*) was so laden with cultural and historical baggage, so to speak, that I sought alternatives to 'poverty' with which to describe my research interests, such as socio-economic 'inequality' (*félagslegur mismunur*) or 'financial difficulties' (*fjárhagslegir erfiðleikar*).

The idea that the needy may be categorized as comprising the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor is by no means a new one nor do these distinctions have their origins within Iceland. The historian Carter Lindberg (1993) notes that within the Judeo-Christian tradition these 'classic' categories of the 'worthy' poor, such as widows, orphans and the sick, were delineated in the Scriptures since ancient times. The 'unworthy' poor were



those who were perceived as otherwise fit but unwilling to work (Lindberg 1993:20)<sup>1</sup>. However, such distinctions on the European mainland were of little importance until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as the poor were generally perceived as part of the normal and divinely ordained social landscape. The social historian Robert Jütte (1994) notes that the reasons for the re-emerging importance of distinguishing the poor into typologies of degree and causation were complex, ranging from the need for labour during periods of depopulation due to famine and disease, to the later need for social order in emerging urban centres and to limit demands upon public relief. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after a prodigious output of pamphlets, tracts and decrees dedicated to identifying these subcategories of the poor in the effort to limit begging and demands upon public and charitable relief, “the distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor became a commonplace concept through which contemporaries organized their view of the social order” (Jütte 1994:12). Yet the history and nature of poor relief in Iceland was quite different from that of the Nordic and Western European mainland.

As I will discuss next, poor relief in Medieval and early modern Iceland was a secular concern under the control of the dominant farming class. The guilds, fraternities, religious institutions and private associations which operated on the mainland of Europe for centuries amongst numerous socio-cultural groups, providing everything from the burial of their members to rudimentary forms of social welfare and insurance (Reynolds 1997:67–68), did not appear to exist in Iceland. Even material aid charities, a common fixture in European societies as well, did not begin to appear in Iceland until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as exemplified by the founding of such charitable and charity-oriented organizations as Thorvaldsensfélagið in 1875 and Hjálpræðisherinn á Íslandi (the

Salvation Army in Iceland) in 1895. There was of course an indigenous Icelandic model of the social order in the Middle Ages, with paupers predictably located at the bottom and who were treated rather harshly. Yet I would urge caution in drawing a link of direct continuity between the views of the poor in Iceland's distant past with the present. There has been a tradition of what some have referred to as a 'neo-orientalist' (Pálsson 1995:62) scholarship of Icelandic history and culture, in which Iceland and Icelanders are not only exoticized as the 'others' of Nordic Europe but modern Icelandic culture and 'mentalities' have been interpreted through the lens of nationalist historiography and Iceland's ancient past.<sup>2</sup> While it may be tempting to link some of the harsh attitudes I noted towards the recipients of governmental and charitable assistance in the present with the harsh treatment of paupers in Iceland's past, I would be hesitant to do so in such a direct manner.

It is possible that some of this residual suspicion and prejudice about the poor lingers given that some harsh measures were applied to the dependent poor as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but, as I will argue further, the older anxieties about landless people, coastal fishers and others not attached to a farming household gave way in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to concerns about rural to urban migrants, issues of urbanization, and later to other categorizations of the poor and needy. With the rise of the charity complex in Reykjavík during this time, further concerns about the well-being of women and children in particular were raised, as many of these organizations were founded by women's rights advocates and reformers and who had a keen interest in supporting needy women and their children. The protection of 'vulnerable' women later emerged with a particular urgency with the presence of Allied servicemen stationed in Iceland during the Second

World War, as nationalist discourses were interwoven with notions of ‘purity’ and the protection of the Icelandic language and culture which were often expressed and interpreted in a maternalist idiom.<sup>3</sup> During the time of my research, the concerns about social welfare issues notably revolved around the issue of disability pensioners and the disability pension system. I also noted the increasing anxieties regarding ‘foreign’ clients which I suspect will soon become a key issue with regards to charitable and public assistance should immigration to Iceland continue at its current pace. The key point is that the hegemonic framework in place in a given society and at a given time which informs and justifies the redistribution of wealth and explains poverty and inequality, such as with regards to who should and should not receive assistance, is not stable but in flux, sensitive to emergent issues and counter-hegemonic discourses. I would not discount the factor of history in shaping these views and the consequent structuring of aid provision—quite the opposite. But I would not argue that the concerns of the public, government agencies and charitable organizations that characterized Icelandic society when Mæðrastyksnefnd formed in the late 1920s are the same as those of the present, let alone those of the more distant past. As I will argue, it was the influence of Mæðrastyksnefnd and other similar organizations which brought certain concerns to the forefront of Icelandic society in the past and continue to do so in the present. I will now turn to a brief historical discussion of the research setting of Iceland and Reykjavík, before turning to a discussion about the earlier provision of poor relief in Iceland and the emergence of charity complex in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Reykjavík.

### **3.1 The historical setting: Iceland and Reykjavík**

The Central Bank of Iceland published *Iceland: 874-1974* (Nordal and Kristinsson 1975) to mark the eleventh centenary of Iceland's settlement. The book opens with a common introductory narrative of Icelandic history: according to the *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements),<sup>4</sup> the first settler Ingólfur Arnarson, a Norse chieftain, threw the high seat pillars from his ancestral home into the sea and declared that he would build his settlement where the gods directed they wash ashore. The pillars were said to have been found three years later in 874 on the shores of a little bay in south-western Iceland, which was named Reykjavík or Smoky Bay. However, Reykjavík was to remain a rather insignificant collection of farms for another half a millennium after that (Karlsson 2000:12), only later to develop into the capital and the major urban centre of Iceland.

Iceland was initially colonized primarily by Norse settlers who, in one common interpretation, had fled the aggressive attempts of Harald Fairhair to unify the Norse kingdom (Hastrup 1985:8; Karlsson 2000:15). One point of contention included Harald's attempts to impose taxation on his subjects—the result of such is posited as the origins of the resistance to centralized authority among the original settlers to Iceland as well as the characteristics of “self-help and independence” perceived as key elements of Icelandic culture (Ólafsson 1993:64). It has also been noted that many of these Norse settlers had come to Iceland via the Viking controlled areas of Ireland and Britain, bringing with them a number of Celtic wives, servants and slaves (Tomasson 1980:4). The Book of Settlements reports that all of the available land was taken after the first sixty years of colonization. The *landnám* (land-taking), also known as the Age of Settlement, generally concluded in the year 930 which corresponds to the establishment of the *Alþing*, the

Icelandic general assembly or parliament (Tomasson 1980:4; Byock 2001:94). The Alþing was an assembly of free males which met annually at Þingvellir in south-central Iceland. There were also a number of lower scale regional *þings* which took place in the spring. Every free farmer (*bóndi* pl. *bændur*) had to be affiliated with a particular chieftain (*goði*, pl. *goðar*) who in turn linked all of the cottars and tenants residing on the land of the *bóndi*, as well as his<sup>5</sup> household, with the larger society (Hastrup 1990:73). These landowning farmers were free to leave one chieftain for another of their choosing, which is one reason some scholars have pointed to early democratic forms in the political organization of ancient Iceland (Karlsson 2000:26). Even though the period from 870–1262 was known as the Commonwealth or Free State era, there was no centralized authority, no standing army, or any ‘state’ structure in the modern sense. Decisions rendered at the Alþing had to be executed by the plaintiff, so this institution was more of an arena for consensus building and garnering of support for the enforcement of grievance verdicts than a modern judiciary whose rulings are backed up with centralized authority and force (Durrenberger 1998:178). ‘Commonwealth’ is perhaps a more fitting term than ‘Free State,’ as it denotes “a loose association of political assemblages, united by law and minimal agreement but without a centralized executive body” (Pálsson 1992a:3).

The final period of the Commonwealth Era is known as the *Sturlungaöld* or Age of the Sturlungar, after a powerful and influential family. This is generally stated as lasting from 1230–62 and was characterized by turmoil and strife as this family consolidated their power and landholdings (S. Magnússon 1977:21).<sup>6</sup> In an effort to establish a peace, some chieftains turned to the kingdom of Norway for aid which

ultimately took control of Iceland between the years of 1262–64 (Tomasson 1980:20). Due to a series of mainland Scandinavian wars and the mixing of dynasties, Iceland came under control of the Danish crown in 1380 (Tomasson 1980:20). In 1814, Denmark ceded Norway to Sweden but retained control of the holdings of the old Norse kingdom, which included Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands (Karlsson 1995:33). The period from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is commonly referred to as the ‘struggle for independence,’ though the process was not characterized by violent uprisings but rather the textual agitations of Icelandic scholars and a series of Danish concessions,<sup>7</sup> which started with the renunciation of royal absolutism in Denmark in 1848 and a period of Icelandic Home Rule (1904–1918) which culminated in the Union Treaty of 1918. In April of 1940, Denmark was occupied by German forces which ended in practice 560 years of Danish rule and renewed popular support in Iceland for an independent Icelandic republic. Despite the request from the Danish king to suspend this process while Denmark was occupied, 98.6 % of the population voted in a plebiscite to nullify the Union Treaty, with only 0.5 % voting against. The republic of Iceland was declared in 1944 at the site of the ancient Alþing at Þingvellir<sup>8</sup> on June 17<sup>th</sup> to mark the birthday of the leading figure of Icelandic nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jón Sigurðsson (Karlsson 2000:322).

### **3.2 Poor relief in ancient and early modern Iceland**

Despite being an island society with an early history of maritime exploration, Iceland was, and continued to be for a great deal of its history, primarily an agrarian society in terms of the bulk of primary economic production and social organization. Towns were a rarity in the Middle Ages (Karlsson 2000:44), as most of the population lived on farms oriented towards the raising of sheep and cattle, as well as horses that were

used for transportation. Fishing was an important activity for subsistence, and later trade, but it was primarily a seasonal activity under the direction of farmers. Most of the accessible landing places on the coast were controlled by the landowning farming elites (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989:4), though from the period of settlement to the present most farms were still located near coastal areas as the central highlands continue to remain uninhabitable (Gunnlaugsson 1988:17). In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, small fishing villages began to emerge as German and English fishers established some bases of operation in the coastal areas. These villages threatened to siphon off the labour needed on the farms so all foreign fishing stations were banned (F. Magnússon 1989:141). As a further effort to protect the agricultural mode of production, all of those who were not involved in farming had to enter into annual labour contracts as farmhands (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1989:4; Karlsson 2000:109). Up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, laws were passed in the interest of the landed farming class to prevent settlement on the coast and to protect the agricultural labour supply as well as to stem the tide of those who might become dependent on the poor relief as fishing was not seen at the time as a stable occupation (Durrenberger 1997:78).

Those who were not attached to a rural household or attempted to subsist by fishing were seen as inhabiting a marginalized position in early and early modern Icelandic society and referred to as *lausafólk* (loose people). There are records of coastal cottars dating back as far as the 11<sup>th</sup> century who, owning no land of their own, attempted to forge an existence based on fishing. However, these landless people “came to live in an oppressive existence on the extreme social and cultural fringes of peasant society” (F. Magnússon 1986:84). The views of these people held by the landed farming class seemed

to change little over the centuries under this system of economic production and social organization. Aside from pejorative terms with which to describe those who were not part of the 'proper' social order, such as *lausafólk*, landless people were also seen as a "redundant and inferior population," as a burden, and as the "cause of the economic misery in Iceland through centuries" (F. Magnússon 1989:142). This, despite the fact that the increased need to turn to relief often had to do with periods of famines, natural catastrophes and poor farming and fishing prospects. Gunnlaugsson (1988:32–34) notes that a process of 'proletarianization' had occurred by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the number of landless people began to grow at a much faster rate than owner-occupier farmers. As such, there emerged in the lower ranks of the social order variations in terms of status and power within the rural household by this period. Among the lower tiers on the farms there were *húsmenn* (lodgers) and *lausamenn* (boarders) who were generally day labourers and seasonal farm workers and had a measure of control over their labour power as well as a measure of status within the household. Servants, in contrast, had fewer rights and had to sign a contract with their employer. *Þurfamenn* or *ómagar* (paupers) occupied the lowest rung in Icelandic society, much as they had throughout most of Iceland's history. There were some distinctions among paupers in terms of individuals who were supported by kin, in their own household with the aid of poor relief or whether the individual was assigned to a farm. Nevertheless, paupers continued to lack "several personal, political, and economic rights" (Gunnlaugsson 1988:34).

Throughout Iceland's history poor relief was in the charge of the local administrative unit known as the *hreppur* and in recent times the *sveitarfélag* (municipality).<sup>9</sup> The term *hreppur* has been glossed in English in various ways, such as



'township,' 'commune' and 'parish.' Historically the *hreppur* was an administrative unit comprised of at least 20 farms whose borders did not necessarily match those of the local ecclesiastical *sókn* or parish (Gunnlaugsson 1988:53). But it is important to remember that in medieval Iceland the provision of poor relief was a secular concern and a situation quite unlike the arrangements for poor relief common to mainland Europe during this time (ibid:93). The family and immediate kinship group were originally designated to provide the primary care for their poor and destitute family members in medieval Iceland, which was codified in the *Grágás*, a written law code from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the revised law code *Jónsbók* of 1280. Elements of these poor laws have roots even earlier in Iceland, particularly with regards to the tithe law of 1096 which held that one quarter of the tithe collected from tax paying farmers had to be forfeited to the *hreppur* for the administration of poor relief (Gunnlaugsson 1988:93). These legal arrangements regarding the care of the poor in Iceland had more or less remained unchanged until reforms in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Broddadóttir et al. 1997:52; Gunnlaugsson 1993:344). But the poor had to be supported by the *hreppur* only if kin members could not be found who could perform this duty. If no family members were found to fulfill this obligation, entire families were split up amongst different farms who agreed to accept the township rates for their upkeep. Paupers who had no family members to care for them still only had the right to receive relief from the *hreppur* of his or her next of kin. The poor laws were revised in 1834 but measures were put in place to limit the movement of those seeking assistance, as individuals only had the right to receive assistance from their township of birth unless they resided for a five year period elsewhere without having received assistance during that time (Broddadóttir et al. 1997:52). This was further

extended to 10 years and it was not until 1917 that the long-standing prohibition on the right of paupers and those on poor relief to marry was lifted (Gunnlaugsson 1988:94). Perhaps even more stigmatizing, the upkeep for paupers was also auctioned off by the local authorities to the lowest bidder. As Karlsson (2000) notes, the increasing number of paupers, particularly during times of economic hardships, “was generally considered to be a serious threat to society, and they met with strong condemnation” (Karlsson 2000:252). These harsh measures were not applied to the landless alone but could also affect landowning farmers who, for various reasons, were unable to maintain a viable working farm. Referred to as *þurftabændur* (indigent farmers), in-house relief was provided if these difficulties were temporary. If the *þurftabændur* were unable to maintain the farm as a productive unit the household was dissolved, individual family members sent away as labourers to other farms and the original farm was then awarded to another household to work. These measures were put in place to ensure that the agricultural level of production was maintained, further sources of labour were made available where needed, as well as to inhibit the social and biological reproduction of families stricken by poverty (Gunnlaugsson 1988:94–95). The received view by most historians on the *hreppur* relief system was that the local administrators enforced the poor laws “very strictly and often inhumanly” (ibid:98). Farmers who offered to pay the lowest for the upkeep of paupers, “tended to be the people who spent the least on their maintenance and extracted the most work from them” (Karlsson 2000:252). There are recorded tales of the ill-treatment of paupers, which is aptly captured by the comment reported to have been made by a young pauper in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. A visitor, upon spotting the youth at a farm in northern Iceland whom he subsequently learned to be a pauper, asked how he was being treated to

which the young man replied, “everyone’s been good to me, especially the dogs” (Gunnlaugsson 1993:344).

While the *hreppur* system of poor relief may appear to be a relic from Iceland’s distant past, even today some younger Icelanders have personal recollections connected with the *hreppaflutningar*, those who were sent away as labourers to various farms after the dissolution of a family. While discussing some aspects of my research with a friend of my wife, who at the time was in her mid 20s, I was quite surprised to learn that she had recollections as a child of an elderly man who lived on her farm who was originally an *ómagi* (pauper) after his own family was dissolved many years ago. As I subsequently learned, Gunnar (pseudonym) was born in North-Western Iceland in 1906. His parents’ farm had burned down and since they had no insurance they were unable to provide for themselves or their children. My informant’s mother, who relayed Gunnar’s story to me via email, noted that splitting up the couple was an intentional strategy on the part of the local authorities to prevent them, now relegated to the status of dependent paupers (*ómagar*), from having further children. The authorities were not very successful in this regard as the couple met surreptitiously and conceived another child. However, Gunnar was sent to the farm of the local *hreppstjóri* (district administrative officer) in 1916. My informant’s great-grandfather had purchased this farm in 1938. Apparently Gunnar was included with the property. From what I understood, Gunnar was eventually integrated into the family and followed my informant’s father to another farm in the 1970s. My wife’s friend remembered Gunnar living with their family on their farm when she was a child. He passed away in a hospital in 1986. The story reminded me that the

poverty of Iceland ‘in the past,’ as I often heard it referred to, was not actually so distant in terms of memory as well as experience.

### **3.3 Reykjavík and urban poverty**

As the history of poor relief in Medieval and early modern Iceland illustrates, the *hreppur* system was primarily concerned with sustaining the agricultural mode of production. This was achieved partly through laws passed in the interest of the farming class which discouraged economic production that was not under the governance of the farming sector as well as to make labour available when it was required. But the Icelandic farming society faced a series of crises; a particularly important one in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century had wide ranging consequences. An increase in population in conjunction with a colder climate and a disease which afflicted the sheep stock placed the existing social and economic order under intense pressure. Karlsson notes that the Alþingi, which at the time essentially represented the interests of the farming class, responded in a reactionary way and attempted to further restrict free labour, the growth of cottars, coastal fisheries and even procreation by placing further limits of those who could marry. Predictably, this primarily meant limits on marriages of the poor, landless, recipients of poor relief, and those who were negatively judged in terms of their character such as “notorious squanderers, drunkards and good-for-nothings” (Karlsson 2000:231). Participants in debates in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century parliamentary sessions in Alþingi were concerned about the unchecked numbers of the poor but also the propagation of their ‘moral flaws,’ as the adjectives of ‘disorderly’ and ‘lazy’ appeared to be regularly applied to the poor (Gunnlaugsson 1988:100–101). One response to these restrictions and limited opportunities was to emigrate abroad, primarily to parts of the United States and Canada

and it has been estimated that 17,000 did so between 1870 and 1914 (Karlsson 2000:236). For those who stayed, a process of internal rural to urban migration had begun in the search for available work in Reykjavík and coastal towns that was offered by the fisheries and other industries, though as Karlsson sarcastically notes “however badly the word ‘urban’ fits the squalid fishing villages that received the surplus population from the Icelandic countryside” (ibid.:233). Reykjavík had long been a rather unremarkable collection of farms throughout a great deal of its history. The area started to attract growth after the building of a prison (1770) and the establishment of some textile workshops of varying degrees of success. Even though the census of 1703 only recorded Reykjavík as a notable collection of farms with a population of 21, the establishment of the prison and workshops contributed to the forming of what passed in Iceland at the time as an urban nucleus, which “proved to be a sufficiently strong magnet to attract other institutions” (Karlsson 2000:176). As the result of the increasing development of the area, Reykjavík assumed the formal leadership role for the country after the establishment of the Home Rule period in 1904, while its status changed from that of town to city on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1962 (Reykjavík 2005). The population of Reykjavík had stood at 5,800 in 1900, but exploded to 40,000 by 1940 and to 78,000 by 1965 (Valsson 2000:50). The population of the city of Reykjavík during the bulk of my research stood at approximately 115,000 or nearly 40% of the population of the Iceland; the population of the greater Reykjavík area stood at approximately 184,000 or slightly over 61% of the total population (Reykjavík 2005). The rapid growth of urbanization was also matched by an equally rapid depletion of the rural population. In 1890 Iceland was 80% rural; by 1930 it was 45% rural (Styrkársdóttir 1998:71); and by 1990 it was only 10% rural (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher

2000:46). Despite the attempts of the landed farming class and Alþingi to impose restrictions on the movement of the population in the interests of agriculture, they were unable to stem the tide of the rapidly changing Icelandic society and economy.

While Icelandic society was undergoing dramatic social and economic change it would appear that cultural views and prejudices tended to lag somewhat behind, as the hegemonic framework which legitimated and justified the social order to the benefit of the farming class continued to inform, to an extent, the views of the poor and what constituted 'proper' ways of living for some time. As noted earlier, the pressures applied against those who were not part of a farming household and who tried to subsist by fishing were both legal and cultural in nature. It would appear that the sector of society which posed the greatest 'threat' to the existing social and economic order received a measure of derision and negative evaluations as per their moral character and status in society. In the earlier past this was applied to landless people and paupers, later shifting to coastal fishers who threatened to siphon off available labour needed by agriculture and who were thusly condemned. Finnur Magnússon (1989), commenting on archival sources from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, noted how the residents of the emergent coastal fishing villages were referred to by some observers in negative terms such as "degenerated slobs" (F. Magnússon 1989:142). Intertwined with some of these criticisms were remarks on how these fishers often had to rely upon public relief as an integral part of their economic subsistence practices. One such observer complained that when fishing conditions were poor that these people 'starved' or else "got used to idleness" (ibid). Further, this commentator felt that these people also lacked "economic thrift" and were unable to prepare for bad times. Even worse, the lack of skills held to be typical of this

'irresponsible lifestyle' was passed down to successive generations, who became "good-for-nothings, useless and thoughtless creatures" (ibid). Magnússon continues that the prejudices towards the coastal fishers lingered even as a working class culture emerged in coastal villages and towns in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In response to these negative views, workers seized upon their identity as hard workers to counter charges of idleness and irresponsibility. He writes, "the ideology of work became a power – a mute force in which the workers embedded their feelings of self-esteem and identity (F. Magnússon 1989:146).

The internal rural to urban migration was not taken lightly by the established farming class. Town dwellers had long been the subject of derision as being 'below' the rural farming society and as such morally suspect. The Danish ethnographer Kirsten Hastrup has offered a symbolic interpretation of how this was realized in Icelandic society, in terms of distinctions drawn between order and disorder, proper and improper. Hastrup argues that the "farm is equated with permanence, stability and social order," whereas "nothing but disorder could ever be associated with village-life and fishing" (Hastrup 1990:281). The process of urbanization was seen as a threat in economic but also cultural and moral terms. Karlsson writes:

The growth of towns and villages was by no means welcomed by the whole society: the "flight from the countryside" was commonly seen as a serious threat, not only to the rural areas and their need for labor, but to the entire society, the national culture and even the nation's physical and moral standards. The theory of the superiority of rural to urban life was well known in Europe at this time and mixed variously with fashionable ideals of human eugenics, but it can be assumed to have had an unusually strong appeal in Iceland, with its complete lack of traditional urban culture and extraordinarily rapid urbanization (Karlsson 2000:292).

But as Iceland began to urbanize and the fisheries began to supplant agriculture as the key economic resource, attention turned to the emergent issues of urban poverty as the population of Reykjavík started to grow. A poverty commission was formed in Reykjavík in the early 1820s to administer poor relief but also to adjudicate decisions on whether or not people could settle in the town, often on the basis of whether they were seen as being, or perhaps seen as likely to be, a burden on the relief system (Gunnlaugsson 1988:104). But the old poor laws regarding the restriction of movement became increasingly redundant and difficult to enforce as the 19<sup>th</sup> century began to close, as agriculture, which began to mechanize, did not require the surplus labour it once had and people sought opportunities in towns (ibid:140–141). The process of urbanization itself brought new challenges for the local authorities. Newspaper accounts and editorials from shortly after the turn of the century through to the 1920s and 30s detailed numerous stories about poverty in Reykjavík. Throughout this period food shortages, unemployment, housing concerns in terms of shortages and quality of life issues, and rural to urban migration were commonly pointed to as contributing to the woes afflicting Reykjavík during this time. Meetings of the *fátækranefnd* (poverty committee) were routinely reported on in the local newspapers as solutions to these problems were explored by the municipal government. Some of these articles offered thoughtful and complex analyses of these issues. For example, one article from 1913 simply entitled “*Fátækt*” (poverty) commented that, “Only a few years ago this word was almost unknown in this town,” and went on to detail how the fisheries had been able to absorb excess labour up until this time. The author asserted that this was no longer the case as the recent mechanization of the



fisheries had cut labour demands. The problem was compounded by the increased pace of rural to urban migration and that the temporary work projects that were offered in response to this were not adequate as a long-term solution (Morgunblaðið 1913a:145).

Iceland, while to an extent somewhat removed from larger world affairs, was not immune to them. The period from 1914 to 1920 was characterized by inflation and cuts to wages (Karlsson 2000:308). The continuing influx of people into the Reykjavík area alarmed the local authorities, concerned that there was not adequate work to meet the needs of existing residents let alone these new migrants. The mayor of Reykjavík during this period, Knud Zimsen, had published an appeal in a newspaper urging a halt to the influx of rural people. Mayor Zimsen also asked city residents not to encourage or aid people from outside of the city to settle in Reykjavík, as city officials had to ensure that work, when it was available, was offered first to local residents (Zimsen 1921:4). During the 1920s the unemployment rate for Reykjavík ranged from 10 to 14%, though Karlsson notes that some of this was seasonal. The statistics on these matters were sketchy before the effects of the Great Depression which hit Iceland in the early 1930s (Karlsson 2000:309), and often did not adequately reflect the extent of need within the city. One response was the creation of 'make-work' projects to absorb excess labour. But a basic lack of governmental services, ranging from health care to insurance and pensions, also contributed to the problems that afflicted Reykjavík in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, problems for which charitable organizations had begun to form to address.

Although I have discussed inequality in Reykjavík in the historical context I feel at this juncture that it is important to introduce the socio-economic conditions that the clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd faced during the time of my research. While I learned that

the situations of the clients were quite diverse, some general statements can be made. The question that was asked time and time again over the duration of my research was whether or not the clients of Mæðrastyrsnefnd were truly 'poor.' This issue was raised by Icelandic scholars I came into contact with, students at the classes where I guest lectured at the University of Iceland, members of the press, politicians who visited Mæðrastyrsnefnd, as well as people from all walks of life whom I encountered in a number of social contexts. Above all, the question as to whether or not and the extent to which their clients were 'poor' was an ongoing theme debated by the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd with me as well as with each other. I will return to the complex issue of defining poverty in Chapter Five, but some general patterns regarding inequality did emerge during my analysis of the client information sheets which I undertook on behalf of the staff. One day I had a discussion about the demographic patterns that the *formaður* (chair) of the committee at the time had noticed in her dealings with the clients. She held up her hand and rhymed off on her fingers the key commonalties she found among the clients, naming in particular "low education, low income, and little or no property [ownership]." The data concerning the clients from Mæðrastyrsnefnd that I analyzed would come to confirm these observations, as noted in figures 1.0, 1.1 and 1.2 as provided in Appendix B. I will now turn to the historical context in which charities first began to emerge in Iceland, followed a by a discussion of the formation of Mæðrastyrsnefnd in Reykjavík in the late 1920s.

### **3.4 Philanthropy, women, nationalism and bio-power**

Auður Styrkársdóttir notes that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Iceland in general that there was “the almost total absence of social welfare” (Styrkársdóttir 1998:87) as would be understood today. To fill the void, philanthropic and charitable organizations began to form to address these needs. Some charitable aid agencies emerged in rural areas of Iceland in the early 1870s. They were primarily dedicated to addressing the material conditions for the women who lived in their immediate vicinities and were largely operated by the wives of local farmers (Kristmundsdóttir 1989:81). One of the first aid organizations which formed in Reykjavík was Thorvaldsensfélagið (Thorvaldsen’s Society), founded in 1875. The society, named after the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, was focused on assisting children (and by extension their parents) with food, clothes, as well as the raising of funds for hospital equipment. The society also opened a bazaar in Reykjavík in 1901 (which is still in operation) to sell knit woollen items with the proceeds going to charitable causes (Thorvaldsensfélagið 2005). One of the key staff members of Mæðrastyksnefnd during the time of my research had occupied a senior position in this organization and, as she detailed their work to me, it appears that little has changed over the last century. The early volunteers of Thorvaldsensfélagið were described by Inga Huld Hákonardóttir as primarily “young upper class women” (Hákonardóttir 2000:183) who were largely educated in Copenhagen, which was quite typical at the time for the youth of well-off families in Iceland when the provision of education, especially at the post-secondary level, was quite limited domestically. The connection between women, often middle-class and elite women, with charity and philanthropy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was fairly common not only in Iceland

but throughout Europe and North America as well. One reason for this was that women had generally lacked certain rights such as the ownership of property, the right to vote and to hold office. Membership in charities and philanthropic organizations was one way for these women to have a political voice. Kathleen McCarthy (2003) notes that women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States, for example, were able to shape policy and exercise a measure of political authority through their charitable work. Their work ultimately had both material and political goals, as their participation in these voluntary organizations “gave women a voice in local, state, and national legislative debates, as well as the distribution of charitable resources” (McCarthy 2003:190). A similar situation appeared to hold in Britain. F.K. Prochaska (1980) notes as well that in 19<sup>th</sup> century England working for wages or for profit ventures among the women of the propertied classes was generally frowned upon. Charitable work, though often trivialized by their husbands, offered the chance for such women to engage in activities outside of the home. Prochaska points out that charitable work “was relatively free from the restraints and prejudices associated with women in paid employments” (Prochaska 1980:6). But more importantly these philanthropic organizations gave these women the ability to influence policy. As with the work of women in charity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Iceland, through these activities these women “had direct influence on issues traditionally reserved for public decision-making in the political arena” (Kristmundsdóttir 1990:117). While it was not the case that the volunteers were entirely middle or upper-class women, McCarthy, writing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States, remarks that these women “were the only group in America’s industrializing economy with sufficient leisure and financial security to embrace volunteerism as a full-time career” (McCarthy 2003:192).

Caution must be used in assuming that these women's charitable and philanthropic societies all shared the same goals or political orientations. In the case of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland, the concern expressed about the plight of widows and orphans by some of these organizations was intertwined with a number of other issues pertaining to women's rights. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century Iceland differed little from much of the rest of Western Europe at the time in terms of women's rights. Karlsson (2000) notes that Icelandic women during this period "could aspire to no executive roles in the political system; higher education was barred to them, and so in consequence were the professions for which such education was required." He continues, "Major decisions about their personal life, property and marriage were out of their hands" (Karlsson 2000:273). The movement for independence from Denmark, which gained momentum during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also drew attention to a number of contradictions within Icelandic society. For all of the discourses which revolved around freedom, independence and the right for Iceland to exist as a sovereign nation, there remained within her borders large segments of the population, such as women and paupers of both genders, who did not possess full and equal rights as citizens.

An Icelandic women's rights movement emerged in the latter decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was influenced by and had ties with women's suffrage movements abroad. A key figure in the women's rights movement in Iceland was Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir. She began to publish articles and to give lectures on these issues in Reykjavík in the late 1880s and was the editor of the newspaper *Kvennablaðið* (the Women's Paper) (Styrkársdóttir 1998:63). In 1902 after the death of her husband Valdimar Asmundarson

—himself the editor of the paper *Fjallkonan* (the Mountain Woman) which exhibited some early feminist themes (Karlsson 2000:277)—Bríet<sup>10</sup> became more involved with the international women's suffrage movement and founded Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (Women's Rights Association of Iceland—referred to hereafter as KRFÍ) in 1907 (Styrkársdóttir 1998:63). As will be discussed further, Bríet's own daughter, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, who was elected as chair of KRFÍ in 1927, was also a key founding member and first chair of the charity Mæðrastyrksnefnd (Mothers' Support Committee) in 1928. In certain ways Laufey was somewhat more radical than her mother and she was often in conflict with some of the other members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd who held conservative views on a number of issues. At times these appeared to be political clashes but in other contexts they seemed to be religiously-based contentions as well. Laufey's views tended towards a secular-oriented socialism, which may not have been typical of material aid charities of the time. Another key member of Mæðrastyrksnefnd at the time, Guðrún Lára Lárusdóttir who was a member of parliament, was also in favour of women's rights but was a deeply religious person. While Laufey and Guðrún Lára shared certain views, they clashed on a number of other issues such as abortion and contraception. Laufey “argued that women themselves should have the right to decide whether they wanted to be mothers or not” (Hákonardóttir 2000:197). Laufey and Lára's politics may well have been reflected in their personal lives. Given that Laufey never married nor had children this was perhaps a personal as well as philosophically-based ideal. Guðrún Lára, who was married and had ten children, argued that “free choice was a great sin and would lead to the deterioration of morality” (ibid.). However, the committee often appeared to present a united front in public discourses when they lobbied for causes

which all of the women of Mæðrastyrksnefnd held dear, such as aiding impoverished children and supporting women's suffrage.

While some charities and philanthropic societies were more radical than others, charities overall tended to be quite conservative. Even if they explicitly worked towards measures, such as widows' pensions, that would appear to be a move towards socialist redistribution, charities generally did little to challenge the status quo in terms of the larger economic order. Some charities also did little to upset the existing political and social order. In the case of Iceland, for example, nothing in the work of a traditional charitable organization such as Thorvaldsensfélagið suggested to me that the organization was dedicated to implementing radical socio-economic change in terms of gender rights or material redistribution. Sigríður Dúna Kristmundsdóttir has argued that, among the late 19<sup>th</sup> century women's societies, until the work of Bríet and KRFÍ, none of them were "concerned with women's rights or put forward any claims on behalf of women generally" (Kristmundsdóttir 1990:20). Other early charitable organizations were Christian in orientation and involved with the Temperance movement. One such charity, Hvítabandið (the White Ribbon), was the Icelandic branch of the larger World's Women Christian Temperance Union (Hákonardóttir 2000:187). The leader of the Icelandic branch when the organization formed in the late 1890s, Ólafía Jóhannsdóttir, advocated the work of material assistance, such as providing nursing to the ill and food to the poor, but also took part with other members in dissuading seamen from entering pubs. Hákonardóttir notes that Ólafía, as a devout Christian, was perhaps "worried even more about the welfare of the soul in the after-life than about worldly misery" (ibid.:205).

Prochaska (1980) argues that similar organizations in 19<sup>th</sup> century England were interested in helping the poor and unfortunate but not in radically altering the nature of society itself. Prochaska writes of these English charities: “Most nineteenth-century philanthropists held a hierarchical view of society and assumed that distinctions between rich and poor were God-given and likely to persist” (Prochaska 1980:125). Further, “Socialist doctrines had little charm for charitable women, whose work was a confirmation of the existing system” (ibid.:221–220). I will argue that in the present the work of the charity complex in many ways continues to contribute to the confirmation, legitimation and justification of the existing system, even if some members and volunteers find certain aspects of their society and the social welfare system lacking. Moreover, while charitable and philanthropic work during this time period, both in Iceland and abroad, often promoted women’s rights, many organizations shared in the same essentialist notions of gender difference—ideas that were used to argue for denying women certain basic rights, such as the vote. Prochaska continues that 19<sup>th</sup> century English women were construed as ‘natural care providers’ and who were ideally suited to charitable work such as caring for orphans and the ill or elderly.

In their attempts to extend their influence they willingly reinforced the stereotypes of women as the more compassionate, self-sacrificing sex. The claims of women to moral authority and greater social recognition depended on public belief in their special and essential qualities (Prochaska 1980:8).

Karin Lützen (2000) argues a similar case in 19<sup>th</sup> century Denmark as women philanthropists justified their charitable work by extending their recognized maternal and domestic roles outwards, by conceptualizing society as a whole as a large ‘household’: “If society could be viewed as a home and all its people as children, servants, husbands and



parents, then women had a duty to step in” (Lützen 2000:149). A similar case appeared to have held in Iceland, as even progressive women’s rights leaders such as Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir gave voice to such essentialist discourses. Bríet had argued that women possessed an essential nature that distinguished them from men and which situated them as the ‘natural’ guardians of the poor and sick. She wrote in the paper *Kvennablaðið* in 1907: “Society is always in need of the precise, loving, maternal care of women,” and that women needed to act as the ‘spokesmen’ for the young, elderly, sick and poor (Bjarnhéðinsdóttir, in Styrkársdóttir 1998:98).

In the cases of 19<sup>th</sup> century England (Proschaska 1980), Denmark (Lützen 2000) and Iceland (Hákonardóttir 2000), and most likely elsewhere in Western Europe, these activist women used their philanthropic endeavours, to varying degrees, to extend the presence of women in public and political affairs in their respective nations. However, the essentialized differences of gender which legitimated their involvement in these charitable works, in some contexts, worked against these aims. The maternal ideology of women as the care providers for children, the sick and the elderly, which many of these women emphasized in their work, also justified the historic restriction of women to the domestic sphere. As such, the roles women inhabited in traditional charitable positions served to reproduce the status quo of gender relations, even if many of these activist women sought to bring change to material and gender inequalities through their work.

In the situation of Iceland in specific, the women’s rights movement was intertwined not only with charity but also the movement for the establishment of an independent Icelandic republic. These nationalist discourses contributed to the essentialist discourses of gender by drawing upon maternal imagery. But they also helped to lay the

groundwork for the creation of a 'homogeneous' Iceland in terms of class as well as ethnicity, as will be discussed later. Motherhood and maternal imagery has played a prominent role in these nationalist discourses, which was personified in Iceland with the iconic image of *Fjallkonan* or 'the Mountain Woman.' This image was derived from the imagination of the Icelandic scholar and early nationalist Eiríkur Magnússon in 1864 and rendered into a painting which was widely reproduced. *Fjallkonan* was the iconic representation of everything that was 'pure' about the Icelandic nation and culture, such as the language, the landscape and the Sagas, personified into a 'mother figure' as guardian and nurturer (I. Björnsdóttir 1989, 1996, 1998; Koester 1995a; Pálsson 1995).

Other nationalist discourses in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe drew upon paternalist imagery as well, as patrilineal descent "readily serves as a metaphorical vehicle for the transformation of social groups into national entities" (Herzfeld 1992:30). Herzfeld (1992) has also pointed out that the concern over blood and national integrity (often coinciding with 'racial' integrity) was a common feature amongst most nationalist discourses of the past as well as in the present, despite the differences in how these discourses were 'gendered.' The notion of European romantic nationalism itself is commonly linked with the work of the German nationalist Johann Herder. Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1998) contends that there were in fact two strains of German nationalism during this time. A militaristic strain, often associated with the thought of Fichte and von Clausewitz, posited that humans are essentially weak and given to selfish and materialistic pursuits. As such, nation-states had to adopt measures such as competitive sport and military service in order channel these energies into preserving the 'national spirit' and unity. In contrast, Herder was a pacifist and felt that the national spirit, *das*

*Volkgeist*, resided in a nation's "unique natural characteristics [which] set their inalienable mark on its language, culture and history" (I. Björnsdóttir 1998:92). In Herder's views national identity was non-negotiable, as the boundaries of nations followed the 'natural' contours of the land and its people. Herder writes,

As a spring derives its component parts...and its flavour from the soil through which it flows, so the ancient characters of nations arose from family traits, from the climate, from the ways of life and education (Herder, in Wilson 1989:24).

Björnsdóttir continues that while German nationalism took the militaristic route in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Herder's ideas appealed to Icelandic nationalists because national character was not determined by the size of the territory or population or dependent on military prowess, much of which Iceland lacked. But Iceland did possess the unique history, landscape and language that Herder so valued and which the Icelandic nationalists employed to full effect. The discourses the Icelandic nationalists produced took on a distinct maternalistic tone in the texts, poems, and artwork they created. Iceland became a mother figure: "the cultural and historical attributes believed to be embedded in and to emanate from her body, became central to Icelandic nationalist discourses" (I. Björnsdóttir 1998:90). The nationalist emphasis upon motherhood and the protection of children, the future of Iceland and its language and culture, helped to justify and legitimate the early charitable emphasis upon assisting single mothers and children, which in turn helped to frame the views about the 'worthy' poor amongst members of these organizations and the larger society.

Before turning to the history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself, I would like to suggest that the work of charities constituted a form of 'bio-power,' a concept developed by the

French social theorist Michel Foucault. The practices of private charitable agencies certainly, in my opinion, fall within Foucault's area of interest even if he did not consider charities at length in his work. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1980a), Foucault argued that one of the 'problems of population' which emerged in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was that of sex in a broad context, particularly the health and practices of the citizens which posed concerns for the state such as birth rates, fertility, contraception, venereal diseases, abortion, pre- and extra-marital sex and so forth. Foucault referred to the efforts to study, supervise and regulate the body and its processes as 'bio-power' or the 'bio-politics of the population,' in conjunction with what he referred to as the 'disciplines' of the body—the body as a machine—such as its regimented and controlled movements during the production on an assembly line, for example (Foucault 1980a:139–140). Foucault admitted that he was uncertain whether the ultimate objective of these regulatory endeavours was the preservation of a stable social environment for capitalist production and the reproduction of labour (ibid.:37). Regardless, they appear to have worked to do so. But he was able to demonstrate that there was indeed an explosion of disciplines dedicated to producing knowledge and discourses about sex and the health of the population during this period, often dedicated to promulgating ideas about 'deviant' behaviour and its corrections. Foucault's work also extended to state institutions such as prisons, asylums and clinics which are dedicated to gathering information, inspecting and classifying their 'patients' (Foucault 1965, 1973, 1979)—the ultimate objective of which is to normalize conduct. While the specific notion of 'bio-power' or 'bio-politics' may seem limited to the disciplines and institutions that explicitly regulate the body and its processes, such as medicine and the agents of public health, the analyses derived from

Foucault's notion of bio-power may be extended outwards to include the regulation of a population in terms what may be produced and consumed in terms of food (e.g. Roseman 2004) or how people's movements are regulated at national borders (e.g. Heyman 1995), along with numerous other possibilities. One could also include bio-power under the broader rubric of what Foucault referred to as 'governmentality'—a wide range of technologies and techniques through which people are governed and come to govern themselves (see Gordon 1991). I contend that charities are very much involved in the activities of bio-politics in a number of ways.

While early charities were ostensibly geared towards helping the needy with material goods, they were also involved in inspecting the lives and living conditions of their clients as well as engaged in efforts to alter their behaviour. As noted earlier, the staff and volunteers of early charities were often quite pious themselves and some Christian organizations were not above attempts to proselytize their clients. This was accomplished either through making attendance at a religious service a requirement of assistance or distributing Bibles and tracts along with material assistance to the clients in their homes during the so-called 'friendly visits' that were popular in parts of Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Certain charities in the contemporary United States continue to this day to make attendance at a religious service or to receive instruction mandatory requirements for accepting assistance (Behrman, Flynn and Hanlin 2003:6). It must be remembered that, before the rise of social theory which sought to locate the causes of poverty in social structural factors, the causes of poverty were posited by many early philanthropists to be found in the nature of individuals and households such as with their lack of faith, failure to practice 'thrift,' or their engagement with various vices. As such,

charitable workers who wished to improve the lives of the poor thought that the solution lay in the normalization of conduct rather than altering the unequal distribution of wealth. Access to the poor was accomplished during the processes of distributing aid and with 'friendly visits.' Prochaska (1980) provides a good illustration of this approach from 19<sup>th</sup> century England:

Armed with the paraphernalia of their calling – Bibles, tracts, blankets, food and coal tickets and love – these foot-soldiers of the charitable army went from door to door to combat the evils of poverty, disease, and irreligion. In other words, they sought to reform family life through a moral and physical cleansing of the nation's homes. In its thoroughness it was a system that must have warmed the heart of Jeremy Bentham (Prochaska 1980:98).

Charitable agencies played a parallel role to that of the agencies of the state which collected information about the population and subjected them to surveillance in order to 'know' the population so they may be governed. Michel Foucault has referred to these early philanthropists with the fitting term "agents of liaison" (Foucault 1980b:62). As will be clear in subsequent chapters, these 'agents' of charity in the present continue to be involved in exercises of bio-power through the inspection and classification of their clients. While Mæðrastyrksnefnd and similar agencies in the present may lack the ability to reshape behaviour as they did in the past, for reasons to be discussed, they still produce 'knowledge' which informs and influences societal views of their clients and the dominant views on the nature of inequality and redistribution.

These 'friendly visits' in the past were also undertaken in order to ascertain whether or not the recipients of charity were 'worthy.' Karin Lützen (1999) argues that 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish charities and benevolent societies used home visits by volunteers as a form of surveillance to ensure that the recipients of their aid were 'poor' and not "merely

requesting help out of indolence” (Lützen 1999:59). These philanthropists were interested only in helping the ‘deserving poor’ as determined on a behavioural basis, whereas those who were perceived as being not willing to ‘help themselves’ and unlikely to ever be re-socialized into the ranks of ‘proper’ society were left in the charge of the public authorities (ibid.). The inspection processes of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the past as well as the present took place in their own premises rather than the clients’ homes. But many of the effects produced are the same as these ‘friendly visits’ in terms of gathering information and subjecting the clients to surveillance but also in determining whether clients were eligible for assistance and therefore ‘worthy’ of their help. These categorizations of the deserving/undeserving poor draw upon but also produce and reproduce a hegemonic framework in which inequalities are legitimated and normalized. I will now offer a history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the emergence of the charity complex within Reykjavík before turning to a discussion of the nature of this complex that I encountered in my field research.

### **3.5 The emergence of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the charity complex**

As stated previously, the governmental provision of social services in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iceland and Reykjavík was meagre. Charities began to emerge during this time to address these needs. Mentioned as well were Thorvaldsensfélagið (Thorvaldsen’s Society) and Hvítabandið, and which were joined by Hjálpræðisherinn á Íslandi (the Salvation Army in Iceland) in 1895 and Rauði Kross Íslands (the Icelandic Red Cross) in 1924, among others. Aside from providing material assistance some charities were actively involved in providing essential health care. Healthcare oriented organizations, such as Líkn, worked towards tuberculosis prevention and founded a TB

prevention centre in Reykjavík in 1919, while Hringurinn (the Circle) did similar work in the nearby town of Kópavogur (Hákonardóttir 2000:199–200). The members of the Oddfellows assisted by providing the housing for a leper hospital while the nuns from the Catholic Order of St. Joseph collected money to build a general hospital in the city, also pressuring Alþingi to contribute to the cause. The nuns were successful and the hospital was built in 1902 (Hákonardóttir 2000:185–186; see also Björnsdóttir and Malchau 2004). Hvítabandið began collecting funds in 1918 to build a home for disabled people and the elderly (Hákonardóttir 2000:199). However, these early nursing homes were generally for those who had no family to care for them. The expectation was that the immediate and sometimes even the extended family would provide for the care of their infirm or elderly relatives—echoes, one can assume, of the earlier approach to poor relief in early modern Iceland as discussed above. Comprehensive care for the elderly continued to remain limited in Iceland until the 1970s (K. Björnsdóttir 2002:6).

What appeared to have been overlooked in the discussions about early charitable efforts in Reykjavík was the role of the media in publicizing the cases of individuals and families in need of assistance, as well as the role of the media in the collection of donations. While scanning for requests for assistance in the newspaper Morgunblaðið since its founding in 1913 and up through to the late 1930s, it was not uncommon to find stories which detailed the plights of the needy while also suggesting that donations could be brought to the offices of Morgunblaðið for collection. For example, one article from 1920 thanked the staff of Morgunblaðið in particular for collecting on behalf of a man who lost his hand (Morgunblaðið 1920a:1). Another (Morgunblaðið 1920b:1), published an appeal for a girl who needed surgery in which she was described as ‘ill’ and ‘destitute’



(*bláfátæk*); it concluded by stating that gifts could be brought to Morgunblaðið's reception desk. The fact that a newspaper had to act as a quasi-charity itself is suggestive as to how ad-hoc the charity complex was and the extent to which governmental assistance was lacking. Charities themselves used the newspapers to publicize their efforts as well as to solicit for support, a practice which continues in the present day. For example, it was routine shortly before the Christmas holidays that articles would appear documenting the efforts of the Salvation Army as they collected funds for the needy with their '*jólapottar*' (Christmas collection pots), which was a regular occurrence in the December issues of the paper I scanned from 1913 (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1913b) through to the 1930s (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1936). Many of the activities of the Salvation Army during this time that were documented in the papers were quite similar to the activities of material aid charities that I encountered in the present. The efforts of these charities to provide needy households in Reykjavík with basic food stuffs during the holidays, such as gifts of meat products and coffee (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1921:3), and the appeals for the public to donate unwanted household goods that may arise as the result of spring cleaning (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1926:3), appeared very similar in nature to the charitable appeals I encountered in the media during my fieldwork.

Common as well in the newspaper accounts of charitable activities during these early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the efforts of the often unnamed authors when making appeals for assistance for specific individuals to highlight the needy person's positive attributes, often referring to their work ethics, and to produce descriptions which would tend to elicit feelings of sympathy among the readers. For example, one father of six who was bedridden with arthritis was described as being "ill with arthritis for many

years, but has worked hard his entire life” (Morgunblaðið 1917:1). Another request for assistance detailed the plight of a poor young single girl with two young children. She was described as living in a tiny, dark and cold basement. It continues that she has not had work for many months and she literally had no food, no coal to warm her place and that “it is merciful and charitable to support her.” The article continues that the holidays are around the corner and it will certainly be “sad and cold for her, if no one extends her a helping hand – right now” (Morgunblaðið 1927a:4). In another case an ill mother of three was described as a ‘hardworking’ (*dugleg*), ‘industrious’ (*eljusöm*) and ‘frugal’ (*sparsöm*) person who cared for her children until her health gave out and she was no longer able to work. Further, the author of the article wrote: “She does not want to seek help from the state until it is absolutely necessary, but she hopes that she will get her health back soon so she can work and support her children” (Morgunblaðið 1927b:3).

My intention is not to belittle or make light of these claims; on the contrary, I have no doubt that these people were in dire circumstances and needed help. But the authors of these requests were no doubt aware of their audience and the suspicions which revolved around the dependent poor and therefore chose to portray them in the best light possible by highlighting certain aspects of their situations and natures. These ‘descriptors,’ as David Wagner (2000) refers to them, such as widows, orphans, the elderly and the ill, “conjure up the romance of charity” (Wagner 2000:178), whereas other categories of people who may be equally in need, such as single men, alcoholics and the mentally ill, often do not. The descriptions of the needy poor usually provided the reader with both the justifications for why the supplicants needed help and why they should be helped. These requests were almost always written in the second person, suggesting that someone had

interceded on their behalf. One possibility was that the recipient of this aid was unable or unwilling to make these requests themselves. Another possibility is that it may have appeared unseemly and impudent for a poor person to directly request assistance for him or herself. During my survey of the early editions of *Morgunblaðið* I also noted examples of some rather unkind things said about the unemployed and those on relief. One critic used the example of one man and his family on municipal assistance whom he charged with manipulating the relief system, for being thriftless, and for viewing relief as a right: “This man looks at it in the way that the parish assistance is supposed to support him in a good lifestyle” (*Morgunblaðið* 1920c:1). The Poverty Committee of Reykjavík was involved in the early 1920s in operating soup kitchens for the indigent. One such operation on Baldursgata, in the central downtown area, was a combination soup kitchen and boarding house. However the clients were described in less than flattering terms as the operation was described as serving *slæpingja* (‘slackers, idlers’) and *umrenninga* (‘vagrants,’ ‘bums’) (*Morgunblaðið* 1924:4.)

It is understandable that charities and patrons of the poor described their clients in terms which drew upon positive ‘descriptors’ given these kinds of views. Yet to do so, in my opinion, has the effect of rendering ‘real’ poverty as something only experienced by people who have suffered a tragedy or whose reasons for needing help are more easily perceived (e.g. elderly, infirm, frail). Overlooked are those who do not evoke the ‘romance of charity’ such as single homeless men, substance abusers or the mentally ill, for example, even though their need for assistance may be equally great. Even less attention appears to be given to those who simply have low pensions or wages and who struggle unseen day to day to make ends meet. The discursive tactics employed by

charities contribute as well to the social invisibility of what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the everyday and often unremarkable 'positional suffering' (Bourdieu 1999:4) which is ignored when the more extreme examples of need are evoked in charitable discourses in order to open the purse strings of donors. When Mæðrastyrksnefnd formed in 1928 it was to address the very real *grande misère* form of poverty faced by widows and single mothers but, as I will note, the distinctions employed by this agency in order to sort their clients in terms of eligibility served to draw attention away both in the past and the present from other sectors of the society whose members also needed assistance. In the process it also becomes expected, unremarkable and to an extent somewhat unsurprising and 'normal' to associate certain sectors of society with inequality and as the subjects of charity.

When Mæðrastyrksnefnd was formed, an emergent charity complex was already in place in Reykjavík as the committee joined the ranks of a number of other charitable organizations that were already in operation. The origins of Mæðrastyrksnefnd can be traced to 1927, when a number of women's organizations began to meet to discuss the plight of widows and single mothers in Iceland. But it was a particular incident which propelled the committee into being. The common historical narrative of Mæðrastyrksnefnd links its origins to the date of February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1928 with the sinking of the fishing trawler *Jón Forseti* out of Reykjavík. From a total of twenty-five crew members, ten were rescued and the rest perished, leaving behind seven widows and thirty-five children without their fathers (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:2). This incident alone was not the sole factor which forced the issue of the plight of widows and orphans in Iceland into the spotlight of the public consciousness. There had been notable accidents

at sea which had left their mark on the public consciousness shortly before this time, but this specific accident had forced further attention on to the issue of the death benefit system itself. There had been in place a fund for the compensation for widows as the result of accidents at sea, but this fund was weakened due to a number of fishing related fatalities in 1925 (ibid.). These benefits were meagre, paid in a lump sum, and were mitigated by other factors such as whether the couple had owned property (which would have to be liquidated) or held outstanding debts. Questions had also been raised prior to the sinking of the *Jón Forseti*, which came to be known as the '*Forsetaslysið*,' about the plight of widows in Iceland in general. However, in one interpretation, it was this incident in particular which caused people to become more "open to the idea of needing to help widows as a long-term solution" (Auðuns N.d.:1).

Concerns about the plight of widows in Iceland were aired before this time and were often intertwined with the larger issues concerning women's rights and nationalist concerns, particularly as evident by the political orientation of some of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's founding members. A key figure behind the formation and early political orientation of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was that of one of its founders and first *formaður* (chairperson), Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, daughter of the founder of the Women's Rights Association of Iceland (KRFÍ) and prominent feminist leader Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir. Laufey was elected as the chair of her mother's organization KRFÍ in 1927 and had immediately placed the assistance of widows on the agenda. In her inaugural speech she attacked the government's lack of assistance for widows:

According to the laws of God in the old and new Testaments, it is considered one of the first duties of man to help widows and orphans. The Bible often mentions correcting the situation for the

widow, but according to man's law in Iceland there is little done for widows (Valdimarsdóttir, in Guðlaugsdóttir 2005:24–25).

Laufey continued that as it stood widows in Iceland basically had two choices at the time. The first was to rely on kinship ties for support and, if this was not possible, the second choice was to seek municipal assistance. In her speech she used the phrase “*fara á sveitina*” (go on the county)—a phrase which encodes the negative connotations that were associated with accepting this assistance, as one also had as well to accept the status of pauper and the loss of rights which it entailed (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:5). She concluded her speech about widows' support urging that “All of the women's societies in the nation should unite on this issue and demand from their members of Parliament that they supported, and of their municipalities and town councils, that they agree with this on their part” (Valdimarsdóttir, in Guðlaugsdóttir 2005:24–25).

The sinking of the trawler *Jón Forseti* in 1928 had spurred Laufey and her colleagues to concrete action. After a collection had been taken up for the widows of the seamen who had perished, a committee was formed in April of 1928 to study the situation of widows and needy mothers throughout Iceland which was comprised of 22 women from ten different women's organizations (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:6). An executive board was formed in June of that year which included Laufey Valdimarsdóttir and other prominent women in Reykjavík. They set about to conduct survey research on the plight of widows in Iceland while the larger committee collected donations to distribute to needy mothers in the city for the Christmas of 1928. Nationalist overtones were sometimes employed in order to sway public sympathies to support their cause and to justify the need to support needy mothers and by extension their children. One speaker

at a meeting in 1929 to discuss the research of the committee on the plight of widows in Iceland concluded with a comment that was fairly typical of this kind of discourse: “the most precious possession [*eign*] of society are children and the welfare and the future of the country depends on their development” (Lárusdóttir, in Vilhjálmsdóttir and Eiríksdóttir 1929:5). Others, such as Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, chose to focus on issues such as the nature of the public relief system. Laufey drafted a letter to detail the survey plans for the executive committee where she makes it clear that government assistance, not charity, is the appropriate response to aiding widows and single mothers. She writes,

We consider that all such mothers, who have little and are in need of help, should get support (*styrkur*) from public funds and that this support would be recognition of their work for society, and it would not entail any loss of rights or be considered as poor support (*fátækrastyrkur*) (Valdimarsdóttir, in Guðlaugsdóttir 2005:24–25).

The aid that Laufey had in mind seemed to be conceptualized as a stipend or wage for their work as mothers rather than as charitable assistance, poor relief or welfare as these practices are produced discursively today. The executive committee also advocated political agitation, not only through publishing the findings of their research but by spreading awareness about the plight of poor mothers through whatever means they could find, such as through other social aid agencies, church sermons and meetings, letters to the newspapers and members of parliament. Throughout most of the 1940s, Mæðrastyrksnefnd of Reykjavík also published a periodical entitled “*Mæðrablaðið*” (the Mothers’ Paper) which reported on a wide range of issues, such as calls for the provision of stipends for housewives (Mæðrablaðið 1944:10–11) to concerns with the issues of housing and daycare (Mæðrablaðið 1947:4–5) among others.

The name 'Mæðrastyrksnefnd' was not in use during the early days of the organization. I noted one newspaper article which referred to the executive committee as '*Ekknastyrksnefndin*' (the Widows' Support Committee) (Vilhjálmisdóttir and Eiríksdóttir 1929:5), but by the early 1930s the terms 'Mæðrastyrksnefnd' (Mothers' Support Committee) or 'Mæðrastyrksnefndin' (the Mothers' Support Committee) were in wide usage (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1931; 1932a; 1932b; 1934a; 1934b). The Christmas allocation of 1928 also started a tradition of holiday assistance with which Mæðrastyrksnefnd would be associated among the public for many years to come. The committee would also be recognized for their later efforts to open and operate homes outside of the city where poor mothers could rest and recover for periods of time during the summer. But in the early incarnation of the committee under Laufey's leadership it appeared that long-term structural change was the primary focus rather than short-term material assistance, which was rather uncommon for charities at the time or in the present for that matter. The committee had opened an office on Ingólfsstræti in May of 1929 in order to collect information on women in need and their families but also to assist in advising them about women's rights. The office was later moved to the lower floor of Þingholtsstræti 18 in the home of Laufey and her mother Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:3). Throughout the 1930s articles in the newspapers by Mæðrastyrksnefnd would routinely appear, particularly in December, asking women to come to their offices and provide details of their situations and needs. In the first year fifty women were also assisted with legal counselling, as a key problem for many single women was the failure to receive child support from the respective fathers. The focus on helping women achieve their legal rights suggests to me that the material assistance was seen as a temporary, but



needed, measure until the larger problems could be addressed. Laufey was a particularly avid letter writer and constantly wrote to politicians and officials at all levels of government for assistance for specific individuals or for input in terms of legislation by either proposing bills, suggesting changes and pressuring specific members of parliament. It has been noted that a bill on child protection in 1932 which was passed into law largely stemmed from the efforts of Mæðrastyksnefnd (Guðlaugsdóttir 2005:24–25).

Mæðrastyksnefnd was the primary force behind the law in which children who were born out of wedlock were granted full legal status (Hákonardóttir 2000:196).

Hákonardóttir argues that Mæðrastyksnefnd deserves a large measure of credit in helping to abolish the practice of dissolving rural households who could not provide for themselves and splitting up their members among various farms as labourers. She writes, “By stubborn and relentless pressure on MPs they helped to improve the legal status of destitute people” (ibid.). In the 1930s and 1940s the committee’s advice was solicited on many matters, ranging from bills on alimony to abortion. This incarnation of Mæðrastyksnefnd far differed from what I encountered during my field research. The former was primarily oriented towards rupturing the status quo of social and legal inequalities while the latter focused primarily on more traditional charitable works.

The early form of Mæðrastyksnefnd as a political lobbying organization appears quite different from its general perception as a material charity in the present. It would seem that the leadership of Laufey Valdimarsdóttir during the first ten years of its existence was a key factor which set the tone of the committee. It is true that Mæðrastyksnefnd also engaged in more traditional charitable endeavours during this time. I encountered numerous articles in the newspaper during the 1930s detailing gifts of

money, food and clothes to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for distribution for the holidays (e.g. Morgunblaðið 1932b; 1934a; 1934b; 1938). Laufey was apparently a forceful and determined person in terms of providing specific clients additional material aid if she felt it was warranted without consulting the committee. However, much of her energies appeared to be focused on lobbying the government for change as well as providing legal assistance for her clients, despite the fact that she was not formally trained as a lawyer. In her memoirs Aðalheiður Holm, an early committee member and union representative, recalled seeing her neighbour Laufey out late at night around the city, visiting women in their homes to document their situations and returning to pound out letter after letter on her typewriter. In Holm's description of her, which I cite at length below, she reveals not only the personal strength of Laufey but an intriguing window into the early dynamics of the committee. I conclude this section on the early history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd with this quotation because it evokes many of the key themes which were raised during my fieldwork at Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the present; this includes the differing attitudes among the staff regarding what constitutes appropriate levels of assistance, attitudes towards the clients, and the delicate balance that is required to maintain a committee which is comprised of the members of a number of different organizations each with their own purposes, agendas and political orientations:

Laufey led that diverse group in such a masterful *línudansi* [ropewalk] that I have seldom seen anything like it. She was equal and fair to everyone and she did both parts of her work even-handedly. The union of this many women's societies was very important to her and she went to great lengths not to upset the balance between women with different points of view. But you cannot deny that often she had to defend her clients from the committee and they often argued in corners. Still, her leadership was unchallenged the decade that I worked for her and the

strength that she had for this leadership was based on her incredible knowledge. She was quickly so well versed in the law that she had no problems taking on a paternity suit for her clients and it was not until 1941 that a woman with a law degree took over the job that Laufey had been doing for over a decade, assisting young women to achieve justice in the courts. At the same time she also knew more than other women about what was happening with women's issues abroad. She could always compare their situations in terms of the law with that of other countries. It was knowledge that none of the others had.

It was thanks to Laufey's leadership as the chair of the committee that we kept the balance. She could sometimes get upset at meetings, especially if she thought that her clients were talked down to, which happened a lot. Some of the women that I worked with at Mæðrastyrsnefnd thought that they were so perfect. Laufey was often able to hide her disposition [*geð*] and approached all issues with courtesy; she was really quick thinking and often answered so wittily [*hnyttilega*] that it hurt to bear the brunt of it. It was rather that the women of the committee tried to find weak spot on Laufey when she ignored the committee and gave an extra bag of coal or a few *krónur* to her clients without having a meeting about it. But she would not let anyone budge her (Holm, in Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004: 29–30).

Laufey passed away in 1949, after having fulfilled her final year as chair of Mæðrastyrsnefnd in 1945. Over the years since, Mæðrastyrsnefnd appears to have become in practice much more of a traditional charity than a social advocacy organization. One possibility was that the early tone of Mæðrastyrsnefnd was set by Laufey but not maintained after her departure. But another factor, to be discussed further, is that the gradual institutionalization of such organizations and their incorporation into a larger complex appears to cement the places of charity into maintaining the status quo rather than rupturing it; the history and tradition of a long-standing organization becomes the justification for its continuance and further support. The preservation of the agency and its name at this point appears to take precedence over more radical activities which

may threaten support from the state, companies and the larger public. My purpose here is not to present an ethnography or a history of Mæðrastyrsnefnd, but rather an exploration of the charity complex in practice using Mæðrastyrsnefnd as an ethnographic window onto these activities. As such, there is not adequate space here to present a more detailed history of the first 75 years of the organization, which is available in Gestsson and Hjartarson (2004). Rather, my focus is on the practices which I observed and in which I participated from 2004 to 2006. My focus will now turn to Mæðrastyrsnefnd and the charity complex in the contemporary setting in order to detail the practice of charity and the numerous issues which emerged from my fieldwork there.

### Endnotes for Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> See also Chapter Two of Robert Bremner's (1994) *Giving* for a detailed discussion of various streams of theological thought pertaining to charitable giving and the poor found within Islamic, Jewish and Christian texts.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Gísli Pálsson's critique of the work of the Danish ethnographer Kirsten Hastrup (Pálsson 1995:62–71).

<sup>3</sup> For a further discussion of the treatment of women who dated or married foreign servicemen see Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1989). See as well Valur Ingimundarson's (2004) discussion of the issue of race and U.S. servicemen stationed in Iceland after the Second World War. I will return to this issue again in Chapter Eight.

<sup>4</sup> The Book of Settlements is a slim volume written by the priest Ari Þorgilsson the Learned in the 12<sup>th</sup> century which described Iceland's early history (Karlsson 2000:11).

<sup>5</sup> *Bændur* were usually males. While it is historically true that some women were known to be landowners, heads of households and had the right to divorce their husbands (Koester 1995a:574), their political rights were otherwise circumscribed which, among other things, prohibited their participation at the Alþing sessions (Karlsson 2000:26–27).

<sup>6</sup> This is a very concise description of a complex and much debated period of Icelandic history. For a more detailed look at these events, see Karlsson 2000:79–86.

<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that Danish rule was not always as benevolent as is implied in some sources. Danish trade monopolies have been described as “oppressive and unresponsive to Iceland's needs” (Byock 2001:152), as Iceland was even forced to export agricultural products during the 1783–5 famines, and Danish trade policies have been described as having “continued to stunt economic development until well into the nineteenth century” (ibid).

<sup>8</sup> The Alþing was abolished by Denmark in 1800, but King Christian VIII made a conciliatory gesture towards Iceland in 1840 by suggesting the Alþing be revived. Despite some debates between the romantic leaning rural elites who wanted the Alþing re-established at the old site of Þingvellir and the modernist leaning emergent urban elite who wanted it at Reykjavík, the modernists under Jón Sigurðsson won the day and the Alþing reconvened at Reykjavík in 1845 (Karlsson 2000:205–207).

<sup>9</sup> Social assistance is primarily the responsibility of the municipalities today. The provision of financial assistance from the municipalities is based on the Municipal Social Services Act 40/1991 (Alþing 2004:4–5). However, in contemporary Iceland certain social assistance schemes, such as disability and old age pensions, have become the responsibility of the national government.

<sup>10</sup> Icelanders generally eschew the use of titles in reference to people in formal and informal written and spoken discourses, irregardless of the social status of the author or speaker and that of the referent in most cases. In this work I have followed the academic conventions of referring to scholars with their surnames. But, in keeping with Icelandic practices, I have broken with these conventions in certain cases. As with the above example, it would be very odd in an Icelandic context to refer to Bríet Bjarnhéðinsdóttir as a person as ‘Bjarnhéðinsdóttir’ unless in reference to a citation of her work.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Hegemony and the Charity Complex**

In this chapter I will argue that charities need to be analyzed as individual nodes within a larger charity complex, but that the larger effects produced by the work of this complex contributes to the ways in which inequalities within the larger society are justified, explained and normalized. I noted in the previous chapter that when Mæðrastyrksnefnd formed in 1928 the committee had joined the ranks of a number of other charitable agencies that were involved in providing material assistance to the needy in Reykjavík. The women of Mæðrastyrksnefnd had their own particular concerns and agendas, both in the past as well as the present. During the 1920s and 1930s it was the provision of assistance for widows, needy mothers and children, intertwined with the larger political concerns of women's rights. Other contemporary organizations had different concerns in terms of their target groups or interests and appeared as well to have had different ideological orientations. The differing orientations of various charities held as well during the time of my fieldwork and such a case is not limited to that of charities in Iceland. Rebecca Allahyari (2000) for example, in her comparative research which contrasted the work of the Salvation Army with that of a Catholic charity in Sacramento, California, found that each agency differed in terms of their approaches to the provision of assistance and views of the nature of poverty and other related issues. As such, each agency inducted "volunteers into differing approaches to serving food, with very different relations to homeless people, local politics, and the national welfare state" (Allahyari 2000:6). Allahyari's approach in examining the 'moral selving,' as she describes it,

among the staff and volunteers in the context of differing ideological frameworks within each organization is an interesting as well as a productive approach, but it fails to draw attention to the ways in which these organizations were part of a larger framework despite their differences; thus it becomes difficult to see the larger effects produced by the cumulative work of charities. She does note some of the ways in which these organizations were linked to the state, such as with the 'drafted volunteers' at the Salvation Army who were there to fulfill community service sentences, as well as the Salvationists' acceptance of government funding. But these connections and the linkages among different charities, governments and other interested parties are not stressed and are only apparent at various points in her work. It seems that Allahyari prefers the more radical approach espoused by the Catholic agency in which she worked, evident by their refusal to accept government funding and reluctance to judge their clients. However, it is clear that the Salvation Army and the Catholic Loaves and Fishes worked together on various projects, such as a jail visitation program, but these linkages were briefly noted on only a few pages (Allahyari 2000:101–104). Further, only passing reference is made to the fact that Loaves and Fishes accepted surplus government food (ibid.:219). The ways in which charities allow companies, businesses and even governments to dispose of unwanted goods is, in my opinion, a crucial point and is given a heavy emphasis by other scholars of contemporary charities (e.g. Poppendieck 1998; Wagner 2000). Another key issue is the way in which these linkages and numerous functions which serve the interests of a host of parties continue to maintain and institutionalize these charities and the complex as a whole.

I do agree with Allahyari that it is important to consider the particular focus and ideological orientation of a given agency which acts to normalize the conduct and views of its respective staff members and their clients. Mæðrastyrsnefnd is perhaps somewhat unique in these regards, given that the committee was, in the past and during the time of my research, comprised of the members of numerous women's organizations representing the range of the Icelandic political spectrum. Yet, in many ways these differences among the staff recede in importance when considering its overall place in the larger charitable system. My contention is that despite the uniqueness of each individual organization charities often work together and have linkages with governments, businesses, political parties, various social organizations and associations, educational institutions, religious groups and individual members of the public as part of a larger framework. The effects produced by the combined work of this charity complex have implications beyond that of the specific character of each individual organization. The 'usefulness' of this complex was apparent in a number of ways, such as: providing the means for businesses to dispose of goods, a place for governments to send social welfare recipients in need of further assistance, a vehicle for the implementation of the programs of other agencies and organizations, and opportunities for publicity for political figures and businesses leaders, among other practices that I observed at Mæðrastyrsnefnd which helped to cement the place of charities in Icelandic society. Further, charities offer an opportunity for members of the public, interested associations and school children to become involved in 'doing good' by helping the needy. While it is not my intention to belittle or make light of these good deeds, the public's involvement in these activities helps to render inequality as a normal part of the contemporary social landscape and charity as an acceptable response to



these issues, further assisted by the media through drawing attention to and rewarding the donors and participants in these exercises. The charity complex as a whole helps to produce and reproduce a practical as well as discursive hegemonic framework in which inequality is explained and normalized. Before turning to an ethnographic exploration of this complex in which I observed and participated from the perspective of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I will first turn to a discussion of the notion of hegemony as drawn from the work of Antonio Gramsci.

#### **4.1 Hegemony: Practice and discourse**

In a well known statement from *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx argued that the ideas of the ruling class are tied to their dominance in material relations, but these ideas are also an ‘intellectual force’; the ruling classes are compelled, in order to continue their rule, to present their ideas of the social order “as the only rational, universally valid ones” (Marx 1998 [1888]:68). But in order for these ideas to take hold among the populace and to be sustained and reproduced they must become more than ideology as a set of ideas or values associated with a specific social group—they must become largely accepted by the bulk of the populace and become rooted in the material practices of everyday life; they must “reemerge in the domain of ‘common sense’ ...that is, they become ‘culture’ – they lack contradictions” (Sider 1986:155). The question as to how this is accomplished and sustained was a primary concern of the Italian Marxist-inspired thinker Antonio Gramsci.

The notion of hegemony in the social sciences is often associated with the work of Antonio Gramsci as found in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1999 [1971]). Gramsci’s work is complex, in no doubt further complicated by the fact that he was imprisoned by Mussolini’s government as the head of the Italian Communist Party in

1927 from where he wrote his *Notes* under the watchful eye of government censors and in poor health (see Hoare and Smith 1971; Crehan 2002:18–19). Gramsci was unique as a Marxist thinker during his time because he shifted his focus away from attempting to understand how a feudal order could be overthrown by an urban proletariat, as in the earlier case of Russia, towards understanding the notion of hegemony in terms of the “mechanisms of bourgeois rule over the working class in a stabilized capitalist society” (Anderson 1976:20). Gramsci himself did not define hegemony. Rather, as Crehan suggests, Gramsci offered an approach to “thinking about the complicated way consent and coercion are entangled” (Crehan 2002:101) and how the realities of class are lived which “refuses to privilege either ideas or material realities” (ibid:200). What hegemony is *not* is the traditional definition of hegemony as rule or political domination, often with the state as the main actor (Williams 1977:108). Crehan (2002) has argued that use of hegemony by scholars influenced by Gramsci, as it has been filtered into the social sciences often through the work of Raymond Williams (1977), has often overlooked or ignored Williams’ own insistence on the importance of material relations. This ‘hegemony lite’ has come to focus on the ideological aspect of hegemony, explicitly concerned with dominant ideas, values and beliefs and has “become an essentially idealist concept” in the process (Crehan 2002:172). To be certain there are ways in which hegemony may appear similar to that of the ascent of a dominant ideology. Gramsci has argued that in the process of creating hegemony there is a struggle between competing ideologies and that at a decisive point one ideology “or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society” (Gramsci 1999:181). But the creation of hegemony brings together a union of political,

moral and economic aims and as such is not limited to an ideological consensus but a consensus which is lived in the very fabric of social existence and not just understood in the realm of ideas. At the crux of hegemony is the situation in which the subordinate sectors of society believe that they benefit in some ways by sustaining the overall social order and that this social order should legitimately continue. Crehan writes,

For Gramsci part of what hegemony means is that a class, or an alliance of classes, has succeeded in transcending its own narrow corporate interests, and has incorporated at least some of the interests of subordinate classes so that it appears to represent the interests of society as a whole (Crehan 2002:96).

Crehan continues that hegemony must be understood as an inclusive field of power:

“Hegemony for Gramsci...always involves ‘practical activity’, and the social relations that produce inequality, as well as the ideas by which that inequality is justified, explained, normalized” (ibid.:174). For Gramsci, due to his Marxist leanings, such inequality was always a story of class inequality but not in a crudely reductionist way.

Crehan continues that Gramsci did not provide a simple or concise definition of hegemony in his writings for a key reason: “rather than being a precisely bounded theoretical concept, hegemony for Gramsci simply names the problem – that of how the power relations underpinning various forms of inequality are produced and reproduced” (ibid.:104). Further, “What in any given context constitutes hegemony can only be discovered through careful empirical analysis” (ibid.). It is my contention that the work of individual charities, culminating on the work of the larger charity complex itself, contributes to a hegemonic framework in which the inequalities they ostensibly work to address are in the process justified, explained and ultimately normalized.

However, hegemony is never total, but active, fluid and responsive to counter-challenges (Williams 1977:113). Roseberry adds that hegemony as such is not 'monolithic' but "a problematic, contested, political process of domination and struggle" (Roseberry 1994:358). Stephen Gaetz (1997), in his analysis of the provision of non-governmental youth services in Ireland, argues that the organs of the Irish State, the Church and the ostensibly 'non-governmental' voluntary organizations form, in Gramscian terms, a 'historic bloc'—a coalition of institutions linked together in complex ways which serve to maintain the dominant socio-economic order. However, Gaetz also argues that these organizations were sometimes in conflict as they pursued their own vested interests. He writes that the "services provided by the government, the Catholic Church, and voluntary groups both ensure the continuity of the political and economic system that they are an essential part of and also, ironically, create space for the emergence of forces (however limited) that challenge such power" (Gaetz 1997:16). The structural ties among this bloc do not preclude tension and conflict, as various parties pursue their own interests even if they ultimately share a larger class interest. A hegemony held in tension is in fact in keeping with Gramsci's views, given the complex interaction of history, class interests, local and national concerns as well as personal experience and dispositions.

This tension within the processes of hegemony extends to differing interests and viewpoints among individuals as well as organizations. Gramsci contends that the 'average person' (he uses the term 'man-in-the-mass') has a practical understanding of his/her social existence derived from lived experience, but "no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity" (Gramsci 1999:333). Gramsci is not saying that

the masses possess 'no' theoretical understanding, just not a 'clear' one, at least from the perspective of a radical interested in change. He continues on the same page that the 'man-in-the-mass' has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory one). By this he means that there is one consciousness which is informed by the experience of daily life, and another which is verbal or discursive and is "inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed" (ibid). It is contradictory in that it is a consciousness which may be directly opposed to experiential knowledge, but nevertheless can guide thoughts and influence behaviour. What Gramsci allows for is a model of thinking, active people who are negotiating understandings of their lives under conditions of structural inequalities and economic processes that are interpreted through direct experience, but are also informed by historically rooted beliefs and to an extent by the views and values of those who benefit from their labour and political acquiescence.

Gramsci argued that it is the job of intellectuals, the 'deputies' of the dominant groups (Gramsci 1999:12), to render intelligible and convincing the contradictions produced by the clash of ideology and practical experience. Gramsci had a very broad definition of 'intellectuals' which may not accord with the dominant understanding of the term in contemporary English; one does not need to be formally educated to be an intellectual in a Gramscian sense but have the 'role' of an intellectual in terms of producing knowledge and instilling that knowledge in others. Gramsci further subdivided intellectuals into 'organic' intellectuals—"those with fundamental structural ties to particular classes"—and 'traditional' intellectuals—"the pre-existing intellectual groups that the organic intellectuals of any newly emerging class must confront" (Crehan 2002:137–141). The dominant way in which poverty has been rendered a 'non-issue' in

Iceland is a good case in point, as it illustrates the often close connection between nationalism and hegemony, the production of counter-hegemonies and the role the charity complex plays in the production of knowledge.

One interpretation as to why poverty became a ‘non-issue’ once Iceland achieved independence and emerged as a prosperous country links this phenomenon to the issue of nationalism. The Icelandic nationalist image projected to the world is of a nation defined by homogeneity, not only of language and ethnicity but also socio-economic class.<sup>1</sup> Among the Nordic nations in general, the relationship between conformity, socio-cultural homogeneity and nationalism has been particularly interdependent and persistent. This ‘sameness’ is notably associated with Iceland (Durrenberger 1996), but also to a degree with Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The particular emphasis varies, but markers of linguistic and ethnic diversity, as well as gender and class inequality, are the key factors which are most commonly muted. For example, after independence Norway sought to solidify control of its territory with the creation of a national “monolithic homogeneity” (Niemi 1995:169). This has had an impact on policies for dealing with the Sami and Kven minorities within Norway’s borders, but also persists as a lingering undercurrent in dealing with recent immigration to Norway. Unni Wikan points out that despite the fact that today there are people representing 158 different nationalities residing within its borders (Wikan 2002:32), Norway, as with many other European states, still denies its status as an immigrant country. Sweden has tended to pursue a somewhat more accommodating policy towards cultural diversity within its borders than Norway. Yet, Sweden presents itself as homogenous in terms of class, specifically claiming to be a middle class society (Frykman and Löfgren 2000 [1987])—in keeping with the ideal

socio-economic model for the Nordic states in general. Michael Herzfeld has argued that nationalist ideologies in general promote cohesion and cooperation at the expense of diversity, because diversity “signifies change and especially fragmentation” (Herzfeld 1987:29). As such, nationalist ideologies produce what Herzfeld calls ‘structural amnesia,’ by which he means the “officially sanctioned silences about sources of internal difference” (Herzfeld 2001:71).

The nationalist ideologies that arose in Iceland in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on the uniqueness and purity of the Icelandic language, literature and countryside, but also promoted an image of ‘sameness’ and encouraged cooperation and consensus in the push for independence from Denmark. These nationalist discourses have resulted in the development of an ideology of ‘radical egalitarianism’ (Tomasson 1980:39) as well as the “myth that Iceland was a society without class divisions,” and this myth has proven to be “tenacious” (Karlsson 1995:56). Gísli Pálsson notes that, even in more recent times, as “a result, Icelanders tend to minimize the differences among them. The idea of equality is one of the key values of Icelandic culture, as popular ideologies testify” (Pálsson 1989:132). In an early piece of socio-linguistic research, Pálsson was criticized for suggesting that gender or class based differences may be noted in the Icelandic language (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1992:304). While some critics may have focused their arguments solely on the linguistic data, it would appear that others reacted to the deeper implications about class divisions in Icelandic society, because “such analysts deny the possibility of heterogeneity in an egalitarian society” (ibid). This has obvious political implications as well. As Karlsson notes that once the talk of class and

structural inequality has become socially muted in Iceland, “One could disregard them, were one politically interested in doing so” (Karlsson 2000:57).

Once my field research commenced in Iceland I was immediately struck by the extent of the charity complex that I encountered but also by the extensive production of counter-discourses which sought to make poverty an issue in Icelandic society and politics. Based on my initial literature review prior to fieldwork, I had expected relative silence on these issues. I found quite the opposite. The work of the sociologists Stefán Ólafsson (e.g. 1999) and Harpa Njáls (2003) was often mentioned in media discussions about poverty in Iceland. The work of the anthropologist Helga Björnsdóttir (2004) on the homeless in Reykjavík received a measure of media attention as well (e.g. S. Ólafsdóttir 2004; Jóhannsdóttir 2005). The social critic Sigrún Á. Reynisdóttir, from the organization *Samtök gegn fátækt* (Organization against poverty), was particularly vocal in newspaper articles and radio interviews during the time of my research and took the opportunity to raise a number of issues connected to poverty (e.g. Reynisdóttir 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2004d; 2004e; 2004f). Journalists wrote editorials which denounced the conditions of poverty and the insufficiency of the social welfare system in Reykjavík or the country as a whole (e.g. Steinþórsdóttir 2004; Guðmundsson 2004) or else wrote large, multi-page articles on issues of poverty and charities (e.g. Guðlaugsdóttir 2005; A. Ólafsdóttir 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). Some members of parliament, including such notable figures in Icelandic politics as the MP Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir from the left-wing *Samfylkingin* party (the Alliance), routinely denounced inequalities in Icelandic society in parliamentary sessions in *Alþingi*, newspaper articles, or through dispatches on parliamentary websites (e.g. Sigurðardóttir 2002, 2003; Morgunblaðið 2005b). The state was not entirely silent on



these issues either, as a parliamentary report on domestic poverty was released in 2004 (Alþing 2004). The work of scholars or professionals related to the issues of poverty would sometimes produce a discursive 'ripple effect' in which the findings of the original work would be distilled via the print media (newspaper, magazines) to a wider audience, which in turn provoked the publication of further articles and responses by other professionals, politicians or members of the broad public. For example, the noted work on poverty in Iceland by the sociologist Harpa Njáls (2003) was drawn upon in conjunction with additional material in an article in a nursing journal on poverty and health in Iceland (Jónsdóttir 2004). The main points of this article were then disseminated via a newspaper article on poverty in Reykjavík to a wider audience (Morgunblaðið 2004d). A few days later another article ran in the paper in which a lecturer in social work at the University of Iceland commented on these earlier pieces in reference to her work on poverty and child abuse (Morgunblaðið 2004e) which itself prompted the social critic Sigrún Reynisdóttir to write a rebuttal (Morgunblaðið 2004f). I had also politely declined a number of requests by journalists to talk about my research, partly because I felt uncomfortable contributing to the very discourses that I was studying and partly because I personally did not feel comfortable at this early stage of my academic career in the role of public intellectual. Still, I contributed to these discourses through my ongoing conversations with the staff and clients, talks with visiting guests to Mæðrastyrksnefnd such as politicians and scholars, and informal discussions with members of the media as well as a public lecture at the University of Iceland and a number of classroom lectures.

Of course the charity complex itself was also quite active directly or indirectly in the production of discourses regarding these issues. During the holidays it was fairly

typical to see a number of articles by journalists documenting the holiday assistance offered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd and similar charities in Reykjavík. These articles usually followed a typical format—a few quotes from a senior staff member, comments on the numbers of clients they serve, a brief characterization of the clients in terms of demographic categories (e.g. single mothers, young, disabled, and elderly people) and a concluding call for further support (e.g. Fréttablaðið 2004d; 2004e; Sigþórsdóttir 2004; Morgunblaðið 2005c). Senior staff members often took the opportunity to make a few strategic comments about their agency and its work while simultaneously fulfilling the donor's wish for publicity. Public calls for support from various charities were made periodically throughout the year as well. One agency, Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands (Iceland's Family Help) was particularly vocal in this regard and often ran articles or large advertisements in the newspapers soliciting support (e.g. Fréttablaðið 2004f, 2004g, 2004h). At the same time, there was a measure of ambivalence among the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd as to whether it was considered 'proper' to solicit blatantly for donations through the media. One long serving senior staff member, since retired, expressed her displeasure to me regarding the extent of the media coverage of charities that she had noticed over the past several years: "You do not do this for a charity. Mæðrastyrksnefnd was there, has been there for a long time. People know about us. They came to us, we never went to them."<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that the staff disputed that they competed with other charities for support, a few senior staff members admitted to me that the media attention given to Fjölskylduhjálpi during 2004 may have drawn support away from their own agency. A compromise was reached and a senior staff member cleverly penned an article entitled: "*Af hverju heyrir svona lítið...*" (Why do we hear so little

[from Mæðrastyksnefnd]] (Morgunblaðið 2004g:41), which explained that it was not Mæðrastyksnefnd's way in the past to publicize their work but now they needed the public's support. The other material aid charities in Reykjavík tended to avoid explicit requests for support in the media, but they were also involved in other ways in the production of knowledge regarding poverty and inequality in Iceland. Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar (Icelandic Church Aid) was often mentioned in the holiday related articles but they also produced glossy reports of their work, replete with coloured pie graphs and charts noting the demographic characteristics and other data relating to the clients they assisted (Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar 2005). The Icelandic Red Cross issued similar reports which documented the demographic profile of those in need and drew conclusions as to which 'groups' of people among the population were at the highest levels of risk in terms of socio-economic difficulties in Iceland (Rauði Kross Íslands 2000; 2006a).

During the time of my research there was a vibrant production of counter-hegemonic discourses in Iceland which sought to make poverty an issue in Icelandic society. The extent to which these counter-hegemonies were effective is a matter of debate. As will be discussed below, the scale and scope of the charity complex cannot necessarily be taken as evidence in and of itself of the scope of the problem. These agencies and their donors have numerous reasons and interests for their involvement in the charity complex beyond helping 'the poor' alone. Further, I would omit the media reportage on the work of charities and the charities' own calls for donations from the body of counter-hegemonic discourses on poverty for an important reason. In my view, charities absorb dissent. They direct the efforts of some otherwise concerned and active citizens towards charitable work which does not have the capability to make significant

changes to structural issues such as unemployment, low wages, high taxes, costs of housing, lack of skills and education, meagre pensions and so forth. Rather than calling on citizens to become politically active regarding these issues, the discourses produced by charities are the work of 'traditional intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense—they help to maintain the status quo by offering the public an avenue for participation in efforts that are largely ineffective as anti-poverty activities as well as to render inequality a 'normal' and expected feature of the larger society. Once the public discourses which promote charities are excluded from consideration as counter-hegemonic discourses we are left with the work of a handful of scholars, partisan politicians, critical journalists and private citizens to counter the traditional knowledge-producing bodies, albeit a counter-hegemony mounted in a rather inchoate and piecemeal fashion.

But as Gramsci argued, the production and maintenance of hegemony is a practical as well as ideational activity. The subject that I will now address is the ways in which charities also produce knowledge through their work and practical activities. The donation of goods or time by volunteering contributes as well to the maintenance of a hegemonic framework that justifies and normalizes inequality. While the acts of donating and volunteering were sometimes communicated via the media in a discursive form, the concrete acts of donating and volunteering itself as elements of a practical activity are integral components in the production of hegemony. The maintenance and reproduction of individual charities and the larger framework depended on serving a number of purposes and interests, some of which had little to do with the role of charity in helping the needy. I will now turn to an exploration of these activities that I encountered from the

perspective of my time at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, starting with a brief overview of the organization before moving on to a description of its place in the larger complex.

#### **4.2 Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the charity complex**

In many ways Mæðrastyrksnefnd exhibited some of the classic defining features of a ‘bureaucracy’ as outlined by the noted German scholar Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1978). For Weber, the key aspects of a rational bureaucracy included a clearly established hierarchy of authority, specific tasks or official duties which must be executed by members of the agency, and the employment of members based on the demonstration of required aptitudes and the possession of certain qualifications (Weber 1978:956–957). Like many small charities, most of the staff members and volunteers did not have to possess particular skills or qualifications to work at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, though some members were perhaps better suited to certain roles within the organization than others. Nevertheless, Mæðrastyrksnefnd did exhibit some aspects of a formal bureaucratic structure. According to their charter or *lög* (2002), Mæðrastyrksnefnd is an independent committee which operates within the boundaries of the city of Reykjavík. Their official goal is defined as thus: “Mæðrastyrksnefnd is a cooperation between associate member societies, composed of representatives who provide free work for the committee in the interest of mothers, children and women in need” (Mæðrastyrksnefnd 2002:1). Membership in the committee is open to all women’s societies in Reykjavík, providing that they in turn exhibit certain bureaucratic features themselves, such as having a charter and a governing board (*félagsstjórn*). If a women’s society has fulfilled these requirements they have a right to have representatives in the committee, up to a maximum of three formal members. Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself has a chairperson (*formaður*), who is

elected by the committee at the annual meeting (*aðalfundur*) for a term of two years, along with a vice-chair (*varaformaður*). The time limit imposed upon holding executive positions within Mæðrastyrksnefnd is a fairly recent development, as before this time the chairs of Mæðrastyrksnefnd often held the position for many years (e.g. Laufey Valdimarsdóttir 1928–1945; Guðrún Pétursdóttir 1946–1957; Jónína Guðmundsdóttir 1958–1975; and one former chair I interviewed held the position from 1981 through to 1999). There is also a governing board (*stjórn*) which is comprised of six members for two year terms, with each board member representing a particular women's society. The *framkvæmdastjóri* (manager) is a person hired by the committee to oversee the day to day operations. Lastly, there is a secretary (*ritari*) who takes notes and enters the minutes from the previous meeting. There were also numerous board meetings, general committee meetings and impromptu meetings among the staff or with outside guests and visitors, some of which I attended during the course of my fieldwork.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd, throughout the entire course of its history, has been comprised of the members of various women's associations within Reykjavík. During the majority of my fieldwork, the committee was comprised of approximately twenty members of eight women's organizations.<sup>3</sup> However, there was a core of perhaps a half dozen or so regular staff members, a handful of members who came from time to time, a few I only saw at meetings and special occasions and, from the list I was given by the chair, a few I have never met.

The committee was an interesting mixture, as the nature of these women's organizations was quite diverse in purpose and socio-political orientation. The organizations which contributed representatives to Mæðrastyrksnefnd included other

long-standing charitable organizations discussed in the previous chapter, such as Hvítabandið and Thorvaldsensfélagið. Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (Women's Rights Association of Iceland), a key founding association, also continued to contribute members. Other societies included Húsmæðrafélag Reykjavíkur (Housewives Society of Reykjavík), and Kvenstúdentafélag Íslands (University Women's Student Association of Iceland). The remaining three were decidedly political in orientation and from across the political spectrum: Hvöt, the women's society for Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, the centre-right Independence Party which long played a key role in Icelandic politics since its formation in 1929; Félag framsóknarkvenna, the women's society for the centrist Framsóknarflokkurinn or Progressive Party, which had largely been a rural or agrarian oriented party since its foundation in 1916 and which, during the time of my research, formed the national government in a coalition with Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn; and Kvenfélag Alþýðuflokksins, the women's society for the left-wing Alþýðuflokkurinn or Social Democratic Party of Iceland which also was founded in 1916.<sup>4</sup> It was also not unusual for individual staff members to hold membership in a number of women's organizations as well as other charities, political associations or church groups simultaneously. Overall these were generally socially and politically active women, most of whom seemed to view Mæðrastyrksnefnd as one part of their larger scope of activities.

I was admittedly curious about how such a diverse group could work together without conflict, especially given the fact that many Icelanders strike me as being passionate about politics. Perhaps anticipating my interest, I was told early on by many key staff members that "we leave our politics at the door"; in other words, political differences were set aside in order to maintain cordial relations among the diverse staff.

In one sense this was true. While there were differences and contentions among some staff members, infrequently erupting into cross words, these seemed to me to be more related to clashes of individual personalities than formal political allegiances. But I never took this contention seriously as in my opinion politics, in the broader sense, hovered over everything they did. In her research on women volunteers in Japan, Robin LeBlanc (1999) argues that many of the women who staffed volunteer agencies denied the political implications of their activities. Partly this was the result of a “distinctive ethic for conducting daily business,” which “circumscribed the place of politics in the volunteer domain” (LeBlanc 1999:103). Many of the women LeBlanc worked with, particularly those who worked in agencies close to the issues of social welfare, harboured deep suspicions that too close of a relationship to the world of politics would taint and significantly alter what they perceived as the humanistic nature of their volunteer work (ibid.:111–112). Yet one could hardly describe the work of the staff of Sagyōsho, an agency which assisted the intellectually impaired and mentally ill with domestic and work skills enhancement, as ‘apolitical.’ Many of the staff members, much like the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, acquired a measure of knowledge about the social welfare system such as pensions, the work of other agencies, and the situations of their clients and subsequently came to form certain opinions about these issues. LeBlanc makes an insightful point regarding the insistence by her research participants on separating politics from their work. These women were not ignorant of politics and they rightly perceived political reasons as underlying many of the problems that their agencies were dedicated to addressing, even to the point of blaming certain policies and governmental bodies for these social ills. “Nevertheless, this blame seldom drove a volunteer to conclude that she



must dedicate herself to changing the structure of politics and policy to eliminate those situations. Instead, she often remained committed to avoiding politics when possible” (LeBlanc 1999:112). This disavowal of politics, however, all but ensures that the status quo regarding inequality in the larger society will be maintained. Removing oneself and one’s agency from political agitation, leaving politics ‘at the door,’ eliminates a central way in which larger structural change may be precipitated. One could argue that an agency which is dedicated to addressing the issues of poverty, social welfare and inequality cannot or should not be ‘apolitical.’ By neglecting to wade into political waters, out of deference to one or another’s political party or upsetting donors and wishing to maintain a friendly work environment, ultimately ensures that larger change will not be effected.

Another key point is to be made here in regards to the nature of Mæðrastyrsnefnd. Each member association was required to contribute members to sit on the committee as well as to contribute their labour. While some staff members devoted a great deal of time and dedication to Mæðrastyrsnefnd, the same could not be said for all. During the bulk of my fieldwork I was present at each packing and distribution day, in addition to special requests for help from the staff as well as the time devoted to my on-site archival and statistical research. I also made every effort to attend the major formal meetings and inadvertently attended other smaller meetings such as board meetings or impromptu meetings of key staff members when I happened to be on-site for another purpose and stayed to listen. As such, I was generally aware during this time of who participated and to what extent. It seemed to me that certain members contributed the bare minimum required of them while others did not appear to contribute their fair share of

labour at all. For some volunteers it appeared to be the case that their participation was out of duty to their contributing association rather than to Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself. One key staff member admitted to me in an interview in regards to Mæðrastyrksnefnd that she “never wanted to be there.” She was a member of a number of women’s organizations, two of which contribute members to Mæðrastyrksnefnd. But she decided to become further involved in Mæðrastyrksnefnd when its future at one point looked in doubt. During 2003, Mæðrastyrksnefnd underwent something of a crisis. According to the many accounts I recorded from various current and former staff members, in this time period the committee was in somewhat of a disarray. The general consensus among the contributing societies to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, in the words of one staff member, was that we “wanted it to survive,” given the long-standing history of the organization. I heard similar sentiments expressed by other staff members, that it would ‘be a shame’ if such a historically significant organization in the struggle for women’s rights in Iceland was left to wither and disappear. Many of the staff members I worked with during my research had started volunteering around this time, becoming involved in order to keep Mæðrastyrksnefnd going.

During the time of my research it grew increasingly obvious to me that Mæðrastyrksnefnd served a number of purposes which contributed to its continued existence. An important one was its history and symbolic value as an institution of Reykjavík and of the historic struggle for women’s rights in Iceland. It struck me that the contributing associations, some of which have been part of Mæðrastyrksnefnd at the time of writing for nearly eighty years, may be averse to severing this relationship whether or not they agreed with Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s work or the enterprise of charity in general. The

fact that a number of women's societies contributed members to Mæðrastyrksnefnd suggests that it is also unlikely that the committee would fold if one or two contributing societies were to opt not to take part.<sup>5</sup> Mæðrastyrksnefnd as such is not an independent charity but rather more of a node or a nexus representing the combined efforts of numerous individuals and organizations. Once an organization is in place for decades, in the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and some other charities in Reykjavík for close to or beyond a century, there are numerous forces and interests at work which keep the organization in question going—not all of these interests are even explicitly tied to the main purpose or goal of the specific organization. Though I only conducted participant-observation at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, through my interviews with other staff members and archival research regarding other charities in Reykjavík it was clear that there were also numerous linkages and a number of roles and interested parties which sustained them in addition to and beyond the core concern of providing assistance to the needy. In the introduction, I quoted the words of a senior official with the social services of Reykjavík who argued that charities 'do not accomplish anything' with regards to redistributing wealth or combating poverty in a serious way. Such an analysis, even though it has some merit, nevertheless draws attention away from the numerous factors which contribute to the institutionalization of charity and the larger effects of the complex that are produced. The existence of Mæðrastyrksnefnd is not attributable solely to the inequalities that it is dedicated to addressing. In other words, the scale of the charity complex should not necessarily be seen as indicative of the level of inequality within a given society. I am not arguing that there is no relationship between charity and inequality; on the contrary, my key thesis is that the charity complex in a way contributes to the normalization of these

inequalities. Of course a certain level of inequality is required in order to justify support for charity—it would be difficult for charities to solicit donations and support if no members of the public felt that inequality was an issue. But the scale and scope of the charity complex I observed testifies both to the disquiet felt by the public over inequality in Icelandic society as well, ironically, as its acceptance and normalization. This seeming contradiction is rendered somewhat more intelligible once it is understood that these efforts are generally ineffective in seriously addressing these inequalities, but they appear to be effective in reassuring the donors and participants that they are ‘making a difference.’ Other factors must also be considered in terms of understanding the maintenance and continuance of the charity complex, as I have begun to note above. Before discussing the factors involved in the logistical support of Mæðrastyrsnefnd and the charity complex, I believe that a brief aside regarding the nature of the charitable donation itself is warranted.

#### **4.2.1 Charitable goods: gifts, commodities, donations or other?**

Charities such as Mæðrastyrsnefnd exist as nodes within the larger nexus that I have referred to as the charity complex. Charities are sites through which a number of goods flow and are re-circulated. These goods may come in the form of financial donations, food, clothing and assorted miscellaneous goods, each of which receives further specific attention below. However, I often pondered the nature of the charitable donation itself in terms of the social relations that are built, reinforced or denied as the result of the charitable acts of giving and receiving. Are charitable donations ‘gifts,’ ‘commodities’ or do they deserve particular consideration as ‘donations?’ The answer, it would seem, depends upon the specific context.

In the anthropological literature, goods and the ways in which they are exchanged have often been classified as either gifts or commodities (e.g. Mauss 1993 [1950]; Gregory 1982; Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; Godelier 1999), or in terms of specific typologies of reciprocity (e.g. Sahlins [1972], following to some extent scholars of substantivist economics such as Karl Polanyi [1957]). However, it has also been pointed out that some goods act as neither gifts nor commodities—such as sacred goods, totemic items, religious relics and land in certain contexts when these items are retained and never circulate.<sup>6</sup> Following the leads of the above mentioned scholars, charitable donations appear at times to possess the characteristics of gift exchanges and in other contexts aspects of alienated commodity transactions, but in general exemplify neither. This may be due to the fact that both gifts and commodity exchanges, as well as idealized forms of reciprocity, rarely exist in the ‘pure’ form of the typology and tend to exist along an exchange spectrum.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that donations to charities were often framed in the language of giving and gifting, in practice these donations were received and redistributed by the staff of charities; in certain circumstances these donations were actively solicited by the staff. In the context of my research, the donors were not aware of the specific clients who received their donations and, in turn, the donors remained anonymous from the point of view of the clients, thus negating the forging of any possible reciprocal bonds between donor and client that are held to be an essential feature of the gift relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known treatment of the gift in the literature of the social sciences is the essay *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss (1993 [1950]), originally published in French in 1925 as *Essai sur le don*. In a widely cited statement Mauss argued that there are three key themes to the notion of the gift: “the obligation to give, the obligation to

receive and reciprocate” (Mauss 1993:39). Mauss was primarily focused on the gift economies of pre-modern and pre-industrial societies, drawing upon works of ethnography and history as his sources of data. In his view there was and is no such thing as a ‘free gift,’ as in the words of Mary Douglas in a forward to his work: “A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction” (Douglas 1993:vii). Mauss explored in his work the various socio-cultural ways in which the obligations to give, receive and reciprocate were enforced through taboos and cultural norms or codes of conduct, often in aid of establishing and preserving alliances and networks of trade. His emphasis upon the calculative aspects of the gift has been influential in the social sciences as well as his exploration of how generous gifts can be used to acquire status through shaming the recipient who may not be able to reciprocate to an equal extent.

Since its publication his work has been criticized for a number of reasons, such as for misinterpreting some key ethnographic data (Sahlins 1972) or for recognizing but not exploring sacred objects which cannot be given or exchanged as well as for being ‘mystified’ by indigenous explanations of gift exchanges (Godelier 1999) to name a few. James Laidlaw (2000) has also attempted to argue that there are indeed such things as ‘free gifts,’ drawing upon his work on the Shvetambar Jain renouncers in India who have taken vows of poverty and depend upon the donations of villagers to subsist. Laidlaw is concerned with how to analyze gifts, things given, when there appears to be no reciprocal links or exchange between giver and receiver. He wishes to retain within anthropology a notion of the ‘free gift’; yet his own data seems to suggest otherwise. The gifts of food to the Jain ascetics by townspeople and villagers in India, though given with interesting measures to counter-act feelings of reciprocity, are nevertheless donated with obligations

and expectations of returns. He writes: "Giving *dan* [free gift, alms] is the paradigmatic religious good deed (*punya*), and lay families are actively keen to give alms to renunciators" (ibid.:619). But these acts strike me as fulfilling the classic gift relationship as outlined by Mauss: the obligation to give (religious imperatives); the obligation to receive (Jain ascetics, despite their posturing of refusal); and the obligation to reciprocate (by-proxy return of karmic cleansing to the donor).

In the context of my research, while the bonds of reciprocity between clients and external donors are difficult, if not impossible, to forge, the donors in certain cases clearly sought recognition and praise from the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd for their donations, while some of the clients clearly expressed reciprocity to the staff through counter-gifts or donations of goods as well as offerings of labour. What is admittedly more difficult to ascertain are the donors' motivations or senses of obligation to give, especially in certain cases where donations to Mæðrastyrksnefnd were made anonymously, such as in the form of unmarked envelopes of cash stuffed through the mail-slot or bags of goods left anonymously by the outside door after-hours. And as will become apparent below, some of the motivations by certain donors were rather self-serving and conducted with little consideration for the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd or the organization itself, and are thus difficult acts to analyze with the classical understandings of the gift relationship.

Laidlaw also takes exception to the ways in which commodities have been theorized in anthropology, specifically in the well-known work of Gregory (1982). Laidlaw argues that Gregory draws a much too sharp and simplistic divide between gift exchange and commodity exchange. Gregory, taking the lead from Mauss but influenced by Marxist approaches, argues that gifts essentially reproduce the social conditions which

produce 'people,' whereas commodities—based upon a class-based division of labour—reproduce 'things.' Gregory also contends that gifts are inalienable in that they socially bind the giver and receiver together. The gift transaction takes place between individuals or groups who are in a dependent reciprocal relationship. Commodity exchange, in contrast, is purported to take place between independent parties and with alienable commercial goods (Gregory 1980:641; Gregory 1982:100–101). As will become apparent below, most of the goods which have been donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd were initially purchased as commodities. Some of the goods donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd by food manufacturers and distributors were taken directly out of stock and then transformed into gifts or donations. Yet other goods were clearly returns, damaged or spoiled and are thus no longer commodities but surplus or even waste; in those cases, the act of donating to charity becomes an exercise in recycling or waste management—something with clear economic benefits. Other charities that operated within Reykjavík were also known to sell some of their donated goods to their clients at reduced prices in order to raise operating funds, as Mæðrastyrksnefnd once did with some of their new items of clothing in the earlier portion of my research.<sup>9</sup> It has been observed elsewhere (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995) that gifts and commodities rarely exist in practice as found in the ideal types of exchanges; thus the nature of any system of charitable donation must be considered in its specific context rather than as a broad or distinct category. I will now turn to an important area of consideration, that of financial support, before turning to discussions about food and clothing donations.



#### **4.2.2 Financial support**

A useful method in terms of understanding the various interests that charity serves is to trace out the linkages of finance, what I had referred to in my fieldnotes as the ‘money trail,’ in order to find out who supported Mæðrastyrksnefnd and, more importantly, why. Heyman (2004) has pointed out that it is a worthwhile exercise for ethnographers working in organizations to trace out the various ways in which agencies are supported. He contends that “funding is highly revealing of political connections and alignments” (Heyman 2004:492). However, one admitted weakness of my research was that, for ethical reasons, I had decided early in the project not to question donors directly. Since charities are largely dependent on donations I did not want to interview donors and potentially risk damaging support for Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I was also uncertain of the possible unintended effects that might arise if a researcher such as myself began analyzing the issue of donors in a public forum, which is why I politely turned down a number of requests for interviews from the Icelandic media regarding my research. One senior staff member, for example, pointed out that one important food good was donated free of charge each week. This arrangement was in place when she first began at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and as such she was unaware of when it had started and why. She told me that she was nervous about asking the company for an increase in the quantity of these goods. There had been a change of ownership in this firm and she suspected that lower-level employees might have continued the practice out of the habit of donating to Mæðrastyrksnefnd even if the higher management was unaware. She was therefore concerned that inquiring about the practice could draw attention to it and potentially jeopardize this resource. Despite the fact that I decided not to question donors directly I

was still able to gain a number of valuable insights through talking with staff members, being present when notable donations were made and analyzing media reports about these activities.

Over the years Mæðrastyrksnefnd acquired a measure of capital and holdings. The committee owned their own space, located in the first floor of an apartment complex,<sup>10</sup> but, as the result of certain issues which occurred before my research began and which I have opted to omit for ethical reasons, the committee's finances were in poor shape when I started my research in 2004. The Icelandic state during 2004 provided Mæðrastyrksnefnd with two million ISK in financial support (approx. CA\$40,000) as well as another 800,000 ISK for the Christmas allocation. I was told that the city of Reykjavík had provided one million ISK in the past, which was reduced to 750,000 ISK during my fieldwork and eventually down to 500,000. The financial officer explained to me that in practice this sum was even less, as the city took back 267,000 ISK in property taxes (*fasteignagjöld*). She also detailed that their annual operating costs were roughly 2.5 million ISK, which was offset by the material and cash donations from governments, companies and the public. Even though in the larger scheme of things this state funding was only one source among others, I was curious as to why there was any state support at all. Researchers in the United States (e.g. Allahyari 2000; Poppendieck 1998; Wagner 2000) have also commented on the financial links between governments and private charities, to lesser or greater degrees, which suggests that serious questions need to be raised regarding the entire notion of an 'independent' charitable or so-called 'third sector.'

In the United States in the early 1980s, John Gardner, public intellectual and member of the conservative Republican Party, helped to establish an organization known as the 'Independent Sector' or 'I.S.' This organization served to coordinate the activities of American philanthropic organizations. But, as the historian Lawrence Friedman notes, the I.S. also had on its agenda "to forge a self-consciousness among grant-making and voluntary organizations – a sense that they occupied a distinct third space between government and the private market economy" (Friedman 2003:1). The Reagan administration clearly began to take an active interest in promoting volunteerism and the 'independent' or 'third' sector, as they came to be known. Poppendieck (1998) cites at length from an address to the nation made by then President of the U.S., Ronald Reagan, on proposed governmental spending cuts, where he urges a greater public involvement in volunteering:

The truth is we've let Government take away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of community pride and neighborliness...We are launching a nationwide effort to encourage our citizens to join with us in finding where need exists and then to organize volunteer programs to meet that need (Reagan, in Poppendieck 1998:92).

Shortly afterwards, further efforts were made to convince the public that the 'third' or 'independent sector' was the way forward in terms of addressing structural inequalities. Powerful and influential 'think tanks' and other partisan organizations were created in order to achieve these goals. A key example is the Independent Sector Research Committee (ISRC), first chaired by Robert Payton, president of the Exxon Education Foundational and former U.S. ambassador (Friedman 2003:1).

There are numerous examples of scholarly, or pseudo-scholarly, foundations or societies dedicated to promoting the 'third sector' and volunteerism, which hold conferences and publish journals and books. Friedman offers two such examples—the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) (ibid.:1–2). The ISTR, for example, publishes the quarterly journal *Voluntas* and lists numerous governmental, volunteer, academic and businesses sector agencies and foundations among their institutional members, including the Ford Foundation, and the Centres for Civil Society at UCLA and the London School of Economics.<sup>11</sup>

The 'third sector' discourse is closely linked as well to another movement which seeks to promote 'community' solutions to structural issues, often referred to as enhancing or building 'community capacity.' I first encountered this discourse during an earlier research project in Newfoundland, Canada, (Rice 2002). The Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC) defined 'community capacity' as "the combined influence of people's commitment and skills which can be used to build on strengths and to address common problems and opportunities" (CSC 1998: n.p.). Their discourses in general were heavily intertwined with references to 'self-reliance' and 'independence,' much in common with the 'third sector' and neoliberal discourses in general, as the common goal of such approaches seek to promote non-governmental alternatives to address structural issues. It is not surprising that the CSC, in their publications at the time, drew heavily upon the work of the Aspen Institute—one of the institutional members of the International Sector for Third Sector Research, mentioned above.

One of the key problems with the entire ‘third’ or ‘independent’ sector approach is that many of these ostensibly ‘non-governmental’ volunteer organizations that provide these services are often dependent upon government and corporate funding. Friedman, writing of the history of American philanthropy, argues that in terms of logistics, joint-initiatives, funding and tax exemptions, that “At no point was there anything approaching an autonomous voluntary sector” (Friedman 2003:15). The same would appear to hold in the present and was certainly applicable in the case of my research.

While Mæðrastyksnefnd received governmental financial support, it did not surprise me to learn that they were not absolved of having to pay taxes, given the Icelandic state’s seeming fondness for taxation, but elsewhere tax-exempt status is a defining feature of charities. In the United States, for example, the so-called ‘third sector’ is sustained through tax-exempt status as well as direct financial grants and material donations. But the image of the non-profit ‘sector’ may be somewhat misleading, as non-profits in the U.S. hold at least a trillion US\$ in assets and account for one-tenth of the U.S. GDP (Wagner 2000:119). The list of American non-profits Wagner has documented strains the ‘common sense’ view of what constitutes a charitable or philanthropic organization, including Best Western Hotels International and the administrators of the lucrative SAT and GRE educational tests (ibid.). Wagner contends that charities in general attempt to distance themselves from the associations with profit and state funding because the allure of charity, and its legitimation, as a non-governmental alternative to the provision of aid and essential services depends upon this image in order to solicit support. He writes: “To retain their mythical sacred status, the institutions of the nonprofit sector – described in the literature as the ‘independent sector’ or the ‘third sector’ – actually must

obscure their almost complete reliance on government” (Wagner 2000:117).

Mæðrastyksnefnd’s allocations from the state and city were significant for the committee and it is unlikely that Mæðrastyksnefnd would be able to sustain their current level of operations without this governmental support.

I agree with Wagner that the image of charity as ‘non-governmental’ is important for the legitimacy of the enterprise of charity in general, but Mæðrastyksnefnd did not take serious efforts to obscure this governmental linkage. The financial officer said to me, in reference to my inquiry as to whether or not I could use these funding details in my dissertation, that this information “is no secret.” During the time of my research Mæðrastyksnefnd wrote a number of letters to Alþingi and businesses requesting support and made reference to their funding which was already in place. However, I doubt that very many members of the Icelandic public were aware that their taxes were used to fund such enterprises, though I am uncertain as to the reaction that would ensue if they were. In one letter the committee sent to a member of Alþingi who served at the time as the *formaður fjárlaganefndar* (chair of the budget committee),<sup>12</sup> Mæðrastyksnefnd outlined their needs, financial situation, and requested an increase to bring their total annual allocation to between four to six million ISK. The financial officer told me later that a meeting she had with a government official went well and he told her that their request would be considered in the next budget—the funding to Mæðrastyksnefnd was in fact later increased to 3.5 million ISK (approx. CA\$67,000). I also learned one of Mæðrastyksnefnd’s executives had ties to one of the ruling state parties, Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, and had ties as well to the business community through her husband. This staff member admitted that much of this increase did have to do with the

way she 'manipulated' her 'political links,' although another staff member (from another political party) sharply reminded me that it was in fact the entire parliament which had approved the funding increase. Nevertheless, one particular incident further confirmed for me that personal, political and professional linkages helped to sustain these governmental and charitable ties. The letters Mæðrastyrksnefnd sent out in 2005 asking for further support drew the ire of one member of Alþingi from Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, Pétur Blöndal. He is well-known for his rather outspoken views on poverty in Iceland (rather on the supposed lack thereof) and his seemingly dim opinion of the clients of charities. He demanded a meeting with the senior staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in light of his concerns about fraud and abuse on the part of the clients. The financial officer told me that she had eventually stormed out of this rather heated meeting. Apparently the entire Alþing had shortly afterwards heard about what had transpired. The fallout from this incident even spilled over into a brief public debate in the media where Pétur Blöndal accused Mæðrastyrksnefnd in a newspaper article of not screening the clients for fraudulent claims, which struck me as very surprising considering that I spent a great deal of my research investigating Mæðrastyrksnefnd's supposedly non-existent screening practices. In a rather unorthodox move he used his own disabled daughter (who was purportedly a client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd) as an example of everything that was supposedly wrong with the Icelandic social welfare system (DV 2005a:6). In response to my inquiries about this story, the financial officer from Mæðrastyrksnefnd explained that she had been quarrelling with this member of parliament about these issues at the national party meeting as well. She eventually complained about his actions and she was reassured that the party and the government would continue to support Mæðrastyrksnefnd despite Pétur

Blöndal's objections. Shortly afterwards the state, with the agreement of Alþingi, decided to raise Mæðrastyrksnefnd's annual support to four million ISK (approximately CA\$80,000).

It appears that personal and political ties help to explain why there was a measure of governmental financial support for Mæðrastyrksnefnd, which in turn helps to sustain their work and place within the larger charity complex. Given that many of the key members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in its early history were women of note and status in Icelandic society, it would not surprise me to learn that support was similarly elicited during this time through these kinds of personal, business and political networks. Diana Kendall (2002) notes that the connection between philanthropy and women in the United States was often a connection based on class as well as gender; elite women had the time to do this kind of work but they also had the necessary networks in place in order to 'make things happen.' In the past, as well as in the contemporary context of her own research, elites commonly used their contacts and influence in order to facilitate the writing of cheques for philanthropic causes. While some of the women of Mæðrastyrksnefnd appeared to move in somewhat exclusive circles in Icelandic society, the committee overall was diverse. But given the rather small and intimate nature of Icelandic society and the denseness of social networks it was not unusual for the committee members in general to draw upon their social networks and contacts in governments, businesses and other charities in order to meet their needs. Yet personal networks alone do not explain the extent of all of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's support.

Governmental support has additional motivations which must not be overlooked when considering the multiple functions of the charity complex. The sociologist Harpa



Njáls relayed to me that there was a measure of hostility from certain governmental officials when she published her work on poverty in Iceland (2003), particularly in regards to her contention that government social services referred their clients to private charities for additional assistance. Harpa told me that the President of Iceland<sup>13</sup> had read an advance copy of her book and had personally called her to congratulate her on her work. The President, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, had also indirectly referred to her work when he delivered his New Year's address in 2003, which largely concerned the issue of poverty in contemporary Iceland (Grímsson 2003). Harpa continued that she was somewhat surprised when her work was later attacked by other government figures when it was published. She told me that a major issue of contention was her claim that social services referred their clients to charities. She commented to me that even the Prime Minister at the time, Davíð Oddsson, had argued that this claim in her book was 'not true.' A chair of Mæðrastyksnefnd had recounted a similar incident to me. When she made the case for additional financial support from the city in a meeting with municipal officials she pointed out that since the city refers social assistance recipients to them it is only logical that the city should in turn assist Mæðrastyksnefnd with funding. She told me that an official with the city grew "very angry" at this suggestion and claimed that this practice did not occur. I found this surprising given that a number of aid workers, government officials, social workers, academics and the clients themselves were aware that referrals from social services to charities were a fairly routine occurrence. A retired chair of Mæðrastyksnefnd commented as well that referrals from the municipal social services was a long standing practice when she was active with the committee:

"Félagsþjónustan [municipal social services] very, very often sent us clients. And they

will [continue to] do it.” I was aware of these practices during the time of my fieldwork given that I had been present on numerous occasions when caseworkers from social services from the city had telephoned Mæðrastyrksnefnd for these reasons. Some clients I spoke with also confirmed these practices to me as had a caseworker (*félagsráðgjafi*) from the municipal social services for the city of Reykjavík:

Oh yes. We don't have emergency assistance here. No food, money or clothes, only money for certain expenses such as doctors or medicine. In cases where people will come to us and say they have run out of money and have no money for food we will tell them to go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd or Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. This is not written anywhere. Sending clients to charities is an unspoken rule and everyone knows this. We do send [clients] to Mæðrastyrksnefnd and Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. Vilborg [the director of domestic assistance for Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar] just asks that we send her an email first.

There is no question that the municipal social services of the city of Reykjavík indeed refers clients to Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar charities in these kinds of situations. In other cases, the city takes an active role alongside charities. The city funds and works closely with the Pentecostal charity Samhjálp. They operate a rehabilitation centre that is located outside of the city which houses thirty-two patients and primarily treats drug and alcohol addiction and which in turn takes referrals from social services and the police. The national director (*forstöðumaður*) of Samhjálp explained to me that they also operate a shelter and support home on Miklabraut in central Reykjavík, for which the city provides the costs of the building as well as the basic operating expenses. Samhjálp also operates a café, community centre, and halfway house on Hverfisgata, also in the downtown area, and added that their work is “well known in the community” in terms of those dealing with issues of mental illness, homelessness, and substance abuse

problems and by the professionals who make these referrals. The fact that the city financially supports Samhjálp can be easily discovered by visiting Samhjálp's website, but my impression is that the public in general, aside from those who deal with these issues directly, is generally oblivious of the exact nature of the work of these charities and their linkages with governmental agencies. I discussed this issue with a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Iceland, Helga Björnsdóttir, who had completed her Master's thesis on issues of identity and the homeless in Reykjavík (H. Björnsdóttir 2004). She provided me with even more examples of the connections between charity and the provision of essential social services in Reykjavík, citing the shelter for homeless women, Konukot, which is operated by the Red Cross as one such instance. The regional leader for the Salvation Army in Reykjavík told me that they sometimes receive referrals from social services as well as from the mental health institute Kleppspítali for temporary placements in the guest house they operate in the downtown, with social services sometimes covering the costs. I commented that while I was aware of some of the linkages between certain charities and government agencies as the result of my research, I was unaware of the Salvation Army's work in this regard. The Major replied that the Salvation Army prefers to "work quietly in the background." I began to realize that had I conducted as in-depth a level of research as I had with Mæðrastyrksnefnd with a number of these other agencies I would no doubt have uncovered even further linkages and connections in what appeared to be a rather extensive charity complex for a city of not even 200,000 people. The Salvation Army Major with whom I spoke cautioned me that I must remember that the caseworkers from social services are often doing the best they can with limited means. In reference to the front line workers who made these kinds of

referrals to charities she said that, “they are working under conditions that are not sufficient,” and that “it is a hard job, having to deal with opposing pressures.” She continued that the caseworkers are placed between the pressures of trying to help their clients while having to follow their guidelines and drawing upon the means available in order to accomplish their goals. The charity complex appears to be one way to relieve these pressures. But one could argue as well that the work of the charity complex may in fact keep this system going by minimizing, to an extent, the cracks in the social welfare system that would be more apparent if it were not for the complex’s activities. If these cracks were more obvious and in turn revealed the extent of existing inequalities, it might place a greater pressure upon the state to deal with these issues in a more comprehensive way.

It became apparent to me that the level of admission by the city and state of their reliance upon charity and the unusual patchwork system and ad-hoc manner in which essential services are supplied would communicate the message to the general public that the government services are inadequate or mismanaged if needy people have to seek help at charities. However, the dominant portrayal of charities and their work in the media and political discourses does not emphasize the reasons which propel their clients to seek assistance at these agencies—rather a positive emphasis is placed upon the acts of giving, whether through state assistance, corporate donations or the efforts of private citizens. But it is not easy to explain away the existence of these charities themselves, especially around the holidays when newspapers often run photographs of clients lined up in the cold for assistance or publish articles about the charities’ work. One official response is to question the ‘need’ of the clients and malign their character, which is a theme I will pick

up later in Chapter Five. The other tactic is simply to distance the government from charities by denying or neglecting to draw attention to the state support of charity. It would place the government in an awkward position if it was widely known that they financially support these charities and the extent to which they relied on their services while at the same time certain senior officials publicly cling to the position that charities are ‘unnecessary.’ In late November of 2004, the outgoing mayor of Reykjavík visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd. At one point I noticed several senior staff members take him to the back room to speak privately and to discuss with him some of the statistical work I did for the committee. I later asked one staff member what the mayor’s reaction was to these numbers and she replied “surprise.” But she added that she was very angry by the end of the meeting—“steam was shooting out of my ears,” as she put it. The mayor had apparently explained that despite these figures social services were doing ‘a wonderful job’ and that it was not necessary for people to go to charities like Mæðrastyrksnefnd. This staff member then scoffed and said to me, “Well if that’s the case what are we doing here?” It is possible that senior officials may not be aware of the practices of frontline caseworkers, let alone the lives of people struggling with socio-economic difficulties, but it is also possible that they may not be able to admit to such practices in a public forum. But the fact that both the state and the city continue to support Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar organizations suggests that they recognize the ancillary role that these ‘private’ agencies play in providing assistance to the needy. It is possible that the combined efforts of the charity complex allow the state and municipal authorities to maintain assistance benefits at a lower than sufficient rate, but I have no direct evidence to suggest this is the case. Janet Poppendieck (1998), in her study of material aid charities

in the United States, expressed similar thoughts (Poppendieck 1998:158) but admitted as well there is a lack of evidence, as researchers often do not have access to the inner circles of policy making to ascertain whether or not charities are a factor when considerations are made to cut-back or to neglect to raise social assistance benefits.

Large non-governmental agencies also play a role in implementing the programs or assisting in the work of smaller charities. The Red Cross, for example, is a large international agency with a paid staff and is an organization altogether of a different order in scale, scope, and resources than smaller charities like Mæðrastyrksnefnd, though the Red Cross can still be regarded as a charity or at least a non-governmental aid agency. The Icelandic Red Cross is involved in many ways in supporting the local charity complex. According to the project director (*verkefnisstjóri*) for the domestic division of the Icelandic Red Cross, they often work with charities such as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar during their holiday assistance, providing them with financial support for their endeavours. She added that the Red Cross has provided clothing and financial assistance as well to the smaller branches of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the towns of Hafnarfjörður and Kópavogur. During the holiday allocation of 2005, Mæðrastyrksnefnd, the Red Cross and Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar pooled their resources and worked together.<sup>14</sup> The project director continued that the Red Cross also has regular meetings with the social services of Reykjavík, Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute) and Ráðgjafastofa um Fjármál Heimilanna (a financial counselling service) to see in what ways the Red Cross may assist. However, given the stature of the Red Cross it seemed to me that they were in a position to offer help to the state and not the other way around. The Director of the National Department of the Icelandic Red Cross (*Skrifstofustjóri*

*Innanlandsskrifstofu*) pointed out to me that the Red Cross operates fifty-one branches across Iceland in addition to operating the national ambulance services but receives no financial support from the state.

Other non-governmental agencies have drawn upon Mæðrastyrksnefnd in order to implement their own programs. Velferðarsjóður barna (Children's Welfare Fund), a charitable trust for children which receives a large measure of funding from deCode, the Icelandic biotech firm, provided a significant level of funding for Mæðrastyrksnefnd in 2004. Most of this funding was earmarked for the holiday assistance as well as the assistance provided to offset the expenses faced by their clients when their children are confirmed in the Lutheran Church, though Mæðrastyrksnefnd was able to apply some of it towards their basic operating costs. But three million ISK of this funding was set aside for the purpose of sending needy children to summer camp. In this sense the trust fund was able to implement their desire to send children to summer camp by drawing upon the logistic capabilities of Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Mæðrastyrksnefnd already had a process in place to screen clients and were already in close contact with the low-income parents of children who were the intended beneficiaries of this program. In exchange for their support Mæðrastyrksnefnd was tasked with screening the applicants and placing children into these summer camp spaces. Another organization, Ráðgjafastofa um Fjármál Heimilanna, offered financial counselling to those in dire economic circumstances. The clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were in general the people in the situations that this and similar agencies targeted, so Mæðrastyrksnefnd agreed to provide literature and referrals to their clients on behalf of these other organizations. Charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd often routinely encounter people in the kinds of socio-economic situations that are of

interest to other charitable and philanthropic agencies. Given that Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar charities have the logistical resources already in place, they are a convenient and cost-effective option for the implementation of the programs of other agencies.

The financial support of Mæðrastyrksnefnd also came in the form of gift certificates from grocery chains such as Bónus and Krónan, as well as department store chains such as Hagkaup. Sometimes these coupons were purchased, such as 5,000 ISK (approx. CA\$100) denominations from Bónus for which Mæðrastyrksnefnd would pay 3,000 ISK per coupon. These coupons were usually used for clients in exceptional circumstances but were given out in more of a blanket manner during the holidays such as Christmas and Easter or when the children of clients were being confirmed in the church. For the holidays these kinds of coupons were usually donated by various retailers which in turn received extensive media coverage. Bónus donated 20 million ISK in coupons in 2004 (approx. CA\$400,000) to help the needy in Iceland for Christmas, evenly split between Mæðrastyrksnefnd and Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, who in turn worked with Öryrkjabandalag Íslands (Organization of Disabled in Iceland) to distribute the coupons. This was reported in various media sources including an announcement on their own website (Bónus 2004). It can be seen as a gesture made towards those who have little during the holidays. I would not rule out benign intentions altogether, but I retained suspicions about other motives on the part of the donors. A coupon locks the recipient into shopping at a particular grocery store. During the holidays, it was likely that the bearer of this card would have to spend more than the face value of the coupon(s), especially those with large and extended families. Positive publicity or public relations for the donor is another candidate for the analysis, given the media attention. I had



witnessed or participated myself in a number of publicity photos which recorded the exchange of oversized novelty cheques, the signing of a document, or a handshake between a staff member and a representative from a donating company or agency. Each time that I witnessed one of these events I was struck by the feeling that all of this had little to do with the making of radical changes to the larger inequalities faced by the clients of these charities in daily life.

On one occasion a corporate donation came in the form of labour. One staff member, who occasionally offered me a lift to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, called me one morning to say that she was coming by early as she had to be there to unlock the building as a 'gift' was being donated, but she was unsure what this gift entailed. I was somewhat amused to find out later that this 'gift' came in the form of three representatives from a pharmaceutical company who were there to spend the day helping out.<sup>15</sup> I chatted with them while I had my morning coffee in order to find out why they were at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. One explained that they were participating in what she referred to as 'Community Participation Day,' which she described as a worldwide event which encourages employees to volunteer. As volunteers they did work steadily throughout the day, breaking for lunch and returning at 1 o'clock and later joined by another member around 2:30, but I interpreted this offer of labour as no more than symbolic, especially when compared with the efforts of the regular staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd who volunteered their time on a steady basis throughout the year. Peloza and Hassay (2006) note that corporations increasingly not only encourage volunteerism but also budget for time to allow their employees to volunteer during business hours. This model of 'inter-organizational volunteerism,' or "volunteerism in support of philanthropic initiatives"

(Peloza and Hassay 2006:358), is markedly different from earlier forms of corporate philanthropy which were usually material in nature. This model encourages the direct participation of employees in charity with their labour. In this more recent approach, companies became increasingly involved in these philanthropic endeavours as it was recognized that there are a number of returns to be had. Peloza and Hassay describe this as a 'win-win' situation in that charities benefit from the additional labour, employers benefit "from enhanced corporate/brand image," employee morale is boosted, and employees also "gain professional and interpersonal skills" (ibid.:357), which of course is also beneficial for the employer. While all this may be true, it appeared to me that charities are still more useful to corporations than the inverse in such an arrangement. In this case Mæðrastyksnefnd provided the charitable site, so to speak, which allowed for the placement of corporate employees in these activities. It is true that Mæðrastyksnefnd received labour in exchange, and these particular volunteers did appear to take these efforts seriously. However, in the larger picture these few hours and one time donation of labour was ultimately of little consequence to Mæðrastyksnefnd, as these tasks would have been completed anyway at a later point in the day or on the following morning. Mæðrastyksnefnd's labour needs were notoriously unpredictable, as at times there were too many volunteers and too little work while at other times the small numbers of staff could barely cope. What was needed were patient volunteers who could bide their time until they were needed or who made offers to be on call if the need arose. A one-time offer of labour at an arbitrary point was hardly something that could factor into their overall planning. In terms of the impact of this brief offer of labour upon the situation of Mæðrastyksnefnd's clients, such acts are almost certainly negligible in effect. Perhaps in

this context, an offer of financial support or material goods would have been of much greater benefit both to Mæðrastyrksnefnd and their clients.

Funding also came from members of the general public. At one point I was chatting with the manger of operations of Mæðrastyrksnefnd while she worked. I glanced at her records which listed companies and individuals and what they donated in terms of goods or cash. I noticed that next to the names of some individuals were figures ranging from small sums to 10,000 ISK (approximately CA\$170), which the manager admitted was a little high for an individual member of the public but not unheard of. She added that it was also not unusual for members of the public to donate anonymously, ranging from envelopes of cash slipped through the mail slot or transmitted electronically into their bank account. Some donations from individual members of the public were quite generous. I was told of a woman in the early 1990s who had left Mæðrastyrksnefnd her apartment in her will. It was later sold and the cash used for their operating expenses. However, another example illustrated for me the rather precarious nature of funding. Shortly before the Easter allocation for 2006 I was helping to pack some bags of goods when the manager received a telephone call from an Icelandic woman living in Norway. This woman had called Mæðrastyrksnefnd to inform them that she was making a cash donation of 1.5 million ISK (approximately CA\$25,000). This donor explained that Mæðrastyrksnefnd had, in the words of the operations manager, “helped her out a lot” in the past. Since she was now financially comfortable she decided to re-pay Mæðrastyrksnefnd for the assistance that was given to her. But I learned in September of that year that there was no sign of this woman or the money and the staff were uncertain as to what had happened. Mæðrastyrksnefnd made attempts to recognize all donors but

the fact that some individuals did include their names suggested to me that their motivations may differ a little from that of the anonymous donors in terms of their desire for recognition. As of the fall of 2006, Mæðrastyrksnefnd listed the names of over 220 sponsors of their organization on their website in order to recognize their contributions, which included corporations, retailers, financial institutions, political parties, unions, other charities and non-profits, small businesses and private individuals (Mæðrastyrksnefnd 2006a).

During the time of my research I clipped and saved numerous articles from various newspapers which recounted the financial donations from trust funds, businesses or financial institutions to Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar charities. They almost always included a photograph of an official or two representing the donating party with a senior staff member of the receiving charity, usually shown together shaking hands with the donor or holding up a novelty cheque or some kind of documentation, and with all concerned smiling for the cameras. In one typical example (Morgunblaðið 2004a:37), the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was shown with a number of coupons in her hand from the grocery chain Krónan. Along with her was included: a representative from Velferðarsjóður barna, and in the text it was reported that they had just donated three million ISK to send needy children to summer camp; a representative from the chain Krónan, which had just donated 300,000 ISK in gift coupons; and a representative from the firm NTC, which had just donated 500,000 ISK worth of coupons for clothing in their youth clothing store Gallerí 17. This event coincided with Mæðrastyrksnefnd's plan to assist the parents of needy children with the costs that arise from confirming their children in the Lutheran church, which is a common event for Icelandic youths when they

reach their early teens.<sup>16</sup> Another such article included a photograph of the chair of Fjölskylduhjálpi shaking hands with a senior executive from VÍS, an Icelandic insurance firm, which provided 200,000 ISK to fund a similar summer camp program which was administered by this charity (Morgunblaðið 2005a:33).

But these activities demand pause for thought. Acts such as donating money and efforts to assist needy people with essentials for the holidays or to send underprivileged children to summer camp are indeed difficult to critique, as doing so places the analyst in the uncomfortable position of appearing to be opposed to such things. I have no doubt that well-meaning intentions underlie these acts, but I also have no doubt that there are multiple motivations and purposes at work which also must be investigated. Business consultant and authority on corporate donations, Curt Weeden (1998), has been vocal on the issue of corporate philanthropy, arguing that the older ad hoc model of ‘corporate philanthropy’ needs to be replaced with a more coherent approach, which he labels ‘corporate social investing.’ Weeden argues that directed and managed donations are a useful business tool which enable companies to “open markets, recruit employees, improve customer relations and solve any number of business problems” (Weeden 1998:xxiii). Weeden outlines for corporate leaders how to accomplish this, such as making sure the charities in question (in the United States) receive tax exempt status from the IRS, thus rendering the corporate donation as a tax shelter (ibid.:48–49); making a public statement about social corporate responsibility (ibid.:54–55); as well as becoming involved in high profile sponsorships which garner a measure of media attention (ibid.:153–154).

While a number of corporate donations to Mæðrastyrksnefnd that I witnessed were openly publicized in some of the ways in which Weeden advises, there was also a number of such donations which did not appear in the local newspapers, even though I observed the work of a photographer documenting the scene. I surmised that these photographs were intended for internal newsletters or promotional purposes for the donating firms. Publicity and public relations play a role in these donations, as do advertising concerns for these firms. But what causes me the most trouble are the messages that are conveyed to the public through the promotion of these exercises. The accolades are clearly bestowed upon the donor; in these kinds of photographs, all are smiling to indicate the joyousness and goodwill inherent with the act of charitable donations. These activities not only are praised but they also have become routine and normal. Most of these kinds of publicized events tended to be included in the mid to later pages of the newspaper, in the case of Morgunblaðið around the thirty page mark. I noticed that when I was actively scanning for these kinds of articles I found myself reading the papers backwards, starting at the back page and working my way forwards towards where I expected to find these types of stories. This suggested that these events are newsworthy, but fairly unremarkable and not exactly front-page material—it is in fact rather unremarkable and normal for companies to donate money and goods to charity, especially around Christmas and Easter. But in the process, the conditions of inequality and the multiple factors which force people to turn to charities for assistance become unremarkable as well and charity becomes the expected and routine response to the poverty.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd made efforts as well to give thanks to individuals and companies whose donations were not given public recognition. Early in 2005 I observed the manager of Mæðrastyrksnefnd preparing thank you notes to donors to be mailed. They were form letters, printed on a sepia-toned stock and the edges were roughened to mimic the aging of parchment. The text was printed in a Gothic-style font which read: “Mæðrastyrksnefnd Reykjavík gives thanks for the good will and support for the committee. Warmest regards and best wishes for the New Year.” Each letter was signed by hand by the chair of the committee. The motivations behind these donations from the public are no doubt complex. In certain cases it appeared to be the result of a reciprocal act—an attempt at re-payment for the assistance rendered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd to an individual in the past. Some clients have spoken to me of the desire to help Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the future if their personal situations improve and enable them to do so. However, it is unlikely that all personal financial donations are the result of reciprocity for a past act; this was certainly not the case for corporate donations. Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s practice of mailing thank you notes is undertaken no doubt in deference to the demands of etiquette but also in consideration of the fact that a measure of praise or accolades is most likely expected on the part of the donor and is an integral part of the performance of donating to charity. The practice is also a sound strategy to pursue in order to ensure future support as well. The recognition by Mæðrastyrksnefnd of their donors is a longstanding practice. I encountered numerous articles in the newspapers during Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s early years which published the names of individuals and how much they had donated. One can presume that this was done in order to give recognition to the donor as well as to encourage further support. Curiously, it was also

fairly common to see donors named only by their initials. I remained puzzled by this practice, as it renders the donor somewhat anonymous but perhaps not to one's close peers and more importantly not to oneself, as a measure of recognition still appeared to be desired and the donor seemed to wish to see his or her contribution noted in print. The reasons why individuals and businesses donate to these kinds of charities are no doubt also complex but the recognition of these acts, either in a public forum such as a newspaper or in a more private forum such as the mailing of letters, suggests that donors generally desire the positive associations that are commonly intertwined with the acts of charity. Yet what charity represents from a broader perspective, and what this praise and accolades for the donors draws attention from, is not inherently positive but a failure of the state and society to seriously address inequality. I will now turn to a discussion of the food assistance provided to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, following a similar line of argument as above.

#### **4.2.3 The food assistance**

The food and clothing assistance at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was distributed to their clients on Wednesdays, aside from the extended operating days and hours during the Christmas holidays. But the bulk of these goods were usually received and sorted on Tuesdays. I began each Tuesday between ten and eleven o'clock in the morning with general maintenance duties, such as mopping, vacuuming, taking out trash and generally preparing for the food shipments which usually began to arrive around one in the afternoon. Out of their general operating budget Mæðrastyrksnefnd made weekly purchases of certain goods which were distributed to their clients; the regular core offerings included a carton or two of fresh milk, a two-kilogram bag of potatoes, and a



meat product such as fish, chicken, hamburger and so forth. The rest of the food assistance was usually provided as donations, aside from additional purchases when donations ran short. The milk was delivered in metal wheeled racks and purchased from a national dairy firm. Mæðrastyrksnefnd purchased one rack per week of *léttmjólk* ('light milk'—1.5% fat content) which more or less serves as the 'standard' milk in Iceland. The rack consisted of 180 one-litre cartons. The rough average of weekly client visits during 2004 and 2005 was between 100 and 130, which meant that most clients received one carton and decisions were made on the spot by the staff whether to give families with multiple children more than one carton if supplies held. This dairy firm often donated two or three racks of other dairy products. I found that many suppliers would often include extra goods as donations along with purchases. Iceland has what for me was initially a bewildering array of dairy products, many of which I semantically classed as 'yogurt' though they differed in certain ways. Some of these donated products included *skyr*, milk curds which in modern times are flavoured in numerous ways; *AB mjólk*, *þykkmjólk* and *jógúrt*, which all seem like yogurts of varying thickness to me; *engjapykkni*, which consists of a bi-sectioned carton containing a yogurt product which is mixed with the accompanying dried treat such as chocolate flavoured cereals; and various other dairy products repackaged to appeal to children. Many of these goods were donated well ahead of their expiry date and this firm did not request a receipt from Mæðrastyrksnefnd nor did they request any publicity. The bill that I often received and handed over to the staff only included the amount for the purchased milk. At times the additional donations, which Mæðrastyrksnefnd came to count upon, did not arrive and this usually prompted a senior staff member to call the firm. These donated milk products generally factored into the

staff's calculations as to the weekly food allocation. Even if these donations by all appearances seemed to be generous, they were nevertheless erratic at times and I always mused as to other possible motivations. One possibility is that this dairy firm supplied Mæðrastyrksnefnd with goods which they had in abundance and perhaps had little chance of selling, so donating to charity became a form of 'socially positive' waste management. All of these additional goods were usable at the time of delivery but closer to the expiration date than the purchased goods. For example, one donation that was received on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2006 consisted largely of three racks of *sýrður rjómi* (sour cream). They were packaged on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March and were set to expire shortly on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May. I also noticed that when a new product appeared on the market I would often see these goods at Mæðrastyrksnefnd around the same time, suggesting that there may be some marketing and advertisement interests at work as well.

Other food acquisition arrangements included a mix of purchases and donations. Each week a half dozen or so sacks of potatoes were purchased from a grower's co-op, Sölufélag Garðyrkjumanna, who often provided some additional free produce. Some firms provided fresh goods free of charge. For example, the national baked goods firm Myllan provided 96 loaves of fresh bread each week free of charge and often included a small box of baked treats for the staff. This remained unchanged for the entire time of my research and into the first half of 2007 when I balanced my writing time with volunteering at Mæðrastyrksnefnd on a reduced scale. This firm asked for no public recognition or publicity and, according to one staff member, made similar donations to other local charities as well. The goods were fresh and in saleable form, packaged in new cartons and bound with white plastic straps and affixed with a printed label bearing

Mæðrastyrksnefnd's name. The staff members sometimes had contacts, either personal or professional, with stores and companies which they were able to draw upon at times to solicit for donations, yet no one I was aware of had such a contact with this firm. Another bakery, Ömmubakstur, would sometimes deliver a few cartons of *flatkökur*, a type of flat bread usually eaten with butter and cheese. They were delivered fresh and often still hot in styrofoam cartons. What had been an irregular occurrence became an increasingly regular donation in the latter part of my research as the result of the request from a staff member. Again, this firm donated fresh, saleable goods without any requests for recognition or publicity. During the holidays of Christmas and Easter there were several instances of members of the public who took it upon themselves to purchase enough food for a family to host a holiday feast which they donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for redistribution. These individuals would appear with bags of food recently purchased from a grocery store and shrug off any attempts of praise, thanks or offers of coffee from the staff and they left as quickly as they had appeared. Perhaps one danger of this kind of research which involves considering the less obvious motivations of donating and the larger effects produced by the work of charity is that it tended to leave me with a somewhat cynical outlook, always looking for the proverbial 'angle' to these donations. It is important to remember that there are indeed elements of magnanimity at work in charity and this should be considered as well. To argue that some individuals and companies donated goods simply to be 'nice' or 'kind' may seem wanting in an academic discourse, but in a handful of instances that was the conclusion I was left with. In addition, some of these individuals may well have been motivated by religious ideology.

However, this does not change the fact that these laudable acts must still be placed into context within the larger effects produced by the works of the broader charity complex.

A significant portion of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's weekly food allotment to their clients came from donations from food distribution firms. These were often a mixture of usable goods interspersed with spoiled and expired items. Here my analysis sits somewhat more comfortably with cynicism. Many of these were returns to the distributor from supermarket chains, as I noticed that some of the cartons of food were labelled "*skila*" (return) in black magic marker. The latter part of the packing days of Tuesday were often characterized by the manual sorting of spoiled produce from usable goods by the staff. This involved such activities as picking off the outer spoiled leaves of heads of lettuce or cabbage, picking out spoiled mushrooms from cartons and bagging the usable ones in individual sized portions, cutting off the spoiled portions of carrots, or picking out the individual spoiled berries from otherwise usable cartons of strawberries. I had learned early on to set aside an old pair of shoes and work clothes to wear to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as during the course of my time there from handling food I had stepped into a rotten cantaloupe, been up to my elbows in bags of spoiled produce searching for usable goods, and have had various fruit and vegetable run-off spill onto me as I took out the trash and crushed down produce cartons. Large donations of goods from distribution firms, sometimes a skid-load or more, occasionally came into Mæðrastyrksnefnd that were close to or slightly past the expiration date, such as cartons of biscuits or cereals. Food donations also came from a wide range of other sources. One afternoon I was told to be on the look out for a driver from a bakery who was coming with an offering of bread and buns. When he arrived at the back door he asked me to hold off a minute before receiving

the goods while he checked through the bread. Several loaves were mouldy so he took them back and what was left was usable. I asked him what bakery he was from and he replied, “Oh, I’m not from the bakery, I just don’t want this bread going to waste if people are starving.” I was a little taken aback by his comment and he quickly left before I was able to learn more about the details of this donation. Donations, often leftovers from special events, were also provided through numerous other kinds of organizations and institutions. One day in early February of 2005 I arrived to find a large number of instant noodle packages stacked on one table. The University of Iceland had recently held student elections and they donated some leftover food items which included around 800 instant curry noodle cups, a few cases of diet Coke and perhaps twelve dozen cartons of orange juice. The noodles were just past the due date so they were placed in the front room for the clients to take if they wished and the rest were integrated into the weekly allocations. On another occasion a fishing vessel was in the process of being sold and the leftover food goods from its galley were donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, which included cartons of *G-mjólk* (a treated milk designed for longevity), butter, and dried goods such as biscuits, coffee, and flour.

The acceptance of excess and unwanted food goods, returns otherwise destined for a landfill, and expired or close to expired food goods to charities raises a number of issues. The first is that the acceptance of these goods is a necessary practice by material aid charities, given the fact that they often rely on donations and a mixture of private and public support—most of which is not guaranteed but unsteady and unpredictable. Charities often have to work with what is at hand, which at times necessitates the use of substandard goods as an integral part of their operations. In her study of food banks in the

United States, Poppendieck (1998) notes that the staff of these organizations referred to the food goods left over from events or partially spoiled produce and dented cans from retailers and distributors and the like as 'salvage' (Poppendieck 1998:32). Tarasuk and Eakin (2005) note a similar use of what they term 'surplus' food which has been rejected for commercial sale in the Canadian food bank system. Similar practices to what I have observed in Iceland seem to have been widespread in North America for some time. Both Poppendieck and Tarasuk and Eakin link the rise of the food bank system in their respective analyses to the 1980s and the rise of political ideologies which advocate both a reduction in government spending for social programs and a call for a greater self-reliance. In recent years in Canada, food banks have become "an integral part of Canada's system of income security programs" (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005:177). However in certain ways such an arrangement is difficult to criticize. Poppendieck argues there is a general societal reluctance to dispose of food which can be eaten. As such, charities offer a "moral relief bargain" (ibid.:9) by accepting goods which would otherwise go to waste and redistributing them to their clients. Individuals from time to time would donate food to Mæðrastyrksnefnd as well, including some inappropriate goods such as expired foodstuffs or open packages. In these cases the donors were still thanked even if the goods themselves were quietly thrown into the garbage. Businesses benefit as they are able to rid themselves of excess or unusable goods in a 'socially positive' way—in some cases receiving credit for doing so, both in financial terms as well as publicity. In my research I have found that the regular donors of salvage goods appeared to eschew publicity and, according to my information, did not normally request receipts of these goods for tax purposes. But Poppendieck notes as well that modern bar code technology

often allows stores to receive credit once these goods are pulled from the shelf (ibid.:32), so I cannot say for certain if these firms received credit for donating. But there is no question that charity was useful for these businesses. Mæðrastyrksnefnd paid a private driver they employed to pick up these goods as well as covering the cost of disposing of goods stores could not use, both of which have obvious logistical benefits to the donating firms. Tarasuk and Eakin (2005) suggest that this is a definite motivation for Canadian firms. They note that Canadian companies do not receive tax benefits for donating surplus food to charities, but they certainly save on the disposal fees as well as the labour intensive costs of sorting usable from unusable food goods (ibid.:178)—costs and labour which fall to the receiving charities.

The staff held a variety of opinions regarding these goods. Some were of the opinion that the clients could discard of any goods they did not want and as such were not resistant to using goods that myself or other staff members would prefer to have thrown away. I felt strongly that distributing produce of a quality that I would not select from a store encodes the message that the clients, for reasons of low income, are expected to make use of food goods that the members of the larger society would discard. Some staff members shared my views to varying degrees and a few were quite vocal about using substandard goods. On one occasion, I felt it was necessary to remove some carrots that contained rotten sections from some bags that a staff member had packed. Another staff member watched what I was doing and gravely shook her head and exclaimed “*uss!*”<sup>17</sup> when she saw the carrots that I removed. She then began to chop the blackened parts off of these carrots herself and repackaged them, muttering that some of these goods were not fit for “*svín*” (pigs). Later another staff member politely reprimanded us for engaging in

this time consuming activity, stating: “They [carrots] are still good if you cut the bad parts off. If they [clients] don’t want them they can throw them away.” This was of course true, but I had become more sensitized to this issue as the result of my interviews and discussions with the clients. I found that I was often confronted with comments and complaints from the clients about the quality of the food or how it was packed. I did my best to explain the procedures and found that many were unaware of the labours that went into these efforts as well as the fact that a good portion of the goods were donated. The clients I spoke to did react to varying degrees to the messages that were encoded with the use of expired or low quality goods, but this usually only materialised as low level complaints to the staff, gossip among other clients about the quality of the food or else direct complaints to myself. This rarely occurred in a public forum but did so on one notable occasion.

One Friday in late March of 2004 my partner’s mother told me about a story that was running in the tabloid paper *DV*. I went to the local store and sure enough splashed across the banner on the top right was the headline: “*Mæðrastyrksnefnd gefur eldgamlar matvörur*” (Mæðrastyrksnefnd gives out really old food goods). The most curious thing included with the banner was a picture of the client who made the complaint, as I assumed that the client would want to maintain her anonymity in such a context. Inside was a close-up of the client posing with the goods in question (which I recognized) and a further story (*Mæðrastyrksnefnd gefur útrunnin matvæli* [Mæðrastyrksnefnd gives out expired foodstuff]. DV 2004b:6). In the article the client expressed thanks for the milk and potatoes but expressed a measure of anger over the frozen pasta entrée and French fries which had expired in 2001 and 2002. Since I was relatively inexperienced at the time



I was not then in the habit of examining expiry dates, but I was later able to confirm that these goods were as old as she claimed. The chair of the committee at the time countered in the article that they tell the clients when goods are outdated and do not put them in the bag but offer them with a warning. When I arrived at Mæðrastyrksnefnd on the following Tuesday there was to be a visit from the health inspectors from the city, as action had to be taken as the result of this story. The chair waved the article from *DV* at me and asked if I had seen it. I replied that I had. She was agitated about this article. She was normally quite sympathetic and supportive of the clients and I felt that, if she was annoyed at this story, then some other staff members would be outraged. But what bothered her most was the fact that the client ran to the papers rather than dealing with the issue internally. Some of the staff members challenged certain claims made by this client in this article, which they felt were made in order to boost the sympathy of the readers for the client's plight. Some clients had apparently called Mæðrastyrksnefnd to offer words of support, as well as to argue that they found nothing wrong with the goods in question. As well, an official from the charity Samhjálp had called the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and told her "not to give up," and pointed out that all charities have to rely upon expired goods and that they would be happy to take any remainders off of their hands. The original company which had donated these frozen entrees said that they still had 30 cases for Mæðrastyrksnefnd, but the chair was mulling over whether to give these to Samhjálp as well. As she walked into the kitchen to refill her coffee she said, in reference to the frozen goods, "I don't dare to take it Jim." The inspectors from Heilbrigðiseftirlit, the city health department, later appeared but did not seem overly concerned as none of the food Mæðrastyrksnefnd offered was cooked or prepared on the premises. Their only

substantive comment was to point out that Mæðrastyrksnefnd required a license from the city to distribute food. The chair scoffed at this, pointing out that Mæðrastyrksnefnd has been in operation for 76 years and this was the first that she had heard of this from the city. The officials shuffled a little awkwardly at this point and left after suggesting some relatively minor changes; it was the last official response I was aware of regarding this issue. As I reflected on this afterwards, it did not surprise me that there was little public outcry about a single mother receiving expired goods from a charity nor a significant interest on the part of the city to subject Mæðrastyrksnefnd to much scrutiny. Most people that I spoke to outside of Mæðrastyrksnefnd about this issue were critical of the client for running to a newspaper and questioned her character. The most significant issue in my view which emerged in my research from this story and the discussions about it was that the overall focus was on whether or not Mæðrastyrksnefnd informed the client that the food was expired, the motivations on the part of the client to speak to the newspaper, and whether or not the statements she made about her personal situation were true. But what was omitted was any discussion about the more important issue—whether it is right that people in such a prosperous society should have to resort to charitable assistance in the first place. I asked myself whether this system of charity was the most effective, safe and practical way in which to direct material resources to the needy. Further, the lack of interest sparked by this story, in my interpretation, spoke volumes as to the public's overall indifference towards the plight of the clients of charities.<sup>18</sup>

Given the efforts and costs in terms of receiving, sorting, re-packing and bagging, along with the efforts of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's staff to distribute these goods as well as those on the part of the clients to come and collect them, the system did not strike me

overall as the most logical and simple way in which to ensure the needy had their food requirements met. It was a labour intensive system and I could not help thinking that there must be a more efficient way in which to address these needs. Indeed, a key thesis of a recent work on poverty in Iceland (Njáls 2003) holds that even modest increases to the governmental social assistance benefit schemes could raise the standard of living of the poor and reduce many of the ills associated with poverty, such as depression and stress, as well as obviating people's need to turn to non-governmental agencies for assistance. Poverty researchers in North America often place primary emphasis on the lack of affordable housing in conjunction with low wages and low social assistance benefits as a key factor underlying poverty (see Lyon-Callo [2004] for a recent example). The costs of housing in Reykjavík are quite staggering, to be certain, but so are food costs in comparison to what I was used to in Canada. In her work Harpa Njáls calculated the costs of living in order to juxtapose these figures with the level of assistance offered by the various Icelandic pension schemes (Njáls 2003:233–247). What struck me was that the food costs were roughly on par with housing for low income people.<sup>19</sup> From my own experiences of shopping for food in Iceland I have come to learn that it is indeed difficult to economize in this area, though possible to an extent by paying attention to sales. Food expenses are often one of the few budgetary concerns for which low income people can economize, such as through careful shopping and using food banks and charities.

The food assistance offered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd was a welcomed budgetary relief for the clients I spoke with, but these same clients pointed out to me that the once a week allocation does not stretch very far. This weekly allocation generally consisted of two bags; one was packed with the potatoes, bread and donated produce and the other

with the purchased dairy and meat products. The bags were usually supplemented by items on hand or from additional and ad hoc donations when they were available. Aside from the milk and bread there was a high degree of variability from week to week and even within one day, given that some items often ran out during the course of packing the bags. As an example taken from my fieldnotes, on one week the initial bag consisted of the following: two kilograms of potatoes, a bag of carrots, four tomatoes, one cucumber, three apples, one package of *flatkökur*, a container of *sild* (pickled herring), a bag of mixed salad, and a loaf of bread. Another week was the following: two kilograms of potatoes, a small bag of mixed peppers and cauliflower, a bag of fruit (a few apples or else a small bunch of grapes), a mixed bag of tomatoes or else carrots, turnips and onions, a bag of mushrooms, two cucumbers, a small bag of mixed salad, a package of crackers, and a loaf of bread—in both of these weeks this was given out in conjunction with a bag containing milk, mixed dairy products and a meat product. Given that this is only a weekly allotment I could certainly understand why some clients sought assistance at other charities as well, especially for large families. Nevertheless, these agencies often placed limitations on the assistance in terms of how often the client could visit, such as once a month or three times a year aside from the holidays.

The staff and officials I spoke to at Mæðrastyrsnefnd and other charities were predominantly of the opinion that regular visitation to all of the charities within Reykjavík is a misuse of the system which is intended to provide temporary assistance. However, I never agreed with this position when one considers the context of the high costs of food in conjunction with the situation of low benefits and wages faced by many of the clients. For some of the clients, their situations could not be characterized as

‘temporary’ and in their current situations they needed regular assistance from multiple sources. In the context of Mæðrastyrksnefnd I found the argument about misuse even less convincing when one considers the fact that a portion of the food assistance is donated and some of it is expired or sub-par in quality. Simply, what was at stake (aside from the more generous offerings during the holidays or the confirmation assistance) did not strike me as equitable with either the level of scrutiny of the clients’ situations or concerns about possible fraud or abuse. Further, in the latter part of my research the weekly allotment of potatoes was reduced to a bi-weekly offering in order to save on expenses. In conjunction with the screening processes, which in my experience were highly variable (as discussed in subsequent chapters), the assistance that was offered by this agency could not be counted on as a weekly given for all clients. This level of material aid did not represent a notable redistribution of wealth and paled in comparison with the formal pension systems offered by the state in terms of the equalization of economic disparities. It was not clear to me what long term benefits were accomplished for the clients. What was more obvious were the benefits to the parties which donated these goods as well as to the additional governmental and non-governmental organizations which relied upon Mæðrastyrksnefnd for a number of purposes.

The fact that the private charity system was so extensive and well entrenched suggests to me that a number of parties found these charitable agencies useful. However, the effectiveness of these agencies did not seem to be challenged nor did their limited assistance and questionable ability to make long-term change seem to detract from their appeal to donors. The provision of food to the needy would be much more efficient if it was delivered in the form of a cheque or coupon from the state, thus obviating the need

for all of the laborious efforts to collect, sort and redistribute goods. But this would require political will and it is quite possible that it is more cost effective in the short-term for the state to refer their clients to private charities. This would also eliminate a useful way for companies to dispose of unwanted goods in a cost effective manner. What I found especially troubling was that individuals and firms were given thanks for, at times, essentially donating garbage. I wish to be clear that among these salvage goods there were usable food products. Sometimes cartons of produce would be donated which appeared to be fit for commercial sale. I would also suggest that firms that donated fresh goods which could be sold and individuals who purchased food to donate sacrificed a part of their own wealth to help others and this should be commended—providing that these acts are nevertheless still placed into analytical context as part of the effects produced by the charity complex. But I contend that the donating of expired, spoiled, opened or used goods is simply a case of waste management parading as magnanimity. I further contend as well that the image of charity as representing the collective societal pooling of resources for the good of the needy is integral to its appeal and maintenance. But this image does not normally include or make reference to the various motivations that I have discussed above. I will now explore the issue of the clothing assistance offered at Mæðrastyrksnefnd in keeping with this line of argument.

#### **4.2.4 The clothing assistance**

The clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd entered the building through a doorway located in an alley which also served as the driveway of the private apartment complex in which Mæðrastyrksnefnd occupied a great deal of the ground floor. Upon entering, to the right was located a waiting room, looking very much like that one would expect to see in a

doctor's office and consisting of a dozen or so chairs arranged around a coffee table on which was usually placed old magazines for the adults and assorted toys for children. In the early part of my research a staff member distributed numbered tickets, at which point the clients were asked to take a seat and wait their turn. Alternatively they were allowed to browse the clothing area located to the left of the waiting room. This area resembled a clothing thrift store, consisting of racks and shelves of clothing and shoes, quite similar to those commonly operated by the Salvation Army, for example, in Europe and North America. When I first started my fieldwork, some of the newer items of clothing were sold for a nominal fee whereas used clothing was given away for free. But by the second half of my project all goods both new and used were given away without charge, though some staff members still felt that charging a low fee for new goods was an important way to raise funds for operating costs. Others disagreed, arguing that, as a charity, the goal of the committee should be to help people who have problems paying for goods in the first place.

Donations from stores and distribution firms were an important source of new clothing goods. Some of these donations appeared to be quite generous, ranging from a few cartons of women's hosiery, shoes, socks or children's clothing to entire skid-loads of goods, usually from stores in the local malls or from national chains such as Hagkaup or Rúmfatalagerinn. I surmised that these goods were overstock, out of style, or did not sell well and giving them to Mæðrastyrksnefnd was a preferable alternative to discarding them. These donations were sometimes given unexpectedly from these firms and retailers but on other occasions they were the result of staff members inquiring as to whether they had any excess goods to donate. At times I observed a donor asking the staff for a receipt

for these goods which the staff later confirmed for me were for tax purposes, but I was also informed that chains and stores regularly donated goods without asking for such a receipt. Sometimes specific requests were made as a condition of the donation. One clothing store in the mall Kringlan, for example, had asked that the staff remove the labels from the goods out of the concern that some clients might attempt to return them for cash refunds. Other clothing donations were made with requests for publicity, such as small articles in local newspapers which served to bring some positive publicity to the donor as well as to let the clients know that these goods were available. In one typical example, which ran in two different papers and used the same photograph (Morgunblaðið 2004b:43; Fréttablaðið 2004a:19), the donor of new children's clothing to Mæðrastyksnefnd was shown alongside the chair and a few staff members who held up examples of the clothing for the camera. The chair at the time explained that some firms requested this kind of publicity. An advantage to Mæðrastyksnefnd was that this allowed them to fulfill the donor's wishes while also communicating to their clients that these goods were available. However, shortly before this time the chair admitted to me that she had grown weary of seeing herself in these kinds of publicity photos and asked other staff members if they could be pictured instead. In one instance in which a footwear retailer had donated a 1000 pairs of shoes, the chair was able to persuade two young employees of the donating firm to pose with the vanload of donated goods rather than herself (Morgunblaðið 2004c:31). The chair had also convinced me to take her place in the photograph for the acceptance of a small donation which was reported in a minor article in a newspaper (Fréttablaðið 2004:i). These requests for publicity appeared to me as similar in motivation and purpose as the requests for publicity for financial donations or



gifts of food. These donations of clothing are not likely a case of companies randomly taking saleable goods from their stock and giving them to charities but rather a case of disposing of overstock or discontinued items. However, since this clothing is new and unused it is quite possible that the companies and retailers may still have other options for its disposal, such as sale to a third party wholesaler, so there are still elements of generosity to be found that are not necessarily negated by the requests for publicity.

Used clothing donated from the public represented a significant portion of Mæðrastyrsnefnd's clothing assistance, as the donations of new clothing were erratic and not predictable. The staff were able to maintain a more comprehensive stock of clothing types and sizes by offering used clothing that was in presentable condition. Such donations were routine and commonplace, as on an average Tuesday and Wednesday there were a half dozen or so donations ranging from a few small bags of clothes to entire carloads from members of the public. While these donations did not warrant newspaper articles, they nevertheless were an opportunity for the staff to give thanks to the donors and positively reinforce their actions. Some of the donors appeared to desire or at least expect this kind of recognition. The standard routine was that the donor would enter and ask if it was okay to drop off some goods. If there were extensive donations I would assist the donor, as sometimes an entire trunk or carload of goods were brought in. Once inside it was quite common that the donor would point out specific items to me or the staff. I found this to be curious as the staff would surely 'find' these items once we unpacked the bags. I came to the conclusion that the donors were presenting these items in order to elicit a measure of praise or positive comments from the staff, for which the staff would oblige them in terms of thanks or expressions such as '*flott*' or '*æðislegt*' (cool, stunning,

very nice) in response to the particular items they pointed out. Some donors went to notable lengths to clean, sort and label the clothes. On one occasion a donor brought several bags that were marked with handwritten labels taped to the outside such as: '*drengja föt ca. 3-6 ára*' (boys' clothes around 3 to 6 year olds) and '*ungbarna föt 0-1 ½ ára – meira f. strákar*' (infants' clothes 0 – 1 ½ years – more for boys). They were all cleaned and pressed and brought out approving comments from the staff. Most donations were not this neatly prepared, and many were simply unsorted, sometimes unwashed, clothing stuffed into plastic bags, but the donors tended to receive similar praise in kind. Explanations were routinely offered for the donation of this used clothing, ranging from the need to make more space, moving, or children outgrowing their clothes. Some donors explained that they had finally gotten around to clearing out the belongings left behind by a deceased loved one and decided that Mæðrastyrksnefnd was the best recipient for these goods. One day a man came by early on with a car full of boxes, explaining that his mother had passed away and this was her clothing. Opening the boxes I could see that the clothes did belong to an older woman. They were folded neatly and many of the dresses were still on their hangers. Another carton was full of shoes that were still in their original boxes and carefully stuffed with newspapers which dated from 1999. Upon seeing this I wondered if they were packed away when this man's mother fell ill. Another box contained hats that were clearly of a style fitting for an elderly woman. It felt a little strange looking through this person's former belongings, almost like it was a violation of someone's privacy. I mentioned this to one staff member who obliquely replied: "I feel all sorts of feelings working here." Later that same day a woman dropped by with a few bags and boxes of men's clothes from her husband who had recently passed away. She

explained to the staff that they were reminders of him and she wanted to get rid of these items. The staff also pointed out to me that they repeatedly heard comments from donors who preferred to give their excess clothing to Mæðrastyrksnefnd rather than other charities, such as the Red Cross, because these agencies are known to sell these goods in their thrift shops. I could see why Mæðrastyrksnefnd would be an option for donors wishing to dispose of personal items, as some donors may have objections to transforming donations into commodities.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd served a number of useful purposes for the public in terms of the disposal of excess clothing. It is possible that there might be a similar societal resistance to wasting clothing as there is for food as suggested by Poppendieck. However, a large measure of the clothing donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd was not retained. Partly this was the result of the fact that the committee did not have adequate storage space to hang on to all of these goods. Another reason was that a good measure of the clothing was not in a presentable condition for distribution, as it was excessively worn, rumpled, stained or simply dirty. It was a longstanding practice to sort the clothes on the basis of quality, seasonal need and, in the staff's experience, highly sought after items among the clients and send the rest to the Icelandic Red Cross. The Red Cross would collect these bags from Mæðrastyrksnefnd and in turn sell them to raise funds in their own thrift stores, used for instances of domestic emergencies, or else the clothing was exported for assistance abroad. According to internal figures from 2003, nearly 300 bags of clothing were sent to the Red Cross from Mæðrastyrksnefnd and 145 were collected for them in the first half of 2004 (Mæðrastyrksnefnd 2004:1). I felt the figure was in actuality much higher in 2004-2005, as a 'normal' week would produce in my experience about a dozen bags and on

several occasions I have seen double that number or more. An official from the Icelandic Red Cross told me that from numerous sources they collect approximately 800 tons of used clothing a year. Clothing that was not in presentable condition or items which Mæðrastyksnefnd had in abundance were placed into large black garbage bags which the Red Cross would collect on a weekly basis. But some clothing was in such poor shape it was simply thrown into the garbage.

The clothing sorting process itself was an intriguing procedure. I was interested in seeing what people donated as well as learning on what basis these goods were sorted. There were no formal rules on paper about such things and there was a measure of difference among staff members as to what was considered worthy of keeping, what should be sent to the Red Cross and what should simply be thrown in the garbage. A commonly repeated aphorism within the committee is as follows: "Do not put items out that you would not use for yourself or your family." It is a wise maxim but I had doubts at times about how closely this was followed. Despite the praise and thanks that the staff passed on to the donors, I did not feel that such was warranted on certain occasions. Admittedly some specific donated items or at times an entire collection of goods from a specific individual were of such a poor quality that they had to be discarded altogether.

In my previous research in a community centre in a housing project in Newfoundland (Rice 2002), at times I assisted the staff in sorting donations. A key difference I noticed between my experiences in Reykjavík and St. John's was that in general the quality of the donated clothing in Iceland was much finer. But a similarity was that in both places there were people who were seemingly unable to distinguish between what is appropriate as a donation to a charity and what is appropriate for a rubbish bin.

One day I was sorting clothes with a key staff member and I asked her what was the most inappropriate donation she had unpacked at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Without hesitating she replied, "Dirty underwear." I admitted to her that it beat my own personal best example of a mildew encrusted shower mat that I found in a box of donations at the community centre in Newfoundland. In turn, after spending further time at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I also had the experience of discovering soiled underwear among a bag of donated clothes. I wondered whether this was an accident, as I could not conceive of the mindset which would find such a donation to be appropriate. After many examples of soiled and torn clothing I could only come to the conclusion that some donors must think very little of the clients for whom these donations were intended. After some time had passed I found that I generally grew accustomed to these things, as did the other regular staff members. I, along with the other staff, usually shrugged off the experience of finding these kinds of donations and treated this as a matter of fact, but at times I would still grow angry. One day while I was taking out the trash a staff member presented me with some shoes that were so dirty and badly worn that they were simply to be thrown in the garbage. I reacted with a measure of anger upon seeing them, as the more I came to know some of the clients on a personal level, the more I began to react to some of these instances in a less than detached way. The staff member replied that the donor was most likely too lazy to separate their garbage from the usable items and in a good humour she picked up one of the shoes and said, "If you think that is bad, this one isn't even a pair," at which I had to laugh.

Irregular staff members or temporary volunteers often went through the same feelings of surprise, disgust or dismay upon finding these kinds of donations. The staff

did not always agree on what should be retained, sent to the Red Cross or discarded. One staff member in particular, who had gravitated towards control of the clothing room, exasperated some of the other staff members for retaining items of clothing that others felt should be disposed of. A former chair of the committee relayed an incident to me where she was mortified by the behaviour of an irregular staff member who openly criticized some of the donations from the public in front of a visiting delegation of outside guests. This staff member had used an example of some shoes that were so bad that she felt they probably contained a “fungus” and demanded to know why Mæðrastyrksnefnd accepted these kinds of donations from the public, as it takes time and effort to sort and most of these items are sent to the Red Cross. One of the guests at the meeting noticed this and commented that the staff seemed to have developed a measure of “*fordómar*” (prejudice) about some of the goods that are donated. The former chair told me that she had to appease this staff member as well as to reassure the visiting guests that the public donations are appreciated. In this conversation she reiterated to me what I had long since come to understand—it would be poor public relations for a charity to turn down donations from the public because of a few misguided individuals and that it was not the kind of outward image that she wanted to project for the organization. However, since most donations were packed in black plastic bags or boxes it was difficult to know the contents at a glance and praise and thanks were given in a blanket matter. What troubled me was that this thanks was extended to those who donated rubbish which, in turn, signals the message that a certain segment of the public, due to reasons of low income, should legitimately be forced to make use of items of clothing that most members of the public would discard.

Thrift stores have for some time played a role in the clothing options for low income people, as well as for those in better economic situations who visit these stores for inexpensive vintage items. In a broader perspective, donating to charities that operate thrift stores or clothing banks should be lauded as a form of recycling but one can still critically examine the praise and accolades which are bestowed on the donors as an activity intended to help the needy. Unlike donations of cash or purchases of new grocery items the donation of used and unwanted clothing is hardly a sacrifice on the part of the 'haves' for the 'have nots.' I found the occasional donation of recently handmade woollens, such as children's gloves and hats, explicitly made for the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to be much more touching and worthy of recognition than a bag of crumpled and worn jeans, much less shoes with holes in them or soiled undergarments. However, in a broader perspective questions still need to be raised in regards to the larger effects of these charitable endeavours, issues relating to the quality of donations aside. What needs to be considered is that even laudable acts of charity do not alter the basic fact that a sector of the Icelandic society, primarily for reasons of low income, have to resort to private aid agencies in order to subsist. The time and effort to knit woollen items for children could be spent on writing letters to members of parliament or the media, mentoring a child or assisting with his or her homework, or a number of other activities which may make a greater difference in the long-term improvements in terms of socio-economic disparities. The donation of an item of clothing requires much less of a commitment and is thus an attractive alternative for those still bothered by inequality but who do not have the time or inclinations for more intensive actions. That being said, as a volunteer of Mæðrastyrksnefnd I admittedly thanked all donors as a matter of etiquette as

well as routine. But it is the very unremarkable nature of donating used clothing to charities which obscures and normalizes the underlying inequalities which these acts are ostensibly intended to address.

#### **4.2.5 Bric-a-brac and other miscellanea**

A variety of other goods steadily came into Mæðrastyrksnefnd, either from members of the public or companies. These goods were generally seen by the staff as peripheral to the food and clothing assistance and were often placed on the tables for the clients to peruse once they had received their food allotment. This included items such as toys, kitchenware, books, appliances, accessories, beauty and healthcare products, baby carriages, knick-knacks and the odd piece of small furniture. Specific donations of new items were sometimes set aside and used for special occasions.

The donation of new items from companies was particularly noticeable during the period leading up to Christmas and Easter. For example, in late November of 2004 the shipping company Samskip donated six skid loads of new toys from their warehouse. The company had explained that this shipment was sitting in their warehouse unclaimed since 2001 and decided to off-load these goods to Mæðrastyrksnefnd. These toys were packaged and unopened and could have easily been sold to a third-party but were donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd and formed a key part of their toy distribution activities for the holiday allocation of that year. Various retailers and housing good chains periodically donated shipments ranging from multiple skid loads to a few cartons of everything ranging from new televisions to candles to sets of oven mitts. Some of these goods, such as candles, were set aside for use in the holidays whereas notable items such as new cookware and televisions were stored and used for clients in unusual circumstances, such



as one family who lost everything due to a house fire. Generally these kinds of shipments were the result of companies with excess stock—Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities offered a convenient way in which to dispose of these goods. Failed businesses also contributed goods. One day in late October of 2005 I arrived for the usual Tuesday packing day and I was asked by the manager to accompany their driver to a private residence to pick up a shipment of feminine sanitary napkins. From what the manager understood they were leftover stock from a failed business. When we arrived no one was home, so the driver and I descended into an underground storage space beneath the garage. Along the back and sides of the walls were perhaps two hundred cartons of sanitary napkins. I could tell that the cartons had been there for some time, as some of the cartons along the sides of the walls and on the floors were water stained and fused to the cement but the cartons that were not touching the walls or the floor seemed to be fine, aside from the dust, cobwebs and numerous spiders. After a few trips the usable cartons that were collected were stored at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and in a staff member's garage. Individual members of the public also donated a wide range of goods. Much like the clothing, these appeared to be used goods that were left over and unwanted as the result of cleaning, moving, the death of a family member and other such reasons.

The committee did not have the space to store and distribute all of the donations which came their way, especially large items such as beds. Mæðrastyrksnefnd in turn was able to dispose of excess donations through their relationship with the charitable thrift store Góði hirðirinn (the Good Shepard) that, in turn, is a subsidiary of the waste management company Sorpa. One of Sorpa's goals is to reduce the amount of landfill usage in Iceland. This is accomplished in part by attempting to extend the life of

consumer products such as furniture and appliances. When these goods are brought to one of their centres by members of the public they are sorted and some of the usable goods are sent to their thrift store, Góði hirðirinn. Some of the proceeds from these sales are divided between the major charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd, the Red Cross, Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, and the Salvation Army, each of whom received 750,000 ISK in 2004 as the result of the proceeds from the sales at Góði hirðirinn (Sorpa 2006). There was also some other forms of material exchange between these agencies.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd has at times sent bulky items such as furniture and old carriages to Sorpa and Góði hirðirinn and in turn received some shelving from Góði hirðirinn when they re-modeled the clothing room during the summer of 2005. I have often imagined how an item may be purchased, used, eventually disposed of at Sorpa, sent to Góði hirðirinn, sold as a second-hand item, donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, re-distributed to a client and then disposed of at Sorpa at a later date to start the cycle again. This circulation of goods through the charity complex was also noted by some clients I spoke with as well. One day I accompanied a client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Arna (pseudonym) and her friend Svana (pseudonym, also a client) while they disposed of some clothing at Sorpa. I asked if Arna knew what Sorpa does with the clothes. She shrugged and said, "Some of it goes back to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, some to the Red Cross which they sell. Some of it I might be picking up again from Mæðrastyrksnefnd." Svana laughed adding, "And then it goes around and around and around again." As far as I knew, Sorpa did not send any clothing to Mæðrastyrksnefnd but these women were correct in general by noting the circular aspect of the flow of goods through the charity complex. In a way these goods had 'social lives' (Appadurai 1986), so to speak, and through the phases in their

respective 'biographies' (Kopytoff 1986) existed as commodities, gifts, donated goods, waste, and from which point the cycle may begin again. As such, the charity complex did play an important role in extending the life of goods as a form of recycling but, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter, also produced its own fair share of waste in the process.

There were a few notable donations from members of the public that were made for reasons other than reducing household clutter. One donor apparently had some religious motivations underlying her charitable efforts. She lived in a town outside of Reykjavík and took it upon herself to collect and repair old and damaged baby carriages to donate to local charities. In the fall of 2004 she had donated a half dozen of these carriages to Mæðrastyrsnefnd, each of which was affixed with a handwritten label which read: "*Þessi gjöf er þér gefin í Jesú nafni*" (This gift is given to you in the name of Jesus). However, a great deal of the donated miscellanea was clearly more an exercise in waste management than magnanimity or concern for the needy, as some of these donations were simply unusable junk which was disposed of at Mæðrastyrsnefnd's expense and efforts. It was quite common during the course of a routine day to overhear staff members say something to the effect of 'I don't know what people are thinking' when finding donations such as used cosmetics, burnt-out pots, headless and armless dolls, calendars from years gone by and so forth. Mæðrastyrsnefnd hired a private operator with a van to collect the regular food donations and they also employed him on occasion to pick up goods from donors who were unable to bring the goods themselves. On a few occasions what was received in return for the costs of his hire and the consumption of his time and gasoline was literally garbage. One time a call produced only a few taped up cardboard boxes with 'Mæðrastyrsnefnd' written on them. I assumed they were clothes but as I

picked them up they rattled. I asked the driver what they were and he shrugged and replied "*dras!*" (garbage, junk). I could see a few puzzle pieces stuck to the tape along with a small plastic shark. It turned out that he was right and most of these goods went straight into the garbage bin. The additional irony is that Mæðrastyrksnefnd pays the fees for their garbage bins to be picked up and dumped, as well as paying the driver to haul the trash to the dump when the bins are full. Mæðrastyrksnefnd not only provides a convenient way for people to dispose of unwanted goods I suppose that, in a small part, they alleviate for the city as well of some of the costs of disposing of household trash.

The following extract from my fieldnotes was a somewhat more extreme example of such a donation:

Along the chairs in the clothes room were stacked about a half dozen boxes. They pretty much looked like garbage to me and before sorting them I had to make sure from [staff member] that they were not already placed there for the driver to haul away. She told me that no one had sorted through them yet. I was at a loss to understand the motivation behind this donation. One box was filled with broken, old and dirty toys that were not even worth sorting through. Another contained a few old attachments from a vacuum cleaner that was itself not even donated. I could not imagine what the clients would want with these. There was also a binder of old sun-destination holiday literature, of the kind a travel agent would have, which was of no use either. I hauled all of these boxes to the back to throw away. I started to dump the goods into bags in order to cut down the boxes and save on room in the bin when I noticed that they were full of mouse droppings. I surmised that these boxes had been stored in someone's garage or loft for some time. I knocked the empty boxes into the snow outside, as I did not want mouse droppings all over the floor when I broke the box down. I was rather annoyed about this, as not only did I have to deal with mouse droppings and the uselessness of this stuff but also all of these donations simply filled up the garbage dumpsters which I would need later for the empty food boxes. As I came back I heard a semi-regular volunteer exclaim from the clothes room, "Jim, Jim!" followed by a sardonic laugh, a curse, and then the exclamation of disgust,

*“oj bara!”* and something for which I only caught *“skítur”* (filth, dirt). I had left a few of these cartons which looked like clothes behind, as I did not realize that they were from the same donor. She had opened them up and her face was wrinkled in disgust. “Take these too, they are all garbage,” and then asked with a laugh, “How do you say ‘mouse shit’ in English?” It looked like these rodents had been living primarily in the boxes of clothes. There was no way either I or the staff were going to put our hands into these boxes, let alone attempt to salvage the clothing. I did not want to even see what was inside so I broke my cardinal rule of breaking down boxes to save room in the bin and simply threw the entire lot as it was into the dumpster.

I have long mulled over the intentions as well as the messages that were being communicated by the donation of these kinds of household goods. I felt that most donors had the best of intentions, even if some may have been a little thoughtless. I surmised that the social distance between the donor and the clients, mediated by the sorting process and redistribution by the staff, enabled some to donate items that they may have had second thoughts about donating if they were involved in personally handing these goods to the clients in face to face encounters. During the bulk of my field research I was more or less in charge of a few tables in the main room on which toys and assorted knick-knacks were placed for the clients. I took efforts to ensure that items that were too worn or dirty were thrown into the trash, as I did not want to suggest that the clients should make use of broken toys or rusted cookware. While the staff of *Mæðrastyrksnefnd* consisted primarily of the members of the various women’s societies discussed earlier, there were also a number of independent volunteers as well as current or former clients who generally looked upon their time at *Mæðrastyrksnefnd* in terms of reciprocity—a re-payment through labour for past or ongoing assistance offered by *Mæðrastyrksnefnd*. I felt particularly sensitive while sorting goods when these volunteers were present and I

surmised that some of the members of the public who donated rubbish would also think twice about their donations if they were present while client-volunteers, the intended recipients of these goods, looked on.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd also complemented their labour needs by taking referrals from Fangelsismálastofnun ríkisins (State Prison Administration). As one senior staff member told me: “these people are not criminals,” and they were most likely serving their sentences for traffic related and other relatively minor offences. During most of my research there was one person at a time fulfilling his or her community service sentence at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. They seemed to come from all walks of life—a few were university students, one was a photographer, another a school teacher and some were in similar situations as many of Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s clients. One referral in particular happened to be an occasional client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd. We had numerous conversations about the issues connected to charity and poverty in Iceland during her time at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Kolbrún (pseudonym) also continued to volunteer long after her community service sentence was complete. On one occasion a university student had donated several boxes of goods which Kolbrún and I sorted together. I grew embarrassed when I opened one box to discover that it was filled with open and half-used containers of cosmetics, shampoos, and other hygiene products. Kolbrún grimaced slightly when she saw these goods and asked what to do with them, to which I replied that they had to be thrown in the trash. Even though I had nothing to do with the donation I felt uncomfortable in the presence of a client for whom these goods were intended, as the underlying message encoded in these kinds of donations suggests how little some members of the public think of the clients of charities.

What I hoped to communicate in this chapter is some of the ways in which Mæðrastyrksnefnd operates as one node within a larger charity complex and some of the roles that a charity such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd plays in sustaining this complex. Each charity has its own interests, history and ideological orientations which helps to sustain its work but they are also part of a larger complex which serves a number of useful purposes for a variety of interested parties. These include the disposal of unwanted goods, the opportunity for publicity, a way in which to deliver programs as well as a host of others. It should be fairly obvious that some of these purposes and roles have little to do directly with the needs of the clients, let alone in addressing the underlying causes of inequality in Icelandic society.

In Iceland's distant and early modern past there existed sectors of the larger society who were stigmatized and seen as somewhat 'sub-par.' As discussed earlier, this has historically included landless people, paupers, coastal fishers and later to an extent the emergent urban proletariat. In the present, there seems to be a sector of society who are also stigmatized and for whom it is deemed acceptable to have to turn to charities to meet their basic needs, eat low quality or expired food, wear cast-off clothing and, in the views of some members of the public, make use of used cosmetics and rusted cookware. Such acts and the praise of them only reinforce these social distinctions and legitimate the continuance of the underlying inequality. Further, even the examples of genuine concern nevertheless communicate the message that charity is a reasonable or appropriate response to inequality in a wealthy society, contributing to the hegemonic framework in which these inequalities are justified and ultimately normalized. This appeared in its most explicit form during the holiday assistance. Judging by the media attention and the

heightened participation in the charity complex during the holidays, it would appear that many members of the public only think of charity and the less fortunate during these times of the year. This seasonal assistance, the ‘high times of charity,’ further entrenches the charity complex and the normalization of inequality as the poor are rendered as an unremarkable and normal part of the social landscape as are the seasons of Christmas and Easter. I will conclude this chapter with an exploration of the practice of donating toys to needy children at Christmas that I observed from the perspective of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and which ties together many of the themes discussed above.

#### **4.3 Gleðileg jól (Merry Christmas)**

The holiday assistance offered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd was more extensive than the usual weekly offerings and the committee opened for extended hours and days to accommodate the demand. The traditional Icelandic Christmas dinner usually requires the inclusion of certain items and the food assistance offered at Mæðrastyrksnefnd reflected this. Among the holiday offerings are potatoes, canned *rauðkál* (pickled red cabbage), canned *grænar baunir* (green peas), a meat product such as *hangikjöt* (smoked and salted lamb) or *hamborgarhryggur* (smoked and salted pork), and *malt* (non-alcoholic malt drink) and *appelsín* (orange soft drink) which are usually mixed together, and of course coffee. I have included in Appendix C a detailed list of the assistance offered during the Christmas allocation of 2004. I suspected, as did some staff members, that the gift certificates from the grocery chain Bónus and the department chain Hagkaup that were offered were a major draw for the clients. This was supplemented with some additional goods from firms that were received at this time. Some notable donations for the 2004 Christmas allocation included: six skid-loads of new toys from the shipping firm



Samskip; 450 kilograms of potatoes from the food distribution firm Bananar; various paper and household cleaning products from the petroleum company Olís; dozens of boxes of new batteries, shampoo and soap from the firm Glóbus; 750,000 ISK (approximately CA\$12,500) cash donation from the insurance firm Sjóva Almennar to purchase food; three skid-loads of household goods from the retail chain Húsasmiðjan; a twenty million ISK donation of coupons from the grocery chain Bónus which were distributed to local charities including Mæðrastyrksnefnd; a few boxes of books donated and signed by a noted Icelandic author; and numerous smaller donations from firms and members of the public, such as food and clothing. But what caught my attention in particular was the donation of wrapped toys collected from various sources.

During the time leading up to the Christmas holidays in the period of my field research in 2004 and 2005, toys for needy children in Reykjavík were collected in the shopping mall Kringlan and distributed by the mall staff to local charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd and Fjölskylduhjálpi for distribution. The public response was quite overwhelming, indicating that there was a notable measure of discomfort among the public with the thought of children in Iceland who may not receive a gift for Christmas. These toys were collected into black garbage bags and split up for distribution among local charities. In 2004, the first shipment amounted to fifteen bags. Roughly the same number arrived on another day and a few more bags arrived after the New Year. Firms had also engaged in their own toy drives as had local school children who had brought the toys they had collected to donate to Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The collection of toys for needy children at Christmas is of course not unique to Iceland and it was a rather routine and expected request during the holidays in my former homes of Toronto and St. John's and I

would suspect that it is common throughout towns and cities in North America. It was a practice that I never gave much thought to in the past but it was something that I was forced to confront at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Like many others aspects of charity, such a practice is difficult to critique—who would want to appear to be opposed the practice of collecting and distributing toys for needy children at Christmas? My position is that I am not against needy children receiving toys for Christmas; rather, I am questioning the method through which this is accomplished via the charity complex and its further implications.

The first issue is the rather unremarkable nature of these toy drives. The toys are collected and redistributed during the holidays and as such become associated with this time of the year. As Christmas occurs every year at the same time the cyclical nature of these toy drives becomes expected, routine, unquestioned and normal. The holidays become associated with charitable giving and the practice is expected to occur the following year as well. The eradication of these inequalities simply does not appear to be on the agenda. Further, poverty is often a year round and fulltime experience and the needs which exist during the holidays exist throughout the year too. While it is true that the holidays often place a particularly heavy burden on the needy, the overall situations faced by many clients were not tied to this particular season. What struck me about the holiday allocations I was involved with was the unusual level of interest and support from the media, companies and the general public. This interest in charity tended to recede early in the New Year to be revived again during Easter. In contrast, there is a nearly absolute silence during the summer about these issues, as many charities close or scale back operations and the general level of political discourse drops off. I asked one client

how the scaled-back summer operations affected her and she shrugged and replied: "I eat less." I mused as to why this level of charitable concern appeared to be cyclical and seasonal. Along with the additional material support during Christmas and Easter came additional interest from the public in the form of volunteers—people whom I had not seen before and did not see again at Mæðrastyksnefnd. A few were friends and relatives of staff members who knew that extra help was required and came to assist. Others I spoke with were connected to various staff members in a professional capacity or were a member of one of the women's societies that contributed to Mæðrastyksnefnd. But some of the volunteers were members of the public who showed up unannounced with offers of help. One volunteer I spoke with told me that she had some time off during the holidays and wanted to do something 'charitable' and her spouse suggested volunteering at Mæðrastyksnefnd. Another two were business school students, one of whom told me a similar story: they had some free time and wanted to do something 'to help.' The help was much appreciated by the staff of Mæðrastyksnefnd to be certain. The 2004 holiday assistance was offered over the course of eight days in December, often from 9 or 10 in the morning until 5 or 6 in the evening in addition to the further preparation days before and in-between these times. This placed a notable demand upon the efforts of most of the staff who were used to volunteering once or twice a week for a few hours in the morning or afternoon. The holiday assistance also required a lot of strenuous activity, both psychological and physical, given that some days saw visits from two or three times the usual number of clients. The unloading, sorting, packing and distributing of more than the normal amounts of food assistance in addition to the toys that were offered placed enormous pressures upon the staff, many of whom were middle-aged and elderly and not

always in the best of health. I attended each allocation day for Christmas of 2004 from the opening of the doors until closing time and was entirely worn out and fatigued by the conclusion. I noticed towards the end of the holiday assistance that many of the usual staff members stayed home to rest, and the shortfalls in labour were made up by the friends and family of the staff members and individuals who came on their own to help.

Allahyari (2000) noted in her research on charities in California that there was a measure of cynicism towards the 'holiday volunteers' from the regular staff and outside commentators. In the United States, the cyclical interest in the poor and charity from the Thanksgiving to Christmas holidays has been referred to as the 'span of sympathy' in which times "the media descended on the kitchen [where she worked] to observe community members feeding the poor" (Allahyari 2000:60). Allahyari noticed as well that some volunteers were disappointed when told by the staff that their holiday labour requirements were met and were not interested in the suggestion of helping at other times of the year. There was also a greater desire to do specific tasks, such as high profile roles in food distribution, rather than the less glamorous tasks behind the scenes. The upsurge in seasonal volunteers was partly related to logistics as well. It was not coincidental that the bulk of the staff and volunteers of Mæðrastyrsnefnd consisted of retired seniors, homemakers whose children were older or grown, and client-volunteers who were not working and subsisted on unemployment or disability pensions. The holiday volunteers in early and mid-December usually consisted of university students whose courses were complete and working age adults who had some time off for the holidays. As such, there may indeed be some members of the public who would donate their time throughout the year but cannot due to the constraints of their regular schedules. However, like in the

United States, there was also a 'span of sympathy' in Iceland during the Christmas and Easter holidays when media reports of the work of charities grew during this time and receded once the holidays were over. I noticed a similar phenomenon during my archival research of newspaper reports in the 1920s and 1930s in which there was a notable increase in stories about inequality and charity during the holidays as well as efforts to urge the public to donate and volunteer. These reports and appeals trailed off in the New Year and were generally absent during the summer. The holidays are a time which promotes the togetherness of family and friends but also requires additional expenditures to mark the occasion, such as with gifts and feasts. This indeed places additional burdens on the poor. But the holidays are also a time to give thanks as well as for personal, theological and sociological reflections, which often includes the consideration of those who are excluded from these festivities in terms of wealth or the lack of family. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is a pointed critique of such inequalities which is often broadcast in various forms during the Christmas season in Europe and North America. These socio-economic inequalities are often thrown into a greater relief and made more apparent during these times, due in part to the heightened media attention on the work of charities. But the disquiet and uneasiness that is apparent given the attention to these issues of inequality during the holidays are not generally marked by the writing of letters to parliament, demonstrations, or denunciations of the state or economic arrangements but rather a celebration of volunteering and giving. The charity complex offers a way in which to absorb this dissent and disquiet regarding inequality through volunteering to pack bags of food or working in a soup kitchen for an afternoon; none of these activities do much to alter the basic structural issues which force people to turn to soup kitchens

and charities during the holidays as well as throughout the rest of the year. These are quick, easy and convenient options for the expression of this dissent—sympathy and concern doled out into small portions at specific times of the year.

The toy drives offer another alternative for those who wish to do something to help the needy during the holidays but do not have the time or interest in volunteering. The added appeal of the toy drives is that they are aimed at children who are generally exempt from the suspicion which marks the distinction between the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor. Much like the entire exercise of collecting, sorting, repackaging, and redistributing clothes and food, the toy drives did not strike me as the most efficient way in which to ensure that needy children had gifts for Christmas. When the first portion of these gifts arrived from the shopping mall where they were collected I was quite surprised to see that the gifts were wrapped. The toy drives I was used to in Canada always urged members of the public to donate a new and unwrapped toy. I never questioned this, as I assumed that this enabled the parent to select a toy appropriate for his or her child. This was partially addressed in Iceland, as each gift was affixed with a handwritten tag indicating the intended age and gender of the child. However, another issue was that some members of the public had some rather odd ideas of what constituted an appropriate gift for a child while others, in my opinion, were perhaps mentally ill. A former chair of Mæðrastyrsnefnd told me that they had initially distributed these gifts still wrapped in 2003 and followed the suggested advice from the donor on the tag as per the age and gender of the child. This proved to be a mistake and a decision was made to unwrap the gifts before distribution for the 2004 allocation, a practice that was continued in 2005. The chair explained to me that while the vast majority were appropriate and generous

gifts, in her estimation between five to ten percent were not. After some early complaints by clients who had checked the gift for their child beforehand, the staff decided to start unwrapping the gifts altogether and discovered that among the mainly appropriate gifts that a few individuals had decided to wrap and donate the following: an old newspaper, an empty Coca Cola bottle, dirty toys, old used books and empty tape rolls. The staff I spoke to were of the opinion that some of these gifts were the result of misunderstandings from those who were not aware that used toys were not appropriate. Other 'gifts,' such as empty pop bottles or rolls of tape, were most likely the result of people who were disturbed or had some rather twisted senses of humour. By a fluke of circumstance I happened to speak to the client who received the old newspaper for her child. She said that the tag was marked for a four year old girl and she had no idea that it was an old copy of *Morgunblaðið* until her daughter opened it. When I found myself unwrapping gifts again during the 2005 Christmas allocation I shared this story of the newspaper with a few staff members while we worked. A staff member nodded and said, "Well, the other day I un-wrapped an empty box." I asked, "Just an empty old box? Nothing in it at all?" I tried to imagine what the message or intention was on the part of the donor. The staff member nodded again and affirmed: "Just an empty box."

Perhaps not surprisingly these incidents spawned exaggerations, as one volunteer during the 2004 allocation told me that she overheard a few temporary volunteers talk about how people had donated and wrapped used syringes the previous year. The senior staff members I spoke with rejected these claims and verified the former chair's account of the wrapped newspaper and empty pop bottle. I assisted in unwrapping these gifts myself and did not find anything so strange. Most of the toys were new and quite

generous. The only inappropriate gifts I unwrapped were old and used toys. I saved some of these in a carton for the usual distribution days as I felt quite strongly that the children of the clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd should be able to receive new toys for Christmas like any other child in Reykjavík. The only package which angered me was a small box containing broken, dirty and smashed little toy cars, which went straight into the garbage. A few gifts for young children were ceramic holiday themed ornaments that I felt were more appropriate for adults and which I placed on the shelves. However it was during the midst of this unwrapping, knee-deep in discarded wrapping paper and tags, that the absurd aspects of the charity complex hit me with full force.

I began to consider the expenditure of energy that went into this endeavour. Effort and expenses of time and money were paid by the donors to select, purchase and wrap these gifts. The mall had to gather, sort and redistribute these gifts with vans to the various charities, all of which consumed time and gasoline. The charities had to enlist additional volunteers from the public to help, which required an investment on their part of time and transportation costs. The gifts, for the reasons noted above, had to be unwrapped and placed on the tables, in the process producing an enormous waste of paper, ribbons and cards. The clients then had to come to Mæðrastyksnefnd to receive these gifts and the staff and volunteers had to oversee the distribution process. In all likelihood these gifts were then re-wrapped by the parents at additional costs of money and time, producing yet even more waste afterwards. Another disquieting thought which occurred to me was that in all probability many of these toys in time would find their way back to Mæðrastyksnefnd as future donations of used goods and the usual cycle described earlier would begin again. I stopped to watch the proceedings to wonder what it



was all about, as surely this was not the most efficient way in which to ensure that needy children received gifts. In fact, I doubted I could design a system that was any more inefficient. I thought to myself that raising the social assistance benefits or even providing a holiday bonus cheque would enable the parents of lesser means to buy gifts for their children on their own, items that they knew their children wanted or needed, bypassing all these efforts.

Articles in the newspapers reported on the collection of gifts in predictably positive terms. In one article the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd expressed her thanks and commented on the generosity of the public while an official from the mall's service department commented on how "*duglegt*" (hardworking, diligent) the members of the public were at collecting and donating these gifts (Fréttablaðið 2004c:6). This was not about toys for needy children. On the surface it was, but these efforts appeared to have more to do with the donors being able to find a way in which to still their disquiet about the fundamental inequalities in the social order. The redistribution through taxation via the social assistance system is far too abstract and removed to meet these needs unlike the 'concrete' or personal acts of wrapping a gift or coming to Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the holidays to make an offering of labour. During the unwrapping process it pained me to tear and discard wrappings which clearly the donor had put a lot of effort and time into. I noticed that some staff members and volunteers attempted to retain some of the bows, ribbons and cards to the gift in order to communicate the personal connection, intentions and efforts by the donor to the recipient. I had started to do this as well but quickly stopped as I learned that they did not adhere well to the gifts and fell off once I started stacking them on the tables. At one point a client-volunteer and I were unwrapping these

gifts and chatting when she passed me a homemade card which was attached to one package. It was clearly written in a child's scrawl and read: "*til 5 ára stelpu; gleðileg jól og farsælt komandi ár, njóttu vel, kveðja – 7 ára stelpa*" (to a 5 year old girl; Merry Christmas and a happy/prosperous New Year, enjoy, regards – a 7 year old girl). It was a moving sentiment and we tried to affix the card to the gift but to no avail. Afterwards I wondered how the parents of this girl explained to her what the purpose of the exercise was; I also wondered how much, for this little girl, the holidays would be synonymous with overtures to the poor, food and toy drives, and how charity (and by extension poverty and inequality) would become a hegemonically constructed feature of the social landscape.

Indeed, it appeared that, via the 'high times' of charity such as the Christmas holidays, children from even a very young age are directly involved in the charity complex. During the holiday allocation of 2004, a group of children from a local grammar school up the street from Mæðrastyrksnefnd took part in a project to collect clothes to donate to charity. When they arrived with their teachers, about two dozen children filed past one staff member and placed their collections into a bag while receiving a candy treat from another staff member, along with the obligatory photo op. A group of teens from another school solicited donations from companies and individuals. They brought these by at the close of one day while one student, presumably for a school paper or website, took pictures. One day in December of 2005, a group of pre-school children arrived with their teachers bearing a bag of wrapped toys which I described in detail in my fieldnotes:

I was having a quick coffee in the kitchen when the pre-school arrived and I watched from the kitchen doorway. Apparently there was a problem with arranging a bus so a half-dozen

children came as representatives from the school, along with what looked like two teachers and an older man who came in bearing a bag of wrapped gifts. As I saw this I thought to myself that in 20 minutes I will be tearing all these wrappings off. The two women had digital cameras and snapped several photos of the kids in front of the bag, close-ups of specific kids, the chair of Mæðrastyksnefnd with the children, and so forth. The chair then presented the children with a framed plaque thanking them and the school for their efforts and then offered them some candy. The kids were all adorable no doubt, most of them looking like they had just walked out of an ad for 66° Norður [an Icelandic clothing company], but I felt a little uncomfortable about this. I am no psychologist, but this seemed to me to be an example of positive reinforcement. The children were rewarded for collecting and wrapping gifts for needy children for which they received praise, recognition and small gifts from their teachers, Mæðrastyksnefnd and perhaps the public if these efforts are publicized. The intentions were without a doubt benevolent, which makes it all the more difficult to critique. But the queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach only intensified as I thought about how for these young children the fact that some of their fellow children in Reykjavík need to go to a charity for a Christmas gift is being normalized. Further, this inequality is not only normalized but their charitable response to it is being praised, encouraging in turn a continuation of charitable responses to structural inequalities.

The processes of hegemony render the conditions of inequality as normal, part of the generally unquestioned nature of a given social order which benefit certain sectors of society more than others. This does not mean that these conditions are not recognized by social critics and members of the general public. If it was truly believed that inequality and need did not exist in Iceland, or that the existing inequality was entirely acceptable, the charity complex would founder for lack of support. Despite the fact that I have documented the numerous roles and functions of charity and the multiple interests which sustain individual organizations beyond the core purpose of assisting the needy, ranging from waste management practices to publicity opportunities, it would be very difficult to

justify the time and resources that are poured into this complex if sharp inequalities did not exist or were not recognized. But it is these very same efforts and desires to help which continue to sustain the charity complex and to misdirect efforts away from the more politically difficult, and perhaps financially painful, measures that are required to make substantial changes to the underlying structural issues which force people to turn to private charities for assistance. The efforts by members of the public to donate gifts to needy children and the efforts to help by children themselves are applauded, praised and seen as laudable acts of benevolence. In many ways they are. Yet the hegemonic normalization of inequality in practice was never so clear to me as it was when I observed young children involved in charity and being rewarded for doing so; in their young minds, and perhaps in later adult years, charity will most likely retain a positive association. But the associations made for the clients who receive this charity are another matter altogether.

I have discussed so far how Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities exist as nodes within a larger complex and serve a number of interests which helps to sustain the existence of this charity complex. I have also discussed some of the ways in which inequality can be normalized through the work of charity. What needs to be discussed further are the contributions which charities make towards explaining and justifying these underlying inequalities. One way this is accomplished is through the classification of their clients in terms of need and 'worthiness.' The disquiet felt among the public in terms of the inequalities which exist in Icelandic society is addressed partly through the acts of volunteering and giving to charity—making a 'difference' in practice. But it has to be understood that their efforts are going to help the 'truly needy' in order to sustain this

interest. The eligibility screening processes at Mæðrastyrksnefnd are indeed geared towards sorting eligible claimants from fraudulent ones and communicating the message to the wider public that their resources are being directed towards the 'worthy' poor. In turn, those who are filtered out from receiving assistance are rendered as inappropriate as clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd or as recipients of charitable assistance in general. Even though Mæðrastyrksnefnd worked towards countering some of the negative views of their clients, the classification of their clients nevertheless contributed to the hegemonic framework which held that some sectors of the public are worthy of assistance while other are not. I will now turn to an exploration of how the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were sorted and classified.

## Endnotes for Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> For views on other contemporary debates on Icelandic nationalism, such as with regard to the issues of the fisheries and whaling, see for example, Brydon (1996, 2006) and Einarsson (1996).

<sup>2</sup> As noted in Chapter Three, members of the early version of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the 1930s and 1940s were quite vocal in publicizing their work and calling attention to the various problems with which their clients struggled. I suspect that 'the past' these staff members referred to, in which the public did not hear from Mæðrastyrksnefnd very much, was from the 1950s onwards. After the death of the first chair, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, in 1949 Mæðrastyrksnefnd appeared to become a much more traditional charity and less concerned with social advocacy. The committee's paper *Mæðrablaðið* ceased publication and as I understand it the members of the committee continued their work much more removed from the public spotlight.

<sup>3</sup> The organization Húsmæðrafélag Reykjavíkur (Housewives Society of Reykjavík) closed in 2005 which ended a history that stretched back to 1908. Thus after 2005, Mæðrastyrksnefnd of Reykjavík was in practice composed of seven women's organizations.

<sup>4</sup> I have found Icelandic politics to be much more difficult to comprehend than what I was used to in Canada in certain ways. For example, the left oriented parties have seen numerous instances of splitting and coalitions of various kinds over the years. Elections at the municipal and national level generally consist of 'lists,' which could be a conglomeration of parties of various political persuasions who have united to form a government. During the time of my research the national government was controlled by a coalition of Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn and Framsóknarflokkurinn, but the city of Reykjavík was governed by R-listinn, which was more or less a coalition of left-oriented politicians with the municipal branch of Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn generally forming the opposition.

<sup>5</sup> This point was later proven during the time of my research when Húsmæðrafélag Reykjavíkur folded. One of the members this association contributed to the board of Mæðrastyrksnefnd elected to stay on, as she also held membership in another women's organization.

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of this issue see Godelier (1999) and Weiner (1992).

<sup>7</sup> See Herrmann (1997) for an interesting look at how the commodity transactions that occur within the context of American garage sales can take on the aspects of 'giftlike' transactions in certain contexts.

<sup>8</sup> In the early Middle Ages in Europe, the giving of alms by the wealthy precipitated acts of reciprocity on the part of the poor in the form of prayer. The accumulation of material wealth was associated with spiritual dangers, therefore the offering of prayers by the poor were intended to help the wealthy atone for their sins in exchange for material assistance. Here the charitable donation appears to be much more in keeping with the classic view of the gift relationship. However, such an analysis is not applicable in the context of my research or in many forms of contemporary charity. For a more detailed examination of this aspect of charity in the Middle Ages see Lindberg (1993).

<sup>9</sup> Karen Hansen, in *Salaula: The World of Secondhand Clothing and Zambia* (2000), has explored the ways in which domestic charities in Europe and North America export some of their donated clothing abroad for profit, often to the so-called 'developing world,' and in the process threaten the viability of local textile producers. Such is another example of the further ways in which goods donated to charities are then re-commoditized.

<sup>10</sup> In mid-2006 I helped the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd move to their new location in the Tún area of Reykjavík, which was situated in a ground floor unit located within a complex that largely served the needs of disabled individuals.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.istr.org/>.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Mæðrastyrsnefnd to Magnús Stefánsson, October 19, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> The role of the President of Iceland is largely symbolic. He or she is not supposed to take a public stand on specific issues or represent vested interests, be they political or economic. But the President is expected to become involved in cultural matters, as it is “the president’s duty to keep the national spirit alive and to cultivate Icelanders’ love for their country, language, and history” (I. Björnsdóttir 1996:111). However, the President during the time of my research, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, was rather outspoken as far as Icelandic presidents go as testified by his New Year’s Address of 2003 given that it was a commentary on poverty in contemporary Iceland.

<sup>14</sup> This joining of forces for the Christmas allocation was again repeated in 2006.

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of the gift in anthropology see e.g. Mauss (1990); Sahlins (1972).

<sup>16</sup> In my impression, this confirmation ritual (*ferming*), despite its history and religious implications, has largely become a secular coming of age event. This is an observation shared by other observers of Icelandic society and culture (e.g. Koester 1995b). The ritual is supposed to signify the child’s acceptance into the Lutheran Church. I was often told, somewhat cynically perhaps, that the gifts the children anticipate receiving are now the main attraction of the event and partly sustains its continuance. The focus on the gift aspect, as well as the seemingly increasingly expensive and ostentatious nature of the gifts given, have been raised as points of criticism of the ritual. Having attended a number of these events myself, the gifts appeared to be a key theme, though the adults and others in attendance also treated the *ferming* as an opportunity to socialize and enjoy coffee and cake.

<sup>17</sup> In this context, an exclamation of disgust.

<sup>18</sup> An almost identical incident occurred in February of 2007, except the charity criticized for distributing expired goods this time was Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands. The chair of this organization appeared on the television news program Kastljós (Kastljós 2007) to defend her organization, arguing that the clients are informed if some goods are expired and making them available it is still preferable to discarding them. This story produced another round of inspections from health officials, including a visit to Mæðrastyrsnefnd as well, which resulted in even further vigilance on the part of Mæðrastyrsnefnd. But ultimately the story failed to produce much of an uproar among the public—shortly afterwards the normal silence about this issue was quickly re-established.

<sup>19</sup> As per figures from 2000, as example, a single person could expect to pay roughly 25,000 ISK per month on food and toiletries and approximately the same amount for housing (Njáls 2003:233). Regarding the price of food in Iceland, according to numbers provided by the Statistics Bureau of the European Union, food and drink prices in Iceland were found to be on average 62% higher than the prices found in 15 nations in Western and Southern Europe (Morgunblaðið 2007).

## **Chapter Five**

### **Subject to Classification**

Mæðrastyksnefnd, like similar charities, has a process in place with which to screen their clients as per their eligibility requirements for assistance. During the bulk of my field research this involved an interview of each client by a staff member in which identification was examined and questions were asked about the client's status in terms of income amount, sources of income, marital status, children and a number of other factors. After the completion of each interview, a decision was made by the interviewer as to whether the client was eligible and the extent of the assistance that was warranted. The details about each client were recorded on a standardized form and the successful applicant was given a hand-written chit on which was indicated the number of individuals residing in the client's home. This chit was exchanged at the entrance of the kitchen for the food assistance. In the fall of 2005 the process was computerized but the kinds of questions that were asked and the eligibility requirements generally remained unchanged. I usually stood by the exit door each Wednesday and observed this interview process, interspersed with performing additional chores while assisting clients and periodically chatting with the staff and clients during lulls. One day while I was observing the proceedings from the alcove by the exit door, I noticed a client whom I knew fairly well. She nodded when she saw me but appeared to be in a bad mood. While she stood in line waiting for her food allocation she caught my attention again and then rolled her eyes at the ceiling in frustration. When she was near the exit and rummaging through some goods on a table I quietly asked her what was the matter. She sighed and replied, "I am getting



tired of this identity crisis.” I asked what she meant and she replied, “Them,” gesturing towards the interviewers, “they want proof that I have children and they live at home and that I am not lying. What are they going to ask me next, my religion?” Other clients I spoke with expressed similar frustrations to me regarding such matters as questioning the wisdom of having to fill out the same form each week or what they perceived as inconsistent eligibility requirements. There was perhaps a measure of ambiguity associated with these requirements but after a length of regular observation it was apparent to me that the overall process was decidedly patterned in terms of who was deemed eligible as well as the way in which the clients were sorted into categories based on certain demographic criteria.

In this chapter I will address two key questions, the first of which I had formulated very early in my research: What do the staff of Mæðrastyksnefnd hope to achieve through screening their clients for eligibility? The second set of two related questions continues the line of argument developed previously in this dissertation: What further effects are produced as the result of the evaluation and classification of their clients? How do these processes affect the larger hegemonic framework of the charity complex in general in which the structural inequalities within the larger society are explained, justified and normalized? Before discussing the answers to these questions as they pertain to the findings from my field research, I will first discuss how the classification of the population into discrete categories and typologies in modern bureaucratic societies in general can be seen as the result of particular configurations of power and knowledge as suggested by the work of Michel Foucault.

### **5.1 Charity, power and knowledge**

From the first day I observed the clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd being interviewed, I thought of the work of Michel Foucault. In part this was due to the fact that a good deal of his work focused on bureaucratically governed institutions, such as prisons, asylums and clinics, which sought to inspect, observe and classify their 'clients,' who were later subjected to diagnoses and judgements based on the accrued knowledge of academics, doctors, officials and caseworkers. But I also reflected on Foucault's insights that the accumulation of this knowledge 'produced' these clients and ultimately normalized them—in other words the criminal was not necessarily an objective category to be found in the natural world but a subject produced by particular configurations of law; the 'deviant' was often rendered so because of the constructed yardstick of 'normality' and in turn subjected to the 'correcting' regimes of surveillance and rehabilitation.

Paul Rabinow (1984) succinctly outlines three key themes of Foucault's work: dividing practices, scientific classification and subjectification (Rabinow 1984:7–11). Foucault holds that there was a shift during the Enlightenment towards the scientific approach to the management of human populations. The 'catch-all' institutions such as early forms of the hospital as well as almshouses and workhouses<sup>1</sup> gave way to specific institutions for the confinement and/or surveillance of particular categories of the population: asylums for the mentally ill; hospitals, sanatoriums and rehabilitation centres for the physically ill or infirm; prisons for those convicted of crimes; and, in more recent times, I would include retirement homes for the elderly. All of these institutions fall under the therapeutic care and supervision of the professionals from the human sciences such as medicine, psychiatry and social work, among others, as well as agents of the

governmental civil services (see Foucault 1965, 1973, 1979, 2003). Foucault's approach to dividing practices did not necessarily entail the total physical confinement of the body but also the segregation and distinction within the larger society of sections of the population as 'different,' or more severely as 'deviant' or 'abnormal.' Rabinow notes: "Essentially 'dividing practices' are modes of manipulation that combine the mediation of a science (or a pseudo-science) and the practice of exclusion – usually in a spatial sense, but always on a social one" (Rabinow 1984:8).

In this and the following chapters I am more concerned with the latter two themes of Foucault's work as delineated by Rabinow: scientific classification and subjectification. Both of these themes bear directly on my research at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and are useful ways in which to analyze the application of power in modern societies. Foucault argues that one key factor which precipitated this scientific classification of humans into 'typologies' was the emergence of the 'problem of population' in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One example of this is the noted *An Essay on the Principle of Population* published by Thomas Malthus in 1798 (Malthus 2001 [1798]). Malthus argued that an unchecked population grows at a geometric rate whereas the food supply only increases arithmetically (ibid.:11), therefore unless the population is checked humanity will soon outgrow its food supply. Here the population of the city or state emerged "as an economic and political problem" (Foucault 1980a:25) to be solved by administrators, scientists and technocrats; but this also entails rendering the entire population as 'known.' Foucault argues that there was a shift from the concerns of the state over sovereignty of a delimited territory to include as well the governance of the population as a totality as well as specific individuals in terms of their behaviour and conduct—in short a government of all

and each (Gordon 1991:3). One way this was accomplished was by the gathering of mass amounts of data through the use of statistics, such as censuses, which counted, measured, compared and analyzed a large number of factors regarding the population. Ian Hacking (1991) has referred to an 'avalanche of numbers,' particularly during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, in order to characterize the vigour with which social scientists and administrators collected and analyzed information about the population covering a wide range of factors. It became a truism among many academics and members of the civil service during this period that if a phenomenon could not be statistically measured then it could barely be known; in other words, data and findings that could not be backed up with numerically based assertions were rendered as suspect (Hacking 1991:186). Another important source of data was the compilation of the case file or dossier on specific individuals. Whether this information was collected by doctors, psychiatrists, civil service bureaucrats, the police or social workers, these dossiers enabled "the authorities to fix individuals in a web of objective codification" (Rabinow 1984:22), which also could be compared and measured against other cases. Further, "More precise and more statistically accurate knowledge of individuals leads to finer and more encompassing criteria for normalization" (ibid.).

A great many of the social categories that populate the social landscape of modern bureaucratically governed societies arose from the work of the human sciences and the civil services. It is the weight of scientific legitimacy accredited to this knowledge which renders many of these categories as unquestioned givens and from which the yardstick of normality regarding a wide range of social factors and behaviours may be produced. Furthermore it is the numbers that receive the great deal of attention, as explanations and

counter-explanations are given and sought as to why percentages increase, decrease or remain stable, whether it is unemployment rates or the numbers of disability pensioners. Less attention is directed to the validity, meanings or integrity of the entities or phenomena that are counted in contrast to the weight given to the factor of addressing 'how many.' Lyon-Callo (2004), following the work of scholars influenced by Foucault (e.g. Hacking 1991), notes that because they "are popularly perceived as objective representations of social phenomena, statistics are often given widespread credence as non-subjective and empirical data" (Lyon-Callo 2004:73; see also Urla 1993).

Foucault also stressed that analyses of power need to move beyond the traditional focus on formal mechanisms of governance: "We must escape from the limited field of judicial sovereignty and State institutions, and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination" (Foucault 1980b:102). Gramsci makes a similar point, arguing that the coercive apparatus of the state in capitalist societies is normally held in reserve and comes into play when consent has failed (Gramsci 1999:12). What interests Gramsci is how consent is achieved and maintained in quotidian social relations where this kind of coercion often does not come into play. It is true that the state exercises power through the formal institutions it has at its disposal such as the military and prisons, but Foucault's consideration of the 'disciplinary' power exercised within and by these and other institutions upon their subjects is much more subtle, an approach which considers the intimate link between power, discourse and knowledge—power/knowledge—that he extends throughout society in general rather than conceiving of dominance as rooted in a particular site. He writes, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault 1980a:101). The prisons, military, courts and

other such institutions are merely “the terminal forms power takes” (Foucault 1980a:92). Power is thus “a name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (ibid.:93). Foucault’s concern is not on the more obvious ‘repressive’ aspects of power but how power may be ‘productive.’ The social categories employed by the classification procedures of knowledge producing agencies do not objectively follow or describe the contours of the ‘natural world’ but are the produced effects of these particular configurations of power/knowledge. Whether one is considering a prison, a medical examination, an educational institution, the effects of power in this context are the same: “The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (Foucault, in Rabinow 1984:195).

The dependent poor in North America and Europe have long been subjected to regimes of normalization. One common approach sought to discipline the ‘unworthy’ poor (those seen as able to work and provide for themselves) in order to render the acceptance of public relief as unattractive as possible. Historically this was accomplished in a number of ways, such as through the use of signifying marks ranging from brandings in certain cases in feudal Europe to the wearing of marks or crests on articles of clothing which identified the bearers as paupers to the local authorities, though in some contexts these significations were of use to the poor as it denoted their eligibility for local relief (see Jütte 1994). In more recent times, the disciplinary approach to rendering low paid employment as a preferable alternative to social assistance is partly accomplished through the provision of financial assistance benefits at rates below the minimum wages available in the labour market as well with as the systemic disincentives within a given social

welfare system which make the application process demeaning, humiliating and overly complicated in order to dissuade applicants. Partially this is intended to lighten the financial burdens on the state, to sustain a sector of the dependent poor to act as a downward pressure on wages, and to act as a moral caution to the working classes who are often only a job loss away from becoming the dependent poor themselves—in short one could argue that the modern social welfare systems ‘regulate’ rather than assist the poor (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]).

The poor on the one hand are systemically disciplined in order to prevent their reliance upon the state for subsistence but they are also ‘normalized’ as well in terms of the efforts made to incorporate them into the larger society where possible. Early charities, benevolent societies and poorhouses routinely engaged in efforts to teach the dependent poor life and work skills in the belief that a combination of religious instruction, lessons in morality and the teaching of basic skills could reform the poor and include them among the other ‘productive’ members of the larger society. Contemporary social welfare states often include such programs as well. One example in Iceland is the program Kvennasmiðjan, operated by Tryggingastofnun ríkis (the State Social Security Institute) and the social services of Reykjavík and which aims to teach skills and to improve the quality of life for single mothers who are dealing with socio-economic difficulties (Reykjavíkurborg 2005). In such cases one could argue that the poor are being ‘normalized,’ disciplined and/or rehabilitated by the organs of the state, as the goals of these kinds of programs often speak of enabling their clients to become ‘independent,’ which I assume means non-dependent upon state social assistance schemes. Material aid charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd do not explicitly seek to rehabilitate their clients in

such a manner. Yet, as I will note further, in many ways their actions had this effect upon their clients. However, what has received less attention in studies of charitable work are the ways in which the efforts of charities normalize the views, perceptions and actions of members of the larger society.

Foucault has argued that modern social workers, welfare caseworkers, and governmental inspectors emerged from a lineage which extends back to the earlier form of charitable workers and the 19<sup>th</sup> century ‘friendly visitor.’

Take the example of philanthropy in the early nineteenth century: people appear who make it their business to involve themselves in other people’s lives, health, nutrition, housing; then out of this confused set of functions there emerge certain personages, institutions, forms of knowledge: public hygiene, inspectors, social workers, psychologists. And we are now seeing a whole proliferation of different categories of social work (Foucault 1980b:62).

Foucault also referred to these non-governmental philanthropists as “agents of liaison,” (ibid.) which I hold is an apt term that applies as well to the present non-governmental aid workers as it did in the past. In many ways charities continue to play a parallel role in Iceland alongside the formal governmental assistance agencies, often working together and sharing information and duties, but I have some doubts as to the extent to which material aid charities control and normalize their clients. It is my contention that modern charities and these informal ‘agents of liaison’ in the present have far less authority and power to normalize the behaviour of their clients than they did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that role having since been transferred to the state. The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were generally only able to observe, monitor and collect information on those who willingly came to seek assistance and within the context of their place of operations.<sup>2</sup> The authority



to withhold a weekly allotment of two bags of food and some used clothing simply pales in comparison to the authority vested with the state which may withhold basic financial assistance, housing, services and even impose custodial sentences for non-compliance for the withholding of information or making fraudulent claims. But Foucault used the formal organs of the state as illustrative examples of the often diffuse and hard to see way that power operates in modern societies; the ability to normalize conduct and perceptions is only at its most apparent as it operates upon the clients, patients, or prisoners of formal institutions but this is only the starting point for using his approach elsewhere. As I will argue further, the 'normalizing' work of charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd was more related to the perceptions of the members of the broader public than it was with the behaviour of their clients.

## **5.2 Knowing the clients**

Early charities performed many of the functions of social welfare that in contemporary times are now largely the domain of the state and this included the collection of data and statistics not only of their specific clients but often on the state of the poor in general in a given township or municipality. The collection of data and the surveillance of the poor by these charity workers, who were often untrained and were essentially private citizens, also extended in some contexts into the very homes of the poor. Early philanthropists in England (Prochaska 1980) and Denmark (Lützen 1999), for example, as well as elsewhere in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were involved in collecting demographic data on their target populations, often inspecting the living conditions of the poor in their homes through the 'friendly visits' of their inspectors. Some of these inspections were conducted in an invasive manner which would not likely

be tolerated, or legal, in contemporary times. Many of these district visitors were instructed to report on the details of what they found as well as to advise the poor on household management practices and skills that were “seen as essential to improving the condition of the poor” (Prochaska 1980:128); in other words it was believed that the poor could be rendered as ‘non-poor’ through adopting the lifestyles and mannerisms of their often middle class and elite instructors. The local authorities in England were apparently aware of the usefulness of this surveillance of the poor. With the establishment of school boards and mandatory education in England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the home visitors were instructed to monitor truancy in addition to their usual activities (ibid.:133).

Charities in Iceland during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were also involved in collecting data on the poor. The founding chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was known for visiting needy women in Reykjavík in their homes as part of her advocacy work, though early 20<sup>th</sup> century philanthropists in Iceland did not appear to have undertaken home inspection to the same extent as elsewhere. Nevertheless, early charities in Iceland played a parallel role to that of the local authorities in monitoring and collecting statistical information on the poor in general and their clients in specific. The early version of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was involved in collecting census data on the situations of poor mothers and widows throughout Iceland. By the early 1930s the committee had compiled a database on 500 single mothers across the country (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:27). Mæðrastyrksnefnd also worked with the local authorities in Reykjavík and made a request to the mayor to access the municipal census data during this time. Two members of the committee were granted access to these records in 1933 and spent three months adding official information to their own database (ibid.). Other members of the charity complex did

investigative work as well during this time. In the 1930s the Salvation Army, for example, surveyed the housing conditions of the poor in Reykjavík and alerted the public and authorities about their concerns regarding the lack of privacy, sanitation and poor heating they found in these homes (ibid.:12). In the case of Iceland in particular, these kinds of charities performed a needed service at the time given that the formal social welfare system was in its infancy. The work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the Salvation Army, among others, drew public attention to issues that needed to be addressed. Much of the early work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was dedicated to getting the state involved in these issues. But when the state finally did become involved in a more comprehensive approach to the provision of services the work of the charity complex did not cease; rather, it continued to play a parallel role alongside the state in terms of monitoring the poor, collecting information and making assessments about their clients along with the many 'useful' roles that charities played for a number of interested parties as discussed previously.

The early staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd generally did not go into the streets of Reykjavík to find their clients but encouraged widows and mothers in need of assistance to visit their office and submit an application for assistance. Referrals to the committee appeared to have also been made by friends, family and neighbours on behalf of those who were too ill or unwilling to request assistance themselves. The invitation for low income women to seek assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd was also made via short newspaper announcements of which the following was a typical example:

Mæðrastyrksnefnd is now gathering reports about the situations of single mothers in this town. Their office will be open December 1, 2 and 3 from 2 until 7 all day. The committee calls

upon all single mothers, widows, divorced or never married who would seek support [*styrkur*] to come in for an interview on one of the aforementioned days (Morgunblaðið 1931:7).

It is clear from the above notice that the demographic category the early Mæðrastyrksnefnd targeted was essentially any woman who was not married or in a stable relationship with a male. I would imagine that information on income, occupation and number of children was also collected but it is not clear as to how detailed these reports were and what other eligibility requirements for assistance were in place at the time. The historians Þorgrímur Gestsson and Þórarinn Hjartarson (2004) have commented that the records of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are somewhat scarce during the early 1930s (Gestsson and Hjartarson 2004:27), but some documentation remains. They noted that Mæðrastyrksnefnd received approximately 200 requests for assistance over the winter of 1933–1934 and approximately 80 requests during the lead up to the Christmas allocation of 1934 (ibid:28), but few details about the demographics of the clients are noted aside from the numbers of applications. I was informed early in my research by the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd that many of these early records were lost or destroyed but much of what remained was collected and stored at the archives of the National Library of Iceland. She also informed me that these records were sealed due to the private information they contained, particularly in regards to the records of the legal work undertaken by the committee's lawyer on behalf of their clients. While my research was not a work of history, I remained curious as to the earlier evaluation procedures of the committee.

The long standing practice of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was that an office worker or 'cashier' (*gjaldkeri*) was employed by the committee to take care of the service desk (*afgreiðsla*) as well as to collect the information on the applicants for assistance and

report back to the committee. The larger committee, in turn, would then decide which clients were to receive assistance and how much based on this information. I interviewed the cashier who held this position at Mæðrastyrksnefnd from 1974 through to 1999.<sup>3</sup> When I asked about the evaluation procedures she explained that at the time the assistance offered was primarily cash for Christmas and Easter, quite unlike the weekly food allocation that I was used to. The interviewing was also held before the assistance was distributed rather than decided at the time of application, which was what occurred during the period of my research. She continued: "It was the board who made the decision. They got the information about the clients that I collected. I found out who was the most in need." She admitted that, as a consequence, not all of the committee members were as personally acquainted with the clients as she was. But what she could not tell me were the specific demographics of their clients as ratios or percentages in terms of ages, income ranges and so forth, as this kind of statistical information was apparently not collected or analyzed in any comprehensive way. I found that the discourses of the former staff members often revolved around specific cases as illustrative examples to describe the plight of their clients rather than relying on abstract categories as is more typical of the present. The data that they possessed was uneven, anecdotal and recalled from memory, though in some cases it was knowledge that was accrued over a great number of years. In contrast, the discourses of charities and aid agencies in the present were often replete with graphs and figures much like one would expect from the social sciences and government bureaucracies.

During lulls while volunteering at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, with the chair's permission I would sometimes rummage through the shelves and storage boxes looking for historical

records and documentation that might be of interest. I found a number of old ledgers which detailed the assistance rendered to each client from past years, which noted the name and later *kennitala* (national identification number) of each person and the amount given to the client in ISK in terms of cash or coupons. Most of these records were rather crude and filed in no discernable order, some sitting on shelves in various places, some housed in boxes, and a few tucked away in plastic bags and covered in dust. At one point the use of ledgers gave way to recipe cards in the 1980s to the 1990s. There were also gaps in sequences within as well as between years, so I decided that recreating the visiting patterns of past years would be an exercise in futility. I was unable to find anything at Mæðrastyrksnefnd that included detailed information about the clients or that indicated how the eligibility screening had worked in the past. I surmised that the process was largely oral as the committee would have discussed each case during meetings but I reasoned that there must have been written records on which these decisions were based which, if not destroyed or lost, were most likely sealed in the National Archives along with the legal documents. As luck would have it, I stumbled across a worn green ledger in a bag on an upper shelf entitled: "*Beiðni IV*" (request four). The ledger detailed the information as well as personal impressions by the desk staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd of the clients who applied for assistance for the holiday allocations from 1948 through to 1950. This offered some insights into how the staff evaluated the clients during this time. The process was not very structured and the staff appeared to base their decisions on their target demographic (needy women with children and widows), the severity of each case, history of previous assistance and their judgments of the clients' characters. With the present staff's permission I was able to examine this document. I informed them that I

would not use or record any names and would omit any identifiable details in any translated passages, as many of these clients could still be alive and the next of kin most likely were. The information was recorded in pen and pencil by two, possibly three, staff members judging by the handwriting. All of the clients were women, easily identified by a combination of given names and patronyms. In 1948 there were 109 requests for assistance; 105 for 1949; and 100 in 1950 at which point the book ends. Since the book is noted as number 'IV' I would imagine that a similar system was used in the past and that volumes I through III and those post-1950 were lost, destroyed or sealed in the archives. But I could see why statistical information about the committee's client base did not exist at this time as there was no consistency in these records. Some entries merely included the name and little else, which were later appended with an 'X' or "*afgreitt*" or "*afgr.*" (served) to indicate, presumably, that the client received assistance. Other entries included limited information next to the name as "*ekkja 1 barn*" (widow 1 child); "*gift*" (married); and one example of "*engin aðstoð*" (no help) but no explanation as to why. However, other entries were virtual mini-biographies of the clients which offered some insights into the situations of these women. The following are some extracts from this ledger from 1948 through to 1950 with the names withheld and certain identifying information altered or omitted for reasons of confidentiality:

Has 5 children, very poor [*mjög fátæk*], the husband drinks a lot, and they are getting a divorce. [Woman's name] knows the home very well and is requesting on behalf of her.

Single mother with 4 children, has only child support...and she is trying to make [fishing] nets at home but she is in very poor health. (She came herself, looks very poorly).

Married to *óreglumanni* [drunkard, dissolute person], has 7 children.

Single with 15 year old in school, she is always sick...and she has no feeling in both hands and feet ([initials] requesting on her behalf).

Has 1 child with her, apparently has 2 others somewhere else. Is sort of a *vesalingur*.<sup>4</sup> Works for food.

Single girl, has 1 child whom she gets no support for, works cleaning floors, is very poor.

Is married with 4 children, is often sick because she has such poor health, her husband has to stay at home and loses his work, he is a *verkamaður* [blue-collar worker, labourer], they are very poor [*bláfátæk*], she came herself. This woman has been at the summer home [home in the country that Mæðrastyrksnefnd operated as a vacation place for select clients] so I know her.

Girl with 2 children and her brother who is an *aumingi*<sup>5</sup>, a 38 year old boy. (Came herself)."

Very poor with a crazy husband [*brjálaðan mann*].

Is very poor, has 2 children, her husband came out of Litla-Hraun [prison] yesterday and he is supposed to go into the hospital after the New Year.

Lives in a shed [*skúr*] with her 2 sons.

Is married to [gives his name] who is a *verkamaður*, and they have 3 children, 3 and 2 and 1 year old. The husband has not worked since this summer and drinks a lot.

Lives with a drinker. 2 children, 4 and 7 years old – Big need for help. Has received help before.

Married to an *óreglumanni*, 5 young children. A man who lives upstairs says that the situation is extremely bad.

Has 2 young children, husband was buried yesterday. Has nothing and is in poor health.



Clearly the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd at the time harboured certain views and opinions about their clients, as well as their clients' spouses, and were more sympathetic to some than others. But it was also apparent that a comprehensive statistical analysis is difficult, considering the source material. Ages were not provided and marital status and health situations were sometimes unclear or vague; addresses were sometimes provided but inconsistently and some of the descriptions of the clients are not easily quantifiable. Through the 1980s and up through to the late 1990s, the only documentation I could find were crude recipe cards on which the clients' names, national identification numbers, and amount of assistance given were recorded and which contained no demographic information aside from age.<sup>6</sup> But with a newly elected chair in 1999 the records and evaluation procedures of Mæðrastyrksnefnd appeared to become more 'professionalized.' Records from after 1999 revealed that more extensive information was sought after and recorded, such as the clients' names, national identification numbers, address, income, and inquiries as to whether assistance was sought at other agencies such as the Red Cross or Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. There seemed to be a more concerted effort among the staff to collect detailed and above all standardized information on their clients rather than the uneven and impressionistic information recorded in the past. Around this time Mæðrastyrksnefnd began offering weekly regular assistance and using a standardized and detailed application form, similar in many ways to the application forms that one would find in use by government agencies or large non-governmental aid organizations. The director of domestic assistance for Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar demonstrated their computerized system to me which was used for documenting their clients' information and from which statistical information could be produced with ease. She explained that

the form used by Mæðrastyrksnefnd was based on that used by Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. I have included in Appendix D a copy of the form used by Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the time of my research. What follows is a translation and description of this form: Entitled at the top of the form in capitalized bold letters is “*Mæðrastyrksnefnd Reykjavíkur*.” To the left is located “*Nafn*” (Name), and to the right is a space to indicate one’s “*Kennitala*” (National Identification Number). Followed by “*Heimili*” (Home Address), “*Menntun*” (Education), “*Atvinna*” (Occupation), and below that a question: “*Ertu í eigin húsnæði, leiguhúsnæði eða félagslegri íbúð?*” (Do you own housing, rent or reside in social housing?). Below: “*Ertu einstæð/ur, öryrki, eldri borgari?*” (Are you single, disabled or a senior?).<sup>7</sup> Below that: “*Börn heima og aldur þeirra?*” (Children at home and their ages?). Next: “*Tekjur á mánuði? Ráðstöfunartekjur á mánuði?*” (Income per month? Disposable income per month?). Next: “*Hversu lengi hefur þú verið í fjárhagslegum erfiðleikum?*” (How long have you been in financial difficulty?). And lastly, to the lower left is “*Dags. Umsækjanda*” (Date of application) and to the lower right “*Aðstoð móttækin*” (Assistance received).

This form was used throughout the time of my research in 2004 and the first half of 2005, after which a computerized system was put in place. This system was rather crude and not comparable to that of Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. What intrigued me about this form was that it sought information which, in my opinion, requested details far beyond what was necessary in order to evaluate the clients’ eligibility in terms of a few bags of food and some used clothing. What was also curious was that no concerted efforts were made to analyze this additional data. Each week the forms were filed by a staff member or a volunteer, placed into binders in alphabetical order by given name<sup>8</sup> and then placed

on a shelf and filed by year. Occasionally I observed staff members consult these binders in order to verify a client's claim about some matter but these forms generally gathered dust. The chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd from 2003 to 2004 told me that she would have liked to sort and analyze this data in order to see what they would reveal but did not have the time to do so. The forms served little purpose in terms of records or statistics as the only information that was given much attention by the staff was the amount of weekly visits by clients. Even this figure was recorded by hand on a calendar or a notebook and no apparent efforts were made to analyze monthly or yearly visiting patterns. However, while the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd did little with this information aside from general comments released to the press regarding numbers and references to some basic typologies of the demographics of their clients, it is my contention that the process of having the clients fill out these detailed forms and to submit to the questioning of the staff acted as a form of disciplinary power in and of itself. On the one hand, the surface contours of this data allowed the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to construct some basic categories of their clients; in Foucault's sense they 'produced' their clients through their operative categories, which governed both how they distributed their assistance as well as how they perceived their 'ideal' clients. This constituency of their clients in terms of these categories was, in turn, communicated to the public through press releases. On the other hand, the insistence by the staff upon interviewing each client during every visit, their demands that the clients produce various forms of identification, as well as the detailed nature of the form itself, regulated their clients by providing a means with which to filter out certain clients and to dissuade others. As I will discuss further, the demand by this agency for specific forms of documentation was a source of frustration for some

clients. The inability of some clients to meet these eligibility requirements provided as well the justification for their exclusion from receiving assistance in certain situations.

The first question which emerged out of my observations of the interview procedures asked what the staff hoped to achieve by having this evaluation process in place. According to the staff, on the one hand this screening process was put in place to limit the number of clients seeking assistance due to the limited resources that Mæðrastyrksnefnd had at hand. The committee also sought to distribute these goods in as equitable a manner as possible so that 'those who need the help the most' were given preferential treatment. But the screening process also acted to communicate to the public at large that assistance was not given indiscriminately and that their clients were 'needy' and not simply 'greedy' in order to maintain continued public and political support. Even if the information collected on the form was not analyzed to any great depth, the mimicry of bureaucratic operating procedures, the 'look of rationality' (Fife 1995),<sup>9</sup> communicated the message that the clients were screened in an objective and standardized way in order to filter out fraudulent claims. This was partly done to let the clients know that the assistance was not offered without restrictions but done as well to signal to the donors and general public that Mæðrastyrksnefnd was a responsible charity which took measures to ensure that only those who needed the help received it. However the continual calls for support and efforts to convince the public that their clients were in need resulted in further donations and support for the charity complex, cementing the place of charities in the social landscape and setting in place a rather circular and self-perpetuating system. The increase in donations from companies, particularly of new and high demand items, was viewed favourably by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd but tempered by the fears that

word of these goods would spread and would result in even further client pressures and drains upon their resources.

But the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd also harboured suspicions that not all of their clients were legitimately in need. The staff were, to varying degrees, dubious about the claims of some of their clients and shared to an extent some of the discourses critical of their clients and the poor which circulated throughout the larger society. Such discourses were influential, reproduced by conservative politicians but also drawing upon the wider so-called ‘common sense’ knowledge about these issues. These discourses mirrored the views of the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor, distinctions that were reinforced through the processes of charitable giving that I described in Chapter Four. The extent to which such ‘common sense’ views are indeed distinct from political discourses is debatable, however. Gramsci argued that “‘Common sense’ is the folklore of philosophy, and is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists” (Gramsci 1999:326). These ‘common sense’ views of the clients of charities held that many of those who sought help at organizations like Mæðrastyrksnefnd were not ‘poor’ but they only sought assistance to ‘get things for free.’ The governmental social welfare system was generally held to be adequate, therefore it was argued that the problems among the clients were individual and not structural in nature—some of the clients ‘misspent’ their money and were often to blame for their own situations or else abused these systems for their own gains. The screening processes by Mæðrastyrksnefnd were partially enacted in order prevent the rendering of aid to those deemed as ‘not really needing the help.’ However, by demonstrating that they were a responsible charity in this context these efforts nevertheless reproduced and strengthened the discourses that many

staff members also worked to counter. The screening processes cast a pall of suspicion upon their clients in general even while the staff publicly disputed and challenged these criticisms of their clients. But it is not solely the clients who are ‘normalized’ by the work of the charity complex but the members of the public<sup>10</sup> as well, in terms of normalizing the processes of donating, volunteering and the distributing of goods as well as providing the justification that the solutions to social and economic problems are to be found with the non-governmental charitable sector.

### **5.3 Limiting goods and maximizing returns**

At the beginning of my research I was told by a senior staff member that Mæðrastyksnefnd “never says no,” all clients who request help receive assistance and, by way of implication, the request for assistance was in and of itself treated as evidence of need. Shortly afterwards I learned that neither was entirely true. Some clients were assisted but instructed by the staff to seek help elsewhere in the future, such as with other similar charities, and the occasional client was denied assistance outright; the latter was rare but it did happen from time to time.

In this section I intend to explore why the staff of Mæðrastyksnefnd attempted to dissuade certain clients from seeking assistance at their charity, as well as why the staff attempted to limit the clients’ access to goods for those who were nevertheless evaluated as eligible for this assistance. The attempts by the staff to place limits on the amount of material assistance a given client was entitled to was partly related to the logistics of charity, as the organization itself had limited goods to distribute. As such, the staff made efforts to redistribute what resources they had on hand each week in as equitable a manner as possible. However, this was merely one factor among a number of

interconnected issues which governed the distribution of assistance each Wednesday. The staff's endeavours to classify and evaluate their clients in terms of certain demographic categories based around, for example, gender and disability, was one method employed in order to limit access to these goods by channelling resources towards their 'ideal' or target clientele. This classification system will be the focus of upcoming chapters. The staff also evaluated their clients by visual appearances—the clients were 'read' by the staff as per a number of material indicators which served to indicate, or deny, their status as 'needy' and thus 'deserving' individuals. But the clients were also evaluated by the staff as per their observed behaviours on site during the distribution days, which will be the focus of the following section.

The staff's interpretation of specific clients as either 'truly needy' or else simply 'greedy' was partly based upon their observances of the clients' behaviours on the premises during distribution days. In cases where clients sought an increase in their allotment, for whatever reason, they were generally expected to request such an increase of the goods to be received rather than to demand them. The clients were also expected to ask for additional goods from the tables if they wished to take more than what the staff perceived as the expected amount, a task made all the more difficult as specific members held varying views as to what constituted taking 'too much.' In short, what the staff expected were supplicant, docile and courteous clients. While many of the clients did indeed act in these ways, to varying degrees, some of the clients practiced what I saw as 'managed docility.' Based upon my observations, interviews and general discussions with the clients, the ones with whom I spoke were indeed aware of the staff's expectations of them and modified their behaviour in varying ways in order to receive their assistance.

However it was also suggested to me in some cases that the passive behaviour I observed among some of the clients may be due to depression, fatigue, the cumulative effects of years of hardship or a number of other issues. This does not mean that these clients were in agreement with the expectations and decisions of the staff, but some lacked the energy to argue while others avoided direct confrontation. Some clients did indeed resent having to 'hold their tongues' out of the concern (imagined or otherwise) that an expression of this resentment could jeopardize future assistance from this organization. These practices of managed docility included withholding their criticisms of the staff directly and expressing them in other ways, such as quietly muttering under their breath, making faces once they had their backs to the staff, taking up these grievances with me in discussions outside on the street or in interviews, or else with the expressions of anger I observed through the window once the clients were out on the street. Other clients managed their relations with the staff in other ways, such as by making presentations to the staff in terms of donated goods they had collected on behalf of Mæðrastyrksnefnd or even small gifts such as flowers. I interpreted these latter acts, as did some staff members, as attempts to forge reciprocal bonds between the staff and specific clients in order to ensure their access to future assistance, much in keeping with the classical gift relationship as discussed in the previous chapter. But other clients engaged in behaviours which the staff perceived as rude and openly hostile as these clients resisted the staff's efforts, and right, to control access to what these clients perceived as goods donated by the public for their benefit.

The staff members themselves were ambivalent about the overall efforts to limit access to these goods as well as with regards to what some perceived as the more



authoritarian attempts to discipline the clients and manage their behaviour. Most, if not all staff members, rejected the earlier practice of having the clients queue outside of the building before being allowed inside to receive their assistance, arguing that this was humiliating and demeaning for the clients. However, there were still varying opinions about how these goods should be distributed and some did favour practices that forced the clients into supplicant positions. Staff members sometimes quarrelled over such things as whether the clients should be allowed to take freely from excess supplies of specific goods or whether they should be made to request more of a specific item. I, along with some staff members, found ourselves disagreeing with others as to whether or not a specific weekly allotment was too generous or too sparse. But the members of this organization in general were conscious of the fact that they had to balance generosity with the more mundane issues of logistics, as well as the fact that they needed to present an image to the donating public that they were a responsible charity.

The assistance offered by charities to their clients is constrained in a large part by the logistics of support and distribution. Material aid charities such as Mæðrastyrsnefnd normally do not have the resources to offer services to their clients other than assistance with the basic provision of clothing and food. Some charities, such as the Pentecostal agency Samhjálp, worked closely with the city of Reykjavík to offer drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs as well as to operate homeless shelters. The national director of Samhjálp explained to me that the overall goal of their programs was to assist their clients in overcoming their difficulties in order to make the transition to a life free of addiction and dependency upon shelters. This is the logic behind many rehabilitative agencies. Vincent Lyon-Callo (2004) has noted, drawing upon his extensive experience in homeless

shelters in the United States, that many workers were indeed dedicated to ending homelessness through transitional housing programs, even if they faced a rather uphill battle (see also Bridgman 2006). But it is not without a touch of irony that Lyon-Callo writes about a homeless sheltering 'industry,' as the issue of homelessness has also produced employment opportunities in a number of fields (see also Passaro 1996:9–10). The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were also aware of the irony that the goal of the elimination of substantial socio-economic inequalities in the larger society would eliminate the need for their work and their organization. For some staff members this is, or should be, the ultimate goal of their organization. One long serving member divulged to me: "I would like to survive long enough to see this [Mæðrastyrksnefnd] become unnecessary." But charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd are redistributive in terms of supplying their clients with the material resources they have collected.<sup>11</sup> Redistributive charities are perhaps unlikely to be able to make a substantial difference in the long-term structural situations of the clients who are struggling with a number of complex problems. As a caution I must note that I was aware of some clients whose situations improved as the result of new employment, the resolving of personal issues or problems with their benefits, and they therefore no longer sought help at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The aid offered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd enabled these clients to make these transitions with greater ease as was noted and appreciated by these clients in conversations or interviews. These were the 'ideal' situations, but I was also aware that there was a core clientele whose situations were so complex or the result of such persistent and ongoing problems that there was little Mæðrastyrksnefnd could do aside from offering them food and clothing assistance. The material aid was intended ideally as temporary assistance to cover financial shortfalls

while their clients were presumably assisted by governmental agencies to rectify their situations. But in practice, for some clients, this assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd was an ongoing and regular occurrence. Between 6 to 12 percent of their clients on a given month in 2004–2005 sought assistance on a week by week basis and a handful reported that they have been struggling with financial difficulties for 10, 15 or 20 years and some practically over the entire course of their lives.<sup>12</sup>

As discussed in Chapter Three, aside from the weekly purchases of potatoes, dairy and meat products the remainder of the food goods were donated. These donations varied week to week which made planning difficult. Nevertheless, on a given Tuesday the target of 96 bags were normally packed as this number corresponded to the number of loaves of bread that were donated to Mæðrastyrksnefnd by a baked goods firm. This number also approximated the rough average of weekly visits which normally fluctuated between 90 to 130 requests for assistance; anything less than 90 was seen as a relatively ‘slow’ week and anything more than 120 as ‘busy.’<sup>13</sup> I quickly learned that if the 100 point was reached early in the day, then the staff would grow concerned about supplies. If later in the day the number had barely reached above 50, the staff would then take steps to see if other charities needed the food lest the perishables go to waste. Included among the lore of the staff was the belief that the beginning of each month was usually slow and that the financial pressures on the clients grew over the course of subsequent weeks which resulted in further requests for assistance later in the month. This matched my observations during my time at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. This pattern was subsequently confirmed with my analysis of the data I collected from the years of 2003 to the first half of 2006. Aside from the holiday distribution times of Easter and Christmas, which

disrupted the normal visiting patterns, the first Wednesday of the month was indeed the slowest in terms of the number of clients who were assisted.<sup>14</sup> This pattern was attributed to the fact that social assistance payments were released at the beginning of each month and that the clients' financial situations deteriorated in later weeks. This logic governed the packing process, as goods were used more liberally early in the month if donations were abundant and used more sparingly later. Ironically, in order to conserve and stretch their supply of goods it was often that the least generous bags were offered when the need was the greatest, as the increase in people looking for assistance necessitated that these steps be taken in order to accommodate the increased demand.

One of the logistical practices that the staff employed to limit the distribution of these goods was to ensure that the clients in general did not take 'too much.' The first distribution day I worked at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I was placed in charge of a large table of t-shirts which had recently been donated and I was involved in maintaining the tables and shelves which contained the usual assortment of toys, health care products and various odds and ends. I asked what I was to do this first day and the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd replied, "Help the clients find the right size of shirt, help them with their bags and open the door for them." As she turned to walk away she paused for a moment and added that I was to make sure that the clients 'did not take too much.' I was initially perplexed as to what this meant as I looked over a stack of t-shirts from the 2002 World Cup (it was 2004 at the time), bookcases of old books, magazines and knick-knacks and a table of used toys. Over time I would learn exactly what it meant though I could not quantify 'too much' and admittedly had a difficult time explaining it to new volunteers. I also noticed that the monitoring of the clients was selective; certain clients acquired a reputation

among the staff and their presence was much more heavily monitored than new or irregular clients. But it was not necessarily these goods in general or the clients in specific that had to be monitored and regulated but the projected image of the organization itself as a 'responsible' charity which did not indiscriminately distribute goods.

I often discussed limiting goods with the staff and they had a range of opinions on this matter. One staff member tended to be liberal with the distribution of goods and expressed exasperation to me on occasion regarding some staff members who guarded these goods rather vigilantly, exclaiming on one occasion: "Why should we keep all of this...what are we going to use it for except to give it away?" Another, who worked in the clothing room, hid some items in the back storage area to ensure that those who came later had a fair chance. She was not interested in retaining these goods but was concerned with their equitable distribution: "Some of the women who come right at the beginning take more than we think is right. But we are also holding some clothes for those who come at the end of the day." She added that, "Others are more modest and I have to tell them to take more." For other staff members it was a matter of 'how' the goods were retrieved rather than an issue of 'how many.' One staff member told me that what bothered her most was how 'grabby' some clients were and made a hand gesture mimicking someone repeatedly grabbing items.

The staff attempted to limit the client demands on their goods through conservation practices during the packing process but also through attempting to dissuade certain clients from seeking assistance on a regular basis. Clients who did not conform to one of the target or 'ideal' demographic categories (single mothers, elderly, disabled, for example) were often told that they would be helped 'this time' but not 'next time' and

encouraged to seek help elsewhere such as at another charity. This was often applied towards single and childless men who were of working age—they were routinely informed by the interviewers that ‘we only help women with children here.’ These men were usually asked to seek help at charities that were oriented more towards the plight of childless men, such as Samhjálp. Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar had also agreed to take referrals of men from Mæðrastyrksnefnd which allowed Mæðrastyrksnefnd in turn to focus on women. The issue of the factor of gender will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Six.

Some clients were viewed with suspicion in terms of the validity of the information they provided (income, marital status, number of children). This was especially so for those who were known to seek help from other charities on a regular basis or displayed certain indicators which caught the staff’s attention, such as the possession of new cars or fine clothing. Other charities limited assistance by placing broad restrictions on the number of times a client could visit in a given month or throughout the year, whereas Mæðrastyrksnefnd attempted to ‘filter’ their clients in terms of a number of factors which rendered some clients as more desirable or ‘ideal’ than others. The issue of on-site behaviour was also a factor in these calculations.

To begin with, most of the staff did not look favourably upon the clients who were seen as pushy, grabby or aggressive—‘*frekja*’ was a commonly used word to describe these clients. This extended to include clients who took what the staff perceived as an inordinate amount of goods. Once I had spent a length of time observing the distribution days I learned who many of the ‘problem’ clients were. When these clients entered the interview area I could feel the tension among the staff climb and their eyes would follow these clients around the room while they attended to other matters. These clients would

sometimes take an unusually long amount of time browsing these goods in comparison with the majority of clients I observed. This irritated some of the senior staff as they wanted the operations to flow as smoothly as possible. Over time I became sensitized to this process and could predict with a high level of accuracy when a particular client had spent 'too much time' browsing or had crossed the ill-defined threshold of 'taking too much,' at which point a staff member would step in and suggest that they had enough. Another issue was the manner in which the clients selected goods. Requests for further goods, as opposed to simply taking them, were looked upon favourably as such requests recognized the staff's authority and displayed a level of deference that some members appeared to prefer. This usually applied to high demand items (e.g. baby strollers, new cookware), though even the continued taking of minor items could be a factor or point of contention if a client had taken 'too much' in general. The clients who repeatedly took 'too much' without asking were also perceived by the staff as not demonstrating consideration for other clients. The following fieldnote extract illustrates the difference between the preferred and less ideal forms of client behaviour:

I noticed two quite different approaches by demographically similar clients today. One woman with four children came in. While she filled out the form, the three boys and one girl took it upon themselves to grab some plastic bags and help themselves to the goods and t-shirts that were offered. All of them would shoot me furtive looks to see if I was going to intervene and tell them they had taken enough. Since all of these goods are freely donated I personally don't care what or how much they take, though if it was truly excessive I would do something. But it seemed like a game to me whereby the objective is to get what you can with the expectation at some point that an authority figure or some sort of gatekeeper will inevitably step in to place limits... But other families with similarly aged children are markedly different. The children seem hesitant and unsure if they are allowed to take things and if so how many. Usually they will

ask the parents, and the parents will ask the staff rather than just taking. One boy, about 8 or 9, asked a man who seemed to be his father if he could have a t-shirt and if so how many. The boy then asked one of the staff members who said to 'ask the man,' referring to me. The boy then asked me how many could he have. I replied with the phrase '*gerðu svo vel*' which in this context means roughly 'help yourself' or in other words 'take as many as you like.' The father joked, 'take it all,' with a hand and arm gesture encompassing the whole table but the boy only ended up taking two. This was in contrast to the previous group who crammed as many t-shirts in the bags as they possibly could, all without asking either the parent or staff. I was amused that they did this in several sweeps of the table, taking a few, wandering away to other tables, looking at me, and then wandering back for another handful, as if I would not notice.

The 'grabby' or 'pushy' clients were also usually perceived as 'greedy' clients; in other words, the staff's criticism of certain clients in terms of how they attempted to acquire these goods extended as well to speculations as to why they always wanted what the staff perceived as an inordinate amount of goods as well as what they did with them. While I always tried to put the clients' behaviours into perspective, admittedly I remained perplexed at times with what some clients did with the bags and bags of clothing that they took each week. Some clients left so overburdened with goods that more than one trip to the car was required. One popular suggestion was that some clients sold these goods at the local flea market downtown, Kolaportið (the Coal Port). However, it costs money to rent space at this market and, after some occasional browsing of this market, I saw neither goods that I recognized nor any clients among the vendors. I was also doubtful that much cash value could be extracted from mostly old and used clothing. Another possibility was that some clients tended to 'hoard' for various psychological reasons about which I am not qualified to do more than speculate. I suspect this was the case in certain instances as I had observed my fair share of clients who packed their cars with goods and seemed to



neglect to empty them and who piled new goods on top of old week after week.

Sometimes I recognized goods that I had placed in their cars from previous weeks. Some clients explained to me that they also collected goods on behalf of people in their social networks who would not, or could not, come to Mæðrastyrksnefnd in person. But the staff often perceived 'greed' as the blanket root cause in these disparate situations and tended to respond by limiting access.

There is no question that the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd took measures to further limit access to goods for the clients who were nevertheless deemed eligible for the basic assistance, such as by restricting the amount of goods that were placed in the bags and holding the rest in reserve, placing signs over certain goods which indicated the amount which could be taken by an individual, or visually monitoring the clients at the tables and interceding when individuals reached the point where they had taken 'too much,' as the fieldnote extract below exemplifies:

There were two clients I always see together—one younger woman in her 20s and an older woman perhaps in her late 40s. They look somewhat alike, so I always assumed they were mother and daughter but I cannot be certain. They are always well dressed to the extent that they look less like 'clients' than most. But they are somewhat excessive 'takers' and the staff will generally keep an eye on them. The younger one was spending a long time looking through the bookcase and had started to build a little pile on the floor. Jóhanna [staff member—pseudonym] was slouched against the table across from me resting, and did not pay them any attention. At the next moment Arnfríður [staff member—pseudonym] walked by, caught Jóhanna's attention and looked quickly back between Jóhanna and the young woman kneeling in front of the bookcase. The entire non-verbal communication lasted mere seconds and I would have missed it were I not watching Arnfríður closely, but the message was clear: 'Do something about her.' Jóhanna sighed as she lifted herself up from the table and casually strolled over to the woman and

said “*Jæja, hvernig gengur?*” [Well, well...how’s it going?] which was said nonchalantly but the meaning was clear that she was to move on.

As I have argued, these efforts were undertaken partly in consideration of their limited resources and sense of ‘fair play’ in terms of equitable distribution and their attempts to ensure that all clients had equal access to these goods. I could easily understand why some management was required in this area. But these efforts to limit goods did not only apply to logistics as I had initially surmised. Clients were turned away at times when food supplies were ample and I knew that we were going to have difficulty getting rid of these perishables at closing time. This applied as well to non-perishable goods. In the late summer of 2004 Mæðrastyksnefnd received a large shipment of fabric softener which came in small cartons. Some of these goods remained in stock a year later despite my efforts to ensure that the shelves were stocked so that the clients would take this product. These goods took up a lot of shelving space in the back and I personally grew frustrated at one point when a staff member placed a hand-written sign on the shelf limiting the cartons to one per client.

Some of these efforts by the staff to limit access to these goods were in response to the behaviour of specific clients, as discussed above, though I also wondered if some of these attempts to limit the quantity of goods procured by individual clients arose as the result of some kind of bureaucratic ‘indifference.’ But Michael Herzfeld (1992) argues that the common stereotype of bureaucratic indifference towards clients that one finds in Euro-American societies is simplistic. He contends that the image of the cold bureaucrat indifferent to the pleas of his or her client and who ‘passes the buck’ through claims of powerlessness in the face of laws or regulations overlooks the fact that both bureaucrat

and client are caught up within the same struggle. He writes that both are “demonstrably participants in a common symbolic struggle, using the same weapons, guided by the same conventions” (Herzfeld 1992:5). I have found that many of the same criticisms that the staff applied towards their clients were in turn drawn upon and invoked by some of the clients in order to distinguish themselves from the ‘other’ clients who they claimed were ‘less worthy’ of assistance from this agency. This kind of ‘discursive tactic,’ as Karen McCormack (2006) describes it, is often employed by the poor as a way in which to counteract the dominant negative views towards those who subsist on governmental or charitable assistance by asserting their own commitment to social norms in opposition to the image of the “putative welfare mother” (McCormack 2006:282) and the other ‘undeserving’ poor (see also Wadel 1973). As will be discussed further, these negative evaluations of some of the clients by the staff included doubts regarding the claims of financial difficulties faced by some clients based upon visual evaluations of their cars or clothing. This extended as well to criticisms of the behaviour of certain clients when they sought assistance at Mæðrastyrsnefnd—criticisms which appeared to be shared by some of their clients as well. One day a regular client came before opening hours with a bouquet of roses, presenting them to the staff saying: “from me to you all.” I did not catch all of what she said in conversation with a few staff members, but I was later told that she wanted to apologize on behalf of all of the “ungrateful people,” in reference to the clients who she felt acted poorly towards the staff.

The notion of what constitutes poverty in modern Iceland and who are the poor and how they should behave within the context of Mæðrastyrsnefnd often transcends the social distinctions of ‘staff member’ and ‘client,’ as both official and client tend to draw

upon and reinforce the same discursive tactics. The context of Mæðrastyrksnefnd is but one site among many within the larger society where these hegemonic discourses are reproduced and given strength. However, while both staff and clients questioned the behaviours and economic situations of specific clients, it was only the staff members who expressed concerns about the larger ramifications of the charitable enterprise itself as it pertained to what they perceived as the relationship between charity and dependency. At no point did a client ever suggest Mæðrastyrksnefnd or the other charities were too generous—quite the opposite complaint was common. The concern about excessive generosity was only something that I heard from select staff members or in certain political discourses. One staff member admitted to me that in some cases she felt that certain staff members had an ideological opposition to charity without restrictions. She came to this conclusion after wondering herself why some staff members insisted on putting meagre portions of vegetables into the bags and leaving the bulk in the storage to be distributed further upon request. During one meeting that I did not attend, the issue of placing excess food goods on tables was suggested as a way in which to ease the distribution of perishable food goods they had in abundance. One staff member expressed an opposing view and favoured keeping these goods in the back and only available upon request. The staff member who told me about this meeting was so shocked by the comments of her co-worker that she wrote down her words in Icelandic so that I would be able to have an accurate translation: “The people [clients] need to be aware that they are asking for support [*styrk*], for example from Mæðrastyrksnefnd; therefore they should not choose from excess supplies but ask.” I think that this comment ruptured the ideal image of charity for the staff member who told me about it and laid bare the power relations

which governed practice; it also suggested that some of the struggles over limiting these goods had little to do in some contexts with simple logistics but rather the reinforcement of power relations and the reproduction of the status quo.

The ‘ideal’ clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were perceived by the staff to be genuinely needy in an economic sense, but they were also expected to be supplicant and courteous in terms of behaviour. Disciplinary power operated here in a number of ways, both subtly and overtly. One was the expectation that the ‘shame’ of seeking assistance would dissuade those who did not truly need the help. Some of the staff members voiced to me the opinion that simply coming to Mæðrastyrksnefnd should be evidence in and of itself that most of the clients were ‘needy’ and not ‘greedy,’ citing the embarrassment of having to seek charitable assistance and the difficulties they surmised were faced by some of the clients even in crossing the threshold of their doorway. As one senior staff member declared to me: “No one comes here for fun.” Without exception all of the clients I spoke to reported to me that they would prefer not to have to go and seek assistance at Mæðrastyrksnefnd or other similar charities either—they did what they had to do for themselves or their families.

I would not argue that Mæðrastyrksnefnd designed the evaluation procedure to be intentionally humiliating or harsh overall in order to dissuade clients, as has been argued about poor relief systems in general. Piven and Cloward (1993) have argued that the commonly humiliating and disempowering procedures evident in applying for modern welfare benefits are indeed intended by design for disciplinary purposes, to which they refer to as “rituals of degradation” (Piven and Cloward 1993:448). In the past the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were forced to stand in a queue outside of the building while they

waited for their assistance. This was the routine practice as recently as 2003 and I saw a television documentary from 2002 which had filmed this queue during the holiday assistance (*Þrjá konur* 2002). Aside from rare occasions, such as the result of a late shipment of food or clients who showed up unusually early, these lines did not normally exist during the time of my fieldwork. One staff member who had a decade of experience at Mæðrastyrksnefnd told me that her own mother had worked for Mæðrastyrksnefnd in the 1950s. Her mother had told her that some of their clients were reduced to tears as the result of standing outside in a line for charitable assistance and on display for the public. In a way the forming of these lines could be seen as a ‘ritual of degradation’ with which to discipline the clients and communicate the message to the public that their agency therefore only serves the ‘truly’ needy, as who else but those in dire need would tolerate such conditions. This staff member felt that these lines during her mother’s tenure at Mæðrastyrksnefnd may have been enacted partly for disciplinary purposes but in recent years it seemed to have been related to logistics. If these more recent lines were humiliating for some it may have been so in effect rather than by design. Another staff member told me that prior to the fall of 2003 there was no Tuesday packing day—all of the receiving, sorting and packing work was done on Wednesday mornings. There was also no waiting room thus making it necessary to force the clients to wait outside until these chores were completed.

The version of the committee from the fall of 2003 onwards made the elimination of these lines a priority. With some basic operational adjustments, these lines were no longer necessary. Their formation was countered by preparing beforehand on Tuesdays, opening early if it appeared that a line was beginning to form and by creating a waiting

room out of one half of the clothing room. I was told by some staff members that they were glad to see these changes as they had disliked seeing the clients standing in the rain or snow, in effect put on display. The clients I spoke to were glad as well because of this and some mentioned that they had difficulties standing for long periods of time. One client told me that the lines outside also used to snake around the room inside which rendered the interview process a public event, as the other clients standing in line were able to listen and observe the proceedings. She also explained that she was forced to see and sometimes speak to other clients waiting in line who were sometimes neighbours and acquaintances and who she would rather did not know her business. Even a few years after the lines ceased to exist, the staff periodically received phone calls from potential clients asking if they still forced their clients to wait outside.

However, one staff member pointed out to me that there was also a strategic reason for eliminating these lines. The staff realized that standing in a queue made some of the clients “stressed” by the time they entered the building. Eliminating these lines reduced some of this tension and subsequently made the clients more docile and thus easier to manage and control. Foucault had argued that disciplinary forms of power produce ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1979:138–139). This, however, means that power does not always have to deny but it can also allow, as in this case an overt or explicit form of discipline was replaced by a more subtle form with the appearance of magnanimity but both versions were enacted for similar ends—the control of the clients and their behaviours. It would seem that forms of disciplinary power as discussed by Foucault are indeed complex, diffuse and not always easily apparent. Mæðrastyrksnefnd took measures to assure the clients and the public that the lines were no longer a feature of

their organization as the overall consensus among the staff was that they were humiliating and not necessary. In 2005, a newspaper ran an article about a client who was robbed at Mæðrastyksnefnd while standing in line for assistance (DV 2005b:6). The article was factually flawed in a number of ways as I was present when the incident in question had occurred and had detailed it in my fieldnotes. Among other errors, there was in fact no line at all and the incident had occurred inside in the waiting room. The staff were particularly annoyed by the accompanying photograph which showed the clients lined up and entering the building from what was now the exit. A former chair of the committee informed me that the photograph was in fact from December of 2002. This also angered other staff members as it reinforced an image of their organization that they worked to distance themselves from. One staff member complained: "I was so mad when I saw that. I don't know why they keep using that old picture, they have new ones." It was decided to invite a reporter from this paper to their place of operations in order to illustrate that this practice no longer occurs.

Ironically, while eliminating a disciplinary practice which the clients did not miss, it could be argued that the presence of these lines can also serve as a reminder to the public about inequality and thus potentially draw some much needed attention to the structural inequities which persist within the larger society. One charity in particular maintained the practice of queuing their clients outside of their building while capitalizing upon the presence of these lines for discursive effect. This charity, Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands, continued the practice of having the clients queue outside of the building during the time of my research. I have witnessed these lines myself on a number of occasions. Curiously, this organization often reproduced the same photograph of this queue over and



over in their advertisements and later on their website (Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands 2006). I perceived the image as demeaning but reasoned that it is also a powerful iconic symbol with which to elicit some sympathy on the part of the donating public and to make tacit assurances that, if people were willing to wait in these lines, then they surely must be among the 'truly needy.' References to these charity queues have also appeared in political discourses. One member of parliament a few years past referred directly to the 'long lines at Mæðrastyksnefnd' in order to call the sitting government on their performance regarding poverty. She argued: "The lines at Mæðrastyksnefnd in reality say everything that needs to be said about poverty in Iceland. For one of the richest nations in the world it is tragic to have to see single mothers with children on their arms waiting in line for food donations" (Sigurðardóttir 2003). She continued that these lines should serve as a reminder to the relevant officials: "The Ministers live in such an ivory tower that they do not see the poverty which is becoming even more visible in society and where class division [*stéttskipting*] has become a fact" (ibid.). The size or existence of this line, in my opinion, is really a poor indicator of the scale and scope of the larger problems, especially given that Mæðrastyksnefnd was able to eliminate the lines by making some basic logistical adjustments; the core difficulties faced by their clients, of course, still remained. But that image of these lines has the potential to act as a powerful political symbol. Some clients I spoke to admitted going both to Mæðrastyksnefnd and Fjölskylduhjálpi for assistance but preferred the former and often cited the lack of lines as one reason why. As one client told me: "They [Fjölskylduhjálpi] make you wait outside in a line before you can come in. They don't have the chairs, like the waiting room at Mæðrastyksnefnd. But it is the same kind of help, like the food." There were some critics

who perceived the disciplinary aspects of these queues and drew upon them in order to criticize charities. The chair of the social welfare board (*félagsmálaráð*) for the city of Reykjavík, Björk Vilhelmsdóttir, argued in a local newspaper that the practice of forcing the clients to stand in lines at charities is humiliating and should not be done (Fréttablaðið 2004b). She also argued that charities should pool their resources for more efficient distribution. Her argument was quite typical of the discourses critical of charity by focusing on the way the goods were distributed rather than the larger question of why charitable agencies are in existence at all.

It must be noted that there were subtle, and sometimes overt, pressures from the public and the media upon Mæðrastyksnefnd to restrict access to goods and to ensure that only those who ‘really needed the help’ received assistance. The existence of these lines in the past had perhaps served to communicate to the donating public that their clients were truly in need; their absence left the agency vulnerable to some criticisms regarding how they were able at all to determine who was ‘truly’ in need. As I noted earlier in Chapter Four, one member of parliament for the conservative Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn party excoriated Mæðrastyksnefnd in a newspaper article for what he perceived as their total lack of accountability. He had cited by way of example his own daughter, who he claimed was a client of Mæðrastyksnefnd, in order to criticize charities in general and Mæðrastyksnefnd in specific: “It is not only my daughter who abuses the system, there are many more and it seems like just anyone can go there [Mæðrastyksnefnd] and ask for food. This is utter nonsense” (DV 2005a:6). I found his claims dubious. Given the screening system that I observed and described above, it was most certainly not the case that people could simply walk in off the street and ask for food

without providing identification and some proof of need. Even those who were approved for basic assistance on a given visit were further subjected to various restrictions, such as the amount of goods they could take and how often they should visit. One senior staff member argued that charities should not have to be held to the same standards as the rigid systems found in the parallel state assistance schemes, both national and municipal: She said to me: “We have been around for 76 years and this is how the agency works. It is not ‘official’ as Félagsþjónustan [municipal social services],” but admitted that some sort of screening process was necessary. But a serious charge against any charity in this context is indeed the perception that they are not ‘professional’ and are indiscriminately distributing assistance—a concern which some staff members evidently shared.

One method with which to determine which clients would be assisted without much scrutiny was based on subjective interpretations by the staff of client demeanours. I routinely noticed a dominant pattern of behaviour among the clients in terms of demeanours that I would characterize as passive, such as slumped shoulders, low speaking voices and general expressions of fatigue. They tended to answer the staff’s questions in a polite manner and did what was asked of them. Though I could not be certain in all cases, it was my impression after talking with the staff and months of observation that the clients who had only recently come into the charitable assistance system were somewhat uncomfortable and uncertain about what to do and what was expected of them. It was obvious when clients were new not only because I had never seen them before but because they were unfamiliar with the system at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and acted somewhat ‘cowed’ and uncertain of where to go and what to do. These clients were usually successful and treated kindly by the staff.

But after some time had elapsed in my fieldwork I noticed that some of these clients who may have appeared passive during the interview stage were sometimes quite scathing about the staff or the organization in general to me in interviews and conversations, if not in reference to their own experience than towards the experiences of their friends or family members who also sought help from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I surmised that some of this passivity I observed was in some cases the result of a lack of energy due to depression, illness or chronic fatigue, but in other cases it was a deliberate strategy in order to maximize returns or to ensure repeated assistance from this agency; in other words a form of carefully managed docility. Whereas the new clients often had to be instructed in the procedures of asking for assistance, some of the repeat clients attempted to assist the staff in making the procedure operate as smooth as possible. One could argue that this display of behaviour on the part of some of the clients acted as a form of reciprocity or payment—docility and helpfulness in exchange for assistance. ‘Regular’ or ‘veteran’ clients, as I referred to them in my notes, knew exactly what was expected of them. On a busy day I once observed a regular client pick up the application form out of the tray herself, fill it out on her own without guidance and, with the appropriate identification ready, hand it to an overburdened staff member with barely a word exchanged between them. Most regular and semi-regular (e.g. bi-weekly, once a month) clients received their allotted assistance and never engaged in any behaviour that irritated the staff. The weekly clients usually came prepared with all of the required identification, knew where to go and appeared to be blasé about the ordeal, sometimes stopping to chat with certain staff members, other clients or myself. During one warm and sunny late spring afternoon a rather festive gathering among some regular clients occurred

spontaneously on the street outside of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as car radios played, small groups of clients chatted while their children scurried around the parked cars and played. However, some clients also balanced their appearances of docility and compliance with a kind of low level contestation and routinely attempted to extract the maximum amount of goods they could through a number of strategies without seriously antagonizing the staff. A handful, however, directly defied the staff's attempts to manage the distribution of these goods and verbally challenged their right to do so. While it is often quite common in the social sciences to interpret such acts as acts of 'resistance' I feel that caution must be employed when doing so.

Resistance is a commonly invoked concept in the social sciences. But like other keywords such as class, resistance is often ill-defined and used and interpreted in a number of ways. I write of the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd 'contesting' the efforts of the staff to limit and control their access to these donated goods, thereby implying a degree of 'resistance.' However, I also wish to be cautious and clarify that I do not mean to overstate the significance of such acts as 'resistance.' I particularly wish to avoid the 'romance of resistance,' as Kray (2006) puts it, which she holds characterized some anthropological work in the 1990s (Kray 2006:67). This 'romance' included, in Kray's view, an overly optimistic view of the potential for new social movements at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the overall tendency to see resistance in a wide range of often disparate acts; a popular interpretation that has partly arisen as the result of the influence of Scott's (1985) widely noted concept of the 'weapons of the weak' (Kray 2006:67). Of course some acts of resistance do indeed take the form of collective actions undertaken on behalf of a particularly situated group. The work of Winnie Lem (1999, 2001) with

Occitan farmers in rural Languedoc, France, is but one particularly good example among others. Admittedly, I found it tempting to frame some of the acts I observed at Mæðrastyrksnefnd on the part of some of the clients as acts of 'resistance' or as 'weapons of the weak' of sorts, in reference to James Scott's much cited (1985) analysis of the acts of low level resistance among disempowered rural agriculturalists as well as others. The behaviours of some of the clients during the evaluation process that I interpreted as overt or latent hostility, such as evading staff questions, giving curt replies and aggressive body language, would seem fitting for such an analysis. These behaviours, while irritating some of the staff members, were usually not egregious enough acts to justify excluding these clients from being helped. But these behaviours were also not helpful either. In certain cases I mused about whether or not these clients acted in this way because it may have been one way in which to regain a measure of dignity and self-respect in such a disempowering context. But when I observed individuals or small groups of clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd verbally challenge the staff's attempts to limit or restrict access to goods or, as happened on occasion, when I observed some clients resort to taking goods without permission while a companion blocked the view of the staff, I was perplexed about whether to analyze these acts as 'resistance,' with the term's inherent political implications or, as Sherry Ortner (1995) has noted, these could simply be seen as 'survival strategies' (Ortner 1995:175) on the part of poor or marginalized people in their quest to acquire access to needed material goods.

The clients engaged in a wide range of activities in order to secure their continuing access to these goods as well as to maximize the returns on their efforts. Such strategies ranged from outright passivity to managed docility, as I mentioned, to acts

which directly challenged the right of the staff to control access to these goods. In a few instances, as I will discuss, some of these acts could be interpreted as resistance.

However, at no point during my fieldwork did a coherent movement emerge on the behalf of the clients as a group to press for collective demands from this agency. While some of the clients I spoke with criticized both Mæðrastyrksnefnd as well as the formal assistance schemes and the state in general, at no point did any client clearly express any possible link between the charity complex and state and the role of charities in helping to perpetuate the status quo, though a few seemed to be of the mind that Mæðrastyrksnefnd operated somehow under the control of the municipal social services of Reykjavík. Aside from outright passivity or attempts to help the staff expedite the interview process by filling out forms on their own or having all their papers ready, some clients resigned themselves to doing what was asked of them but, perhaps in an attempt to regain a measure of self-respect or to counteract their feelings of powerlessness, criticized the staff surreptitiously to me in conversations outside on the street or later in interviews. These criticisms took the form of questions directed to me regarding some of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's operating procedures, such as querying why they had to fill out the client information sheets each week or the variability of goods in terms of quality and quantity they noticed from bag to bag and from week to week. At other times criticisms were directed towards specific staff members. During one small group interview at the home of a client, I was told of the role that this assistance played in their survival strategies. I then asked a question about any negative experiences, if any, they might have had at Mæðrastyrksnefnd:

I asked about their experiences at Mæðrastyrksnefnd in terms of what they did not like about the operations. Una [pseudonym] laughed as she said she “doesn’t like” some of the staff members, singling out one in the kitchen. I asked why, and she said that when she goes to collect her food she always tried to be nice and say ‘*góðan daginn*,’ but she laughed as she tried to emulate the serious face of one staff member she was describing and she continued that this woman never says hi or replies to her greeting; “she just does this” and she mimicked quickly shoving out some bags with two hands. Þorgerður [pseudonym] grinned a little and seemed to know who Una was talking about. Þorgerður shook her head and said that some of them are simply “rude.” She sighed and asked why they had to fill out the forms each and every week... She continued: “Sometimes they want more and more proof...you know proof that your children live at home with you. I mean, I know why they ask. I know of some women, a bunch of women actually, who say they have three or four children at home. But they don’t...they don’t have custody of any of them. I know some of the women are lying. But can’t they just check once to see?”... Una added that at Fjölskylduhjálpi that you just have to give them the information once and it is in the computer. “I don’t know why at Mæðrastyrksnefnd they ask each week. Now they are asking me for more proof.”

Until the evening of this interview I had no idea these two clients knew each other and that they were friends, as I could not recall having seen either of them together at Mæðrastyrksnefnd even though they were both fairly regular clients. When I observed these clients on-site during the time of my fieldwork I never observed either arguing with the staff or even complaining. I was somewhat taken aback by the flurry of criticisms which emerged after having explained that I intend to use pseudonyms in any published materials and that I do not report back to Mæðrastyrksnefnd on specific clients. After a number of similar experiences it became obvious to me that much of the passivity I observed among the clients was managed docility; they clearly had grievances and opinions about how things should be done but chose not to voice them in order to avoid antagonizing the staff.



Not all of the clients accepted the staff's control of these goods. Some argued that these goods were donated by the public and were intended for the clients, thus contesting the staff's right to limit access. Even when some clients grew angry about this they still held their tongues for the moment and vented their anger outside on the street. One day a staff member and a client had a minor altercation over some donated fabric. It was assorted bolts and squares of cloth that were donated and presumably intended to be used for sewing projects. It was of negligible commercial value and it was the kind of good to which I paid little attention. I did not see the point in restricting access to donated fabric and, as far as I was concerned, the faster it was collected by the clients the better in order to free up space. However, this particular client was one of those whom the staff members perceived as 'pushy' or 'demanding.' The staff member in question had had enough of this client that day and brashly grabbed this fabric out of the client's hand and sternly informed her that she had received more than her fair share and what was left had to be shared with the clients waiting to be served. In response, the client muttered under her breath while she collected her goods. Given that she had a number of bags, I offered to help her. Once out on the street she exploded in a stream of Icelandic that was too fast and heated for me to follow, as I only caught something about her trying to 'help someone.' I asked apologetically in Icelandic if she spoke English. She did not seem surprised and then switched her tirade into good, albeit heavily accented English: "I am only trying to help a friend. She made me feel like an idiot yelling at me like that—made me feel like I was stealing something. I mean it was only a little material! They act like I am taking from them, like it is their own stuff personally!"

While some clients may have held their tongues in terms of directly criticizing the staff or their policies, they let their dissatisfaction be known in other ways. Certain regular clients appeared to engage in a kind of low-level resistance and seemed to take some pleasure in antagonizing the staff. I shortly learned who these clients were and that they would take goods to the point where a staff member would have to intervene. The following is a typical example of such:

Two clients that I see almost every week came by as per usual. Both of them are well known among the staff for trying to get what they can before being told enough is enough. I find it somewhat humorous at times, as it is almost a game or at least a codified performance where each player knows their part. Both of these women will make a brief sweep of the room, taking a small amount of goods and then casually noting goods to look at closer once they receive their food...these two seem to have an unerring ability to know how long to look at the goods before reaching the point where the staff will have to verbally prompt them to collect their food. Once they get their food they will make a second sweep and then take and take until they can feel the staff's concern build to the point at which if they take any more they will be told 'enough is enough,' or something along those lines. It is difficult to describe, but I can feel the tension in the room build the longer they stay and I think they are aware of this as well. Sometimes they push it a little too far and will receive a warning, other times they will know when to stop. Once they stop they will begin their third sweep which usually consists of moving their bags to the door by me and then continuing to casually look at the goods, asking for permission to take each individual item at this point on. Usually the staff will agree with some harsh or weary looks until either they will be told enough is enough or the clients run out of things they want. Today they reached the stage where they were almost told. One asked for a vase, and then a pot holder. [Staff member A] was watching them without an expression but I could see that [staff member B] was biting her lip, debating whether or not to toss them out... While they were getting ready to leave one then ran her hand over a child's highchair commenting that it was '*mjög flott*' (very cool). However, she did not ask for it, either aware that she pushed the issue enough or else decided that she really did not want it. I couldn't help smirking during the whole performance and as the

client grabbed her bags to leave she flashed me a mischievous grin as she left. It seems clear to me that she knows that she is given extra attention when she is there and appears to push the staff on purpose.

The reactions by the staff to these two clients and others like them varied. Some staffers took it in stride and seemed faintly bemused; others grew frustrated and impatient, while some dealt with these issues with humour. One staff member always struck me as somewhat guarded. I felt that she had strong opinions but tended to keep them to herself. We were discussing the regulation of the goods on the tables one day when, to my surprise, she satirized one of the clients described above, performing a pantomime of how the client often behaves and mimicking her cheery tone of voice and the way she asks for each item: "Can I have this?—Can I have this?—*Æðislegt!* [cool, amazing] Can I have this?" It was not done out of malice but as a kind of 'in-joke' that only experienced staff members could relate to and a way of relieving tension.

In a few cases some clients attempted to extract as many goods as possible from this organization, but since these particular clients displayed various indicators of mental illness or substance abuse the staff generally tolerated their awkward attempts even if they became exasperated at times. One young woman in particular often came near closing time. I suspected that she had a drinking problem as she often smelled strongly of alcohol and at times had difficulty concentrating. I did my best to assist her but she often placed me into a difficult position as I wanted to help but she continued to ask for various items while the staff were sending me non-verbal signals that she had taken enough. On one occasion she remained behind asking for certain items even after the other clients had left and while the staff were putting on their coats to go home. This client was seemingly

oblivious to my hints and suggestions that we were closing as she rummaged through the tables of goods and made further requests. At one point a senior staff member, who was usually quite calm and unemotional, surprised me by intervening and informed this client: "You have taken a lot today. We are closing and it is enough." The client then proceeded to ask about a pair of pants as if nothing had been said. I tried not to laugh as this staff member, whose face was usually inscrutable when dealing with the clients, looked at me in open shock and disbelief and then slumped in frustration. I shrugged in response, as I had no idea how to get the client to leave without being harsh. The staff member shoved the pair of pants at her and abruptly stated: "That's it. We are closing," and briskly walked back to her desk and left me to escort the client out of the building. Telling the clients that they had taken enough or asking them to leave was one of the more difficult aspects of my volunteer activities. In this case I still apologized to the client for the previous actions of the staff member while I walked her to the door, although I was tired and wanted to go home as well. To my surprise she apologized for her own actions by saying "I am sorry" and briefly slipped her arm around my waist in a half-hearted hug as I held the door open. I was not entirely sure what she was thanking me for. She seemed to recognize that her actions antagonized the staff but I never felt in her case that it was done out of ill-feelings or explicit contestation. At a later point when this client returned it appeared that the staff had decided to take pre-emptive measures, as one staff member shadowed her and when she reached the tables I was tending the client declared to me as a matter of fact: "I am only allowed to take two things today."

The clients' dissatisfaction with the staff's attempts to limit access to those goods occasionally materialized in outright theft. Shortly before I started my volunteer duties at

Mæðrastyrksnefnd I was told that two clients had worked together to steal a computer that had been donated and was stored for a moment under a table. I was told that these clients had worked together, with one blocking the staff's view of the other while the staff were distracted. Once it was known what the clients were up to it was too late and they were out of the building with this computer. Admittedly, at times I grew frustrated with some of the clients' behaviour as well, particularly in terms of deceit.

Early in my research a senior staff member informed me that a child's bicycle propped against the wall by the exit was on reserve for a few clients to look at. Since I was often stationed by the door, I was asked to keep an eye on this bike until the clients in question could have a look at it. One client came by but did not take the bike as it was too large for her child and so it remained by the exit. At one point I had to go back to the storeroom and, upon returning, a client whom I had never seen before was in the process of leaving with the bike and casually informed me: "Hildur [chair of the committee] said that I could have this." I had no reason to question this, given the fact that she had mentioned the chair by name and had addressed me in English, so I held the door open for her as she left. Early in my research few clients were aware that I was a foreigner and it was only apparent in extended dialogues where my accent gave me away or when I searched for a word. Since this client whom I had never met before had addressed me initially in English I assumed that the chair had informed her to let the foreign doorman know that the bike was hers. Much to my surprise, an hour or so later Hildur asked me where the bike was. Confused, I told her that the client she gave it to had taken it. As I said this I could see a humorous glint begin to form in her eyes at my growing confusion. She replied with a smirk that she in fact had not told anyone to take it and still had not

decided whom to give it to. I was unable to disguise my shock and apologized profusely, embarrassed that I had been taken advantage of. The chair laughed the incident off but this client's actions had annoyed me nevertheless. Still, as I thought about this event when walking home I had to admire the client's resourcefulness, even though her skill at prevarication was somewhat disturbing. In reality, all she had accomplished was acquiring a used bike that was freely donated.

One could interpret these actions by some of the clients as an attempt to maximize their returns by extracting the greatest amount of assistance possible from this organization by whatever means they had at their disposal. But I would find a materialist interpretation alone lacking as it often seemed to me that some clients also received a measure of amusement or satisfaction from 'pressing the staff's buttons,' so to speak, perhaps in order to compensate for feelings of disempowerment in their lives in general. I have noticed some clients smirking or sharing a small joke after passing the interview stage, presumably about some small lie to the staff that went undetected. In the larger context of things, this might seem like a rather meagre or hollow victory. But the context in which these activities occurred must not be forgotten, as the clients are dealing on the whole with a number of complex socio-economic difficulties which include material deprivation and accompanying feelings of disempowerment, depression and frustration. Some clients did react rather strongly to the staff's efforts to limit their access to goods. The staff generally felt that their attempts to limit access were reasonable and, while not expecting total compliance, did expect in the words of one staff member at least "common manners." One client I knew well felt that the staff needed to appreciate the situations that some of the clients faced in their daily lives and needed patience when

dealing with those who did not always conform to their expectations of behaviour: "They have to remember that people come in there from all kinds of situations. Some of them are being beaten by their husbands, many are depressed, tired, some have barely any sleep. They have enough problems. They are just coming for some help, they don't need this." However the staff, who donated their own free time and labour, also had to put up with their own share of grief. The client-staff interview session was replicated 120 or more times on a busy distribution day and could produce its own form of fatigue among the regular staff members. The clients normally spent five to ten minutes during the interview and allocation process, and sometimes more, depending on how busy the day was and how long they had to wait. But some staff members spent six or seven hours on-site during distribution days when they could be doing other activities. I often marvelled at some of these women as I admittedly cannot envision sorting produce or being told off by irate clients on a weekly basis during my retirement years. I often joked with some staff members that they should be sitting on a beach somewhere rather than sorting mushrooms. But when discussing these issues, I continued to maintain to the staff that the actions of the clients, even those who behaved poorly, needed to be contextualized considering that it is much harder to live with poverty than to deal with it as an outside professional or volunteer.

On a few occasions it struck me that some of the clients' actions could be interpreted under the rubric of 'resistance' in an ideological sense, as these acts were not intended to maximize the possible resources they could extract from this agency; on the contrary, some of their actions could even jeopardize their access to these goods through antagonizing the staff in what appeared to be, in a handful of cases, actions which

signalled their displeasure about their treatment at Mæðrastyrksnefnd or in terms of their status as the subjects of charity in general. One client whom I knew fairly well was having increasing difficulties later in the time of my research in dealing with the staff for a number of reasons. During one visit this client refused to sit during the interview stage, as is the norm, and stood with her arms folded while she answered the staff member's questions. Such an act is unlikely to secure access to additional goods and had the real possibility of jeopardizing future assistance if the staff perceived this behaviour as giving them 'attitude.' In my interpretation the actions of this client were a response to how she perceived she was treated by the staff, as this client later indicated to me her displeasure at having to deal each week with the same battery of questions in order to receive some material assistance. At the end of the day on one occasion this client's behaviour was the subject of discussion among the staff, as one senior staff member recounted to the group how the client had insisted on standing and how she had, in her view, aggressively and defiantly filled out the client information sheet. I was placed in an awkward situation when some other staff members asked for a physical description of the client in order to place her and one of the two who were recounting the story waved in my direction and referred to her as "Jim's friend" [*vinkona*].<sup>15</sup>

However, some of the strategies of the clients were intended to build bonds between themselves and the staff in order to secure access to these goods even though, in my estimation, merely answering the questions of the staff and avoiding making direct challenges to their authority would have been sufficient. Some current or former clients occasionally volunteered their time at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. One of the perks for doing so was that these clients were sometimes able to by-pass the usual procedures or were given



additional assistance or goods if they requested such. This was a form of reciprocity which existed between certain client-volunteers and the staff. I also went to extended lengths to help clients whom I had interviewed or with whom I had built a personal relationship. At times I was placed into difficult situations as I attempted to help clients while the staff wished to limit goods. Sometimes I did so surreptitiously by retrieving goods from the back and placing them into the clients' bags. There was also a drawer in one table where I kept items that I set aside for certain clients. I was saddened one day when moving a table while I helped the staff relocate to their new location in June of 2006. Upon opening one of the drawers in this table I found a picture frame which I had set aside for a client who had passed away earlier that year and I never got the chance to give it to her. Early in my research I set aside and distributed these goods quietly in the hopes that the staff would not notice and reprimand me but I later learned that almost all of the staff members did similar things to help their 'favourite' clients.

At times, however, a handful of clients misinterpreted the 'rules' of reciprocity and alienated the staff with their attempts to extract more than the usual share of goods. One staff member in particular was popular among the clients as she was usually kind, polite and calm and was favourably mentioned to me by many of the clients I spoke with. She practically embodied the stereotypical 'kindly grandmother' image but with a scholar's curiosity and intensity regarding observing and understanding social phenomena. This staff member was usually unflappable and hardly spoke an unkind word about anyone, which was why I was surprised one day to find her complaining about one client, referring to her as "disagreeable," perhaps the harshest thing I have heard this staff member say about a client. I asked what was the matter and she pointed to a number of

large black plastic bags, lamenting that this client was always “bringing in garbage.” I looked at the bags in question and they did contain dirty, rumpled clothing which seemed to smell like stale cigarettes. I was a little perplexed as these kinds of donations were not very unusual. She explained that the client expected praise and preferential treatment in return for her actions. I noted the incident in my fieldnotes, but several months later this staff member complained to me again about this “disagreeable” client. She told me that she regretted telling the client where she was from, as the client had evidently taken the time to find out that they were related albeit in a rather tenuous way. I asked this staff member if this client had found that she was related in terms of immediate family or was of the same larger extended *ætt* and she explained that it was the latter.

There is not adequate space here to discuss either the Icelandic kinship system in any comprehensive way or the academic debates over the structure or terminology aside from a few brief comments. Some scholars have argued that Icelanders make such distinctions as between parallel and cross cousins and use descriptive terminology to make these distinctions clear in discourse (e.g. Pinson 1979), while the counter-argument (e.g. Rich 1989) is that these terms exist and are used but the unspecific merged variants can be used as well. I have not studied the issue at length but can say from experience that my Icelandic in-laws have sometimes expressed confusion over the lack of specificity of English kinship terms such as ‘cousin’ or ‘aunt.’ In Icelandic they sometimes use the descriptive terminology such as ‘*móðurbróðir*’ (mother’s brother) or ‘*föðursystir*’ (father’s sister), but I have found that the merged terms such as ‘*frændi*’ (unspecified male consanguineal relation) and ‘*frænka*’ (unspecified female consanguineal relation) are used as well. The issue appears to be contextual: when the specificity is not relevant

the merged term is often used. If the merged term for 'grandchild' (*barnabarn*) is not adequate to explain the relation then the descriptive '*sonarsonur*' (son's son), for example, may be employed.

However, Rich has argued that the term *ætt*, which he refers to as "the most fundamental genealogical concept in the Icelandic system" (Rich 1989:64), is also problematic in terms of context, meaning and boundaries. The *ættingjar* are supposed to encompass and distinguish consanguineal from affinal kin along patrilineal lines. Rich argues that, in discussing a person's *ætt*, his informants did not always exclude matrilineal lineages as there were subcategories such as *móðurætt* and *föðurætt* (ibid.:65). Given that Iceland has a small population with over a thousand year history and with dense social and kinship networks, it is not unusual to find people who are related to another through lineages if one were to search back through several generations. Knowing where one or one's family is from in Iceland increases the possibility that two Icelanders could find a common relative or acquaintance without having to resort to an intensive genealogical research. It was quite common when observing the first interactions of a new volunteer or staff member at Mæðrastyksnefnd that the conversation often quickly proceeded from locating the person in space ('where are you from?') to finding a common acquaintance or relation ('you must know so-and-so'). It never failed to amaze me that they would almost always be linked in some way. There is also an online genealogical database called Íslendingabók (Book of the Icelanders) which was produced after several years of work, drawing upon the efforts of genealogists, historians, a software firm and the biotech company deCode (see Pálsson 2002; Pálsson

In press). My wife has demonstrated this database to me, showing in what ways she is related to her various friends and some staff members from Mæðrastyrksnefnd.

While many Icelanders are related in one way or another I found it intriguing that this client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd made attempts to establish these kinds of connections with the staff. In my interpretation it was a calculated effort to maximize returns and ensure further assistance, in addition to the previous offering of clothing donations she had made. Marshall Sahlins had noted that reciprocity “is inclined toward the generalized pole by close kinship, toward the negative extreme in proportion to kinship distance” (Sahlins 1972:196). It would be understandably difficult for a staff member not to aid or give preferential treatment to a kin member. But these efforts by this client fell flat, so to speak, not only because the kinship link in terms of the larger *ætt* was tenuous but also because her attempts to build a relationship appeared manipulative and insincere. When I later interviewed a former chair we discussed this client, whom we both knew in common, and she could not disguise her surprise upon learning that this client had made similar kinship claims upon other staff members as she had with herself in the past.

There is no question that the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd assist their clients in a material sense. However, one could also argue that the clients are dominated in terms of the staff’s attempt to control access to the goods they distribute, the monitoring and surveillance of their behaviour both visually as well as through the information they collect. As I have also argued, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd contribute to hegemonic discourses and the maintenance of the status quo through their charitable activities. However, they also challenge some of the dominant images of their clients which circulate in political and popular discourses. Much in keeping with Gramsci’s position

that the workings of hegemony are always in flux and movement, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are engaged in reproducing as well as challenging these discourses; thus the agency itself is engaged in acts of dominance as well as resistance. Very few members of the public and even some governmental officials appeared to be well informed about the issues of poverty and the nuances of the social welfare system, let alone the charitable system. With very few exceptions the staff members, volunteers, and some clients I spoke to as well expressed their admitted lack of knowledge about the conditions of local poverty, the intricacies of the social welfare system and the work of charities previous to their personal exposure to these issues. One staff member admitted to me: "In my world, nobody I know, knows of these things." Another had told me: "Before I started [at Mæðrastyrksnefnd] I felt that I lived a protected life...I feel that I am at school everyday." Another: "I always had an idea about how much poverty there was in town [Reykjavík] and was always interested. But I did not realize the amount of need until I started working here." Many present and former staff members I spoke to reported feelings of shock and sleeplessness after their initial experiences and in regards to certain events that periodically occurred throughout their tenures. But despite their experiences, many of the staff members continued to struggle with the contradictions between the knowledge they gained as the result of their work and their previously held beliefs and perceptions.

It was also not the case that the regular exposure to the issues of poverty as the result of their work produced a commonality of viewpoints among the diverse staff. As Gramsci has argued, hegemonies are produced and reproduced as the result of inherited knowledge that is modified in a complex interplay with the knowledge derived from

experience, but there is no guarantee that a coherent counter-hegemony will arise out of this process without specific political organizing or at least discussions among people with similar related experiences and interests. The fact that the requests for assistance did not serve as evidence of need-in-and-of-themselves indicated that there remained doubts among the staff about the validity of the claims of some of the clients. Many vacillated on a regular basis with respect to their views on some issues and their attitudes towards the clients. The process was confused at times as I would witness a staff member I had pegged as 'conservative' in her views deal compassionately with an agitated client under the influence of a substance and on the same day observe a staff member who was normally generous and understanding grow frustrated and despondent about the behaviours of some clients and the entire project of charity. But in public discourses the committee usually presented a united front, as such ambiguity is not productive in terms of soliciting for aid and support. The entire practice of limiting goods had logistical purposes but it also had a discursive one through the message conveyed to the public that the clients were screened and were not indiscriminately allocated goods. Aside from their screening practices the committee, in order to ensure the level of support from the public, companies and the state, had to engage in discursive practices which assured donors that their clients were in need. This meant engaging directly with the prevalent views on poverty in contemporary Iceland.

#### **5.4 Sá er fátækur sem hvorki á í sig eða á**

At one point in my research a staff member recounted an Icelandic aphorism to me in regards to the issue of poverty: "*Sá er fátækur sem hvorki á í sig eða á*" (The one who has neither in him nor on him is poor). As she started to articulate this phrase, a

client-volunteer who was looking on joined the staff member in completing it in unison. I subsequently learned that this maxim was widely known to refer to the way in which poverty had been understood 'in the past' in Iceland but this saying, which bears much in common with the notion of 'absolute poverty,' is still adhered to in certain ways in the consideration of poverty in the present. The references to food, those with 'nothing in them,' as well as to clothes, those with 'nothing on them,' were still symbolic yardsticks against which poverty was measured and which tended to render notions of relative poverty, or 'positional suffering' in the words of Bourdieu, as "entirely relative," meaning completely unreal, if we take the point of view of the macrocosm and compare it to the 'real' suffering of material poverty (*la grande misère*) (Bourdieu 1999:4).

Suspensions about the clients at Mæðrastyrsnefnd and other charities revolved around not only whether or not they were truthful as to their reported incomes and domestic situations but were also based on the evaluations of visible material indicators. The 'ideal' clients were not only to act in a certain way but look a certain way. Clients who had new cars, fine clothes, cell phones, well done hair and nails and so forth were treated with suspicion as to whether or not they 'really needed the help.' The clients, therefore, had to embody their need in evident ways. A parallel criticism posited that if these clients indeed had as low incomes as they claimed, then they were criticized for 'misusing their money' and for living beyond their means thus having a hand in producing and reproducing their own plights. Yet many of the staff members were also aware of the pressures upon their clients from advertising, the media and peers to conform and to consume at the normative level which, in Iceland, mandated certain standards of vehicles, clothes, electronics, travel and so forth. A measure of blame was accorded to these factors as was the issue of the

easily available level of credit and the inevitable accumulation of debt which contributed to the difficulties of some of their clients.

The clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are here essentially in a double-bind, so to speak: not only are they unable to participate at the normative level of consumption in terms of the larger society, due to low incomes, they are also castigated by the staff of charities and the general public for their attempt at blending in with the larger society through certain consumptive strategies. Stuart Ewen (1988) has pointed out that, from a classic Marxist perspective, one's class position is not a matter of choice but "the position one inhabits in relation to the forces of production" (Ewen 1988:60). However, Ewen contends that, at least in the United States, another understanding of class emerged which was based on consumption rather than production. He argues that even as early as the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States that "the expanding market in appearances was helping to feed a notion of class defined primarily in *consumptive* rather than productive terms, highlighting individual, above common, identity" (ibid.:62). Daniel Miller (1998), following Douglas and Isherwood (1996 [1979]) and Bourdieu (1984), among others, argues that anthropologists need to consider the relationship between consumption, objects and people. Miller supports the analytical shift from production to consumption to argue that "people construct themselves or are constructed by others...increasingly through relations with cultural forms in the arena of consumption" (Miller 1998:11). I agree that it would appear very much to be the case that some of the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd attempted to negotiate their status within Icelandic society through the display or consumption of certain consumer goods. And I would add that the clients are in turn 'made' by these goods but also by the goods they received from



Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as the offering of second-hand clothes, expired or damaged items of food and so forth serve to remind them of their status in the objective relations of production. I contend that, with the consideration of consumption, it is critical not to lose sight of the structural reasons that propelled the clients to seek help at a charity in the first place—there is a critical link between consumption and production which must not be overlooked. Despite the consideration of this point and the general agreement among the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd that low wages and low pensions rendered a basic level of existence difficult in contemporary Iceland, there was nevertheless a measure of disapproval towards the clients who were perceived as living beyond their means and not scaling back their consumption practices to the ‘choice of the necessary’ (see Bourdieu 1984:372–396), which was generally held to befit those who lived on the economic margins of the larger society.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd sought to limit clients as per their stated income level, much in keeping with the practices of the parallel state assistance agencies. One of the agency’s goals was to assist those in need but the basis on which the clients were deemed eligible and determined to be ‘needy’ was not always clear. Mæðrastyrksnefnd did not employ any kind of quantified scale. The staff relied upon their own judgements as to what constituted need. The inevitable discussion as to whether or not their clients were ‘poor’ was a re-occurring theme throughout the entire time of my field research but it was not limited to a mere discussion of the clients’ incomes. The notion of poverty is a notoriously complex issue which, despite the best efforts of social scientists and government agencies, cannot entirely be calculated from a devised mathematical formula.

At the very basic level, poverty has often been analyzed and defined in two key ways: *absolute* and *relative* poverty. *Absolute* poverty is at its most simple “the minimum required to maintain a person’s physical efficiency” (Hagberg 2001:27). This minimum is often expressed as a monthly or annual income sum, or a level of consumption such as necessary caloric intake, and is used a starting point from which to decide where to place the line between ‘the poor’ and the ‘non-poor’ (Burman 1996:19–20). It has not gone unnoticed that a definition of poverty in absolute terms is essentially meaningless without the consideration of context, as the minimum requirements to ‘maintain a person’s physical efficiency’ may be quite different from place to place in terms of the localized costs and logistics for shelter, clothing and food. A notion of *relative* poverty is usually introduced as an attempt to correct these deficiencies so that a definition of poverty may thus consider “the average living conditions in a given society” (Hagberg 2001:27). Most international organizations, such as the World Bank,<sup>16</sup> have attempted to include relative understandings of poverty into their formulas but, as Peter Townsend (2001) has pointed out, this has raised additional questions. He asks, for example, “How are necessities in living standards identified? What are the scientific reasons for selecting sets of predominantly material rather than predominantly social factors?” (Townsend 2001:4). The idea of poverty is thus not only economic and material in nature, but also political, social, cultural, symbolic and ethical. The staff of Mæðrastyksnefnd took a number of factors into consideration when evaluating their clients. Some of these factors included the historical orientation of the committee, logistical concerns, as well as some prevalent beliefs about poverty and the poor in the larger society which the staff both challenged and reproduced.

A common charge against the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in public discourses was that they were not poor but were simply going to Mæðrastyrksnefnd to get something 'for free.' This was a favourite discourse of governmental officials as it drew attention away from the structural issues regarding the pension system or labour market and recast the debate as being about 'greed' rather than poverty. This was a more effective strategy than simply intoning the mantra that there are no poor people in Iceland because it presented an explanation for the visible evidence of people lining up for charities or the discourses of the charities themselves which asked the public for support. This explanation also played upon the suspicions and prejudices among the public regarding social assistance recipients, disability pensioners, immigrants, substance abusers and the homeless who in total made up the bulk of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's clients. A little more than a year before the time of my research the Prime Minister of Iceland at the time, Davíð Oddsson, commented in the nightly news that the lines at Mæðrastyrksnefnd are not evidence of need but simply the result of people who want 'something for free.' This comment was often repeated to me by scholars and charity workers who were angered by his statement but it was perhaps summed up best by a social critic as documented on her web journal:

Davíð Oddsson's comments in the news on RÚV [government broadcasting] Sunday night on October 20<sup>th</sup> are unbelievable. They were covering the reality that is in front of us at Mæðrastyrksnefnd which has never seen as much need for their help as in the last few weeks. The nation's Prime Minister on this occasion said that there is always a great demand when they were giving out free goods! Many people have recently been wondering if the Prime Minister needs to be more in touch with his nation. This is probably one of the clearest examples of such (Hlöðversdóttir 2002).

An opposing member of parliament echoed a similar sentiment about this incident:

The Prime Minister refused to talk about the situation of poor people in Iceland when I asked for such discussions recently. The one substantial thing the chair of the governing party has to say publicly about the lines for food at Mæðrastyrksnefnd is that people will go and get what is free (Sigurðardóttir 2003).

Despite these efforts of critics and charities to counter this discourse it was still pervasive during the time of my research as well, as another member of the governing poverty stated in 2005:

There are people coming to the committee [Mæðrastyrksnefnd] who have enough of everything and one person I know told me that it was much better to go there to get *hangilæri* [smoked lamb for the holidays] than at Bónus [national grocery chain] because there he would have to pay for it (DV 2005a:6).

The previous statement was quite typical of the discourses in general that I encountered which drew upon anecdotal evidence or isolated incidents in order to deride the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and to question their need. I too have heard my fair share of claims that a relative or a friend of a friend knew of someone who went to Mæðrastyrksnefnd who 'didn't need it' or 'abused the system,' which hardly constituted evidence let alone spoke of larger patterns. In early September of 2004 I presented the findings from my analysis of the client information sheets from March of that year to a general meeting of Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The staff were pleased to hear that for that month only one client sought assistance five weeks in a row and 17 or 6.01% sought assistance four weeks running. In contrast the majority, 158 clients or 55.83%, only sought assistance once that month. There was a measure of head nodding at this point in the presentation and the findings were referred to as 'good numbers' as they formed the beginning of a factually-based argument in order to contend that the clients sought

assistance when they needed to rather than out of habit or dependency. These patterns held in the subsequent months I examined which I also reported to the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd. In fact, in 2003 the first of the month saw the lowest number of requests for assistance six out of the nine months they were in operation that year, eight out of ten months in 2004, nine out of ten months in 2005 and three out of the four months I recorded in 2006; even the instances where the lowest number was not the first of the month were usually due to Easter and Christmas which tended to disrupt the normative patterns of those respective months. This pattern was attributed to the fact that the social assistance payments from the city and the state were released at the beginning of each month, as were the quarterly *barnabætur* or child benefit payments. The clients I spoke with confirmed for me that they were more financially secure earlier in the month and did not normally have to seek assistance until their money began to tighten later in the month. This evidence was also positively greeted by the staff as further proof that the clients only visited in general when they needed the assistance.

Shortly after I provided the committee with this information it was used by the staff in their letters to government officials and businesses when soliciting for support. These numbers were also drawn upon in newspaper articles soliciting the public for support (e.g. Morgunblaðið 2004g) and were often referred to when dignitaries visited the committee. These numbers were suggestive that their clients normatively sought assistance only when they needed to, which was readily incorporated in the discourses produced by Mæðrastyrksnefnd in order to counter the claims that the clients only sought goods because they were free. I found it intriguing that the figures I provided the committee basically only confirmed what they already knew. But presented as a statistic,

a quantified 'fact' rather than an impression, they seemed to feel they now had evidence they could use in public discourses that carried with it the stamp of scientific validity. Countering these discourses with references to client visiting patterns, the demographic patterns among their clients, or statistical calculations of the poverty rate and levels mimicked the forms of knowledge and discourses often used by the state and bureaucracies (e.g. see Hacking 1991; Urla 1993). Yet it has been pointed out to me by members of the staff and various scholars that the debates about poverty in Iceland have generally taken part on a 'low plane'; in other words, rather than an 'objective' and scholarly approach to these issues, the debate often degraded into a form of character assassination of the clients of charities rather than a focus on the complex issues underlying inequality. Anti-poverty activists were forced to expend their energies defending the poor in moral terms rather than the more productive focus on policy issues. It was fairly obvious to me when listening to people and analyzing media discourses that the prevalent discussions about poverty drew upon forms of knowledge and 'common sense' which were predicated upon beliefs and views that were focused on issues of individual behaviour and morality rather than structural issues such as low wages, pensions, the labour market, education and training and so forth.

Pierre Bourdieu pointed out that the eminent sociologist Max Weber had argued that the privileged or elite members of a given society need to produce and reproduce a framework which explains and justifies their status and the overall state of inequality, referring to this as a "theodicy of their own privilege" (Bourdieu 1998:43). The term in its original theological context refers to the explanation for evil and misfortune in a world created by a perfect divine being. Bourdieu contends that in the more secular context of

neoliberal market societies that the term 'sociodicy' may be more apt; "in other words a theoretical justification of the fact that they," the elites, "are privileged" (ibid.). The previous justification for inequalities based on wealth and status as part of a divine plan, for example, are somewhat anachronistic in modern secular societies. Other means need to be employed to justify the unequal distribution of wealth and status and in many ways 'competence' today performs this role: "Competence is nowadays at the heart of that sociodicy, which is accepted, naturally, by the dominant" (ibid.). The notion of sociodicy may be seen as part of a larger hegemonic framework as outlined by Gramsci (1999 [1971]) in which social and economic inequalities are justified and normalized and charities play a role, directly and indirectly, in these regards. In such a sociodicy it becomes 'common sense' that some members of society are more successful than others as it becomes more widely accepted in recent years, as it seems, that governments or society as a whole only have a limited role to play in equalizing these imbalances. A dominant belief that inequality is structural—the result of low wages and exploitation in the workplace, inheritance, low assistance benefits, discrimination and so forth—invites action from the state which could respond with raising minimum wage levels, a more comprehensive social assistance system, and other forms of legislation. But if the clients of charities and the poor in general are portrayed as greedy, dull-witted spendthrifts, or some other negative characterization from the plethora that I encountered, then the underlying causes of the plights of these people are seen to be individual and personal in nature. In such a context the options for governmental action appear less clear. Further, once the clients of charities are portrayed as having a hand in their own plight then there are also fewer incentives for the general public to become involved or even to care.

'Competence' covers many issues ranging from talent, intelligence, consumption practices, 'right' decision making abilities and so forth. Following this reasoning the poor are often blamed for their situations for 'misspending' their money, making poor choices, throwing their money away by gambling, smoking, using drugs, excessive drinking and living beyond one's means. It must be remembered that Iceland, like other Western European and North American nations, was influenced by the international Temperance movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the founding member organizations of Mæðrastyksnefnd, Hvítabandið (the White Ribbon), was the Icelandic branch of the larger World's Women Christian Temperance Union and is still a contributing member in the present. While I rarely encountered any discourses from the staff which were overtly ideologically opposed to alcohol, I was reminded by some Icelandic scholars with whom I discussed my work that there is a history in Iceland of concerns regarding the relationship of alcohol with those, usually youths in general and adult members of the working class, who were seen as unable to 'control themselves.' Prohibition on the importation and sale of alcohol in Iceland was enacted in 1915. This ban was partially lifted in 1922 due to pressure from Spain which linked the importation of Icelandic cod into Spain with a reciprocal Icelandic agreement to allow the importation of Spanish wines (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000:32). After a national referendum in 1933, which saw majority support for the repeal of prohibition, the total ban on alcohol was lifted in 1934 with the curious exception of beer—the domestic sale of beer remained illegal in Iceland until 1988. Gunnlaugsson and Galliher interpret this continuance of the prohibition on beer partially in terms of class, as seen in the rather paternalistic view that certain segments of the population were perceived as incapable of controlling their actions and thus required the



intervention of the state to govern their behaviour. The paternalistic approach to governance pertaining to this issue is very much apparent in some debates in Alþingi in the mid 1930s where one MP declared: “The Parliament should be like a father to a child, knowing what is best for its welfare...Poor people will start to drink beer because it’s the cheapest alcohol” (Alþingistiðindi 1934–1935, in Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000:34). I will later return to the issue of the perception that the poor are unable to control their actions, but suffice it to say here that my sense is that the views held by some of the staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd towards some of their clients—specifically the clients who sought assistance when they were drunk or under the influence of drugs, smoked cigarettes and otherwise were perceived as ‘misspending’ their money—were viewed to an extent as having a hand in authoring their own fates. In contrast, the clients who were perceived as having been dealt a poor hand in life—such as those with a physical or developmental disability, injury or illness; those who had been abandoned by a spouse; or those who suffered the sudden loss of employment—tended to form a pool of the ‘worthy’ clients who were poor through no fault of their own. These issues of perceived client behaviours were raised numerous times by the staff during my research and they factored into their eligibility screening processes in part because of the image of the organization they wanted to present to the public—a responsible charity which channels resources to the ‘right’ clients. However the staff, to varying degrees, did challenge the discourses of the ‘worthy/unworthy’ clients in their press releases and dealings with the media and officials but subsequently reinforced them in their eligibility evaluations.

When the clients presented their documentation to the interviewer and completed the client information form they were evaluated based on some of this information. But

the clients were also 'read' by the staff in terms of their appearance, clothing, and even the kind of cars they drove. Some staff members were very skilled observers, noting the quality of the clothing and accessories they observed among the clients but also, among the female clients, the quality of everything ranging from haircuts to manicures. One staff member had pointed out to me the make, model and cost of a specific cell phone that a particular client displayed as one factor among a list of others regarding why she was suspicious of her claims for needing assistance. Another staff member explained to me that it is also difficult for some older Icelanders to conceive of people in the present as poor given the low standards of material existence that were the norm in the past: "When we think of the people who come to us, and they smoke and with their cell phones and their cars...it is hard to think of them as 'poor' compared to the past." While I was impressed with some of the staff's observational skills regarding the goods the clients possessed, I came to develop very different interpretations of the same information.

To begin with, I subsequently learned that driving a car to Mæðrastyrksnefnd to collect assistance ultimately says little of the context in which this vehicle was acquired or even to whom it belonged. The kinds and qualities of cars the clients drove were sometimes observed and commented on if they parked in front of the building, especially if they were new and expensive. Less attention was given to the vehicles that I observed when assisting the clients with their bags which were old and some of which were falling apart. In one case, a rear fender was literally held together with duct tape and, in another instance, I was startled when a windshield wiper flew off and struck the building when the client started his barely roadworthy car. My own wife even felt that I was exaggerating about the car held together with duct tape until one day by coincidence the

client in question was stopped ahead of us at a traffic intersection. Even less noted and commented on among the staff were the clients who car-pooled, took the bus, walked, or used the disabled transit services provided by the city. One particular client during one point in my research usually came close to closing time and was often out of breath and with rivulets of sweat running down her face. Once we began to chat she explained that she had to run across the downtown to Mæðrastyrksnefnd before it closed as the bus route was not helpful, she had no car and refused to spend the money on a taxi. There were indeed some clients who drove new vehicles but these instances drew an inordinate amount of attention from the staff in contrast to the other forms of transportation used and I felt therefore somewhat distorted their perceptions. These views extended to the general public where it was stereotypically held that the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd drove expensive vehicles to pick up their assistance. One author of a critical article in a newspaper called the general public on this: "I have also heard people deny poverty, say that people are abusing aid agencies. People have seen 'the poor' jump up in their SUVs on the other side of the corner [from these aid agencies]. But what is the truth?" (Steinþórsdóttir 2004:47). Indeed, aside from myself, a few staff members working in the front and perhaps a few locals glancing out of their windows from time to time, I was unaware of anyone else observing the coming and goings of the clients on a consistent basis in order to make these claims. Not only are these discourses not derived from firsthand observational data but they are affected by assumptions, stereotypes and prejudice. The negative view of social assistance recipients driving new SUVs and other expensive vehicles is not unique to Iceland. The supposed Cadillac-driving 'welfare queen' was a popular stereotype among conservative politicians in the United States in

the 1980s who attacked social assistance benefits as part of their electoral platforms and which drew upon and reinforced widespread prejudices against both the poor and the members of ethnic minorities that were already in place (see Hancock 2004 and Zucchino 1997). One senior staff member of Mæðrastyrsnefnd agreed that the discussion about the vehicles of social assistance recipients in general was a popular theme which was employed in order to question their claims for needing assistance. She continued that she found it to be a problem among some of the staff, lamenting the number of times she heard “look at all the cars they have, they are not poor.”

For those clients who had new vehicles I found that, upon speaking with some of them, numerous explanations were given. Sometimes these explanations were offered unprompted, perhaps because these individuals were aware of the dominant views on these matters and anticipated that I might ask. In one case, a client whom I assisted on a number of occasions drove a brand new car, replete with that hard-to-define odour commonly associated with new vehicles. For a moment I had also begun to question how someone on a disability pension could afford this vehicle but did not feel it polite to broach the question. Once I felt that enough rapport and familiarity had been achieved between this client and myself, I raised this topic with her. The client explained to me that she won a free lease for a year in a contest and would not be able to retain the vehicle afterwards. Over a year later, I encountered this client again and she was without this car and was given a lift by an acquaintance. Others explained that they had borrowed vehicles from friends and family members and one vehicle was the result of inheritance. But even for those who did purchase new vehicles, this must also be placed into context. One client I interviewed was quite ill and physically disabled and entirely dependent upon her

pension but she made no apologies for owning a new minivan. She explained to me that, because of her mobility issues, she needed a vehicle big enough to accommodate her wheelchair and was dubious of used and older cars because she was frightened of the possibility of breakdowns on busy roads. She wanted to maintain as much independence as she could and this vehicle afforded a measure of such. The State Social Security Institute (Tryggingastofnun ríkisins) also provides some financial assistance with vehicles for those with mobility issues in addition to the base pensions.

But another issue is the availability of credit in Iceland. Given the price of housing and consumer products in addition to inflation, buying or leasing a new vehicle or owning a home purchased on a loan often makes more economic sense than renting a house or buying an older vehicle. The sociologist Harpa Njáls also reminded me that, just because people may come into sudden financial difficulties as the result of an unexpected job loss, injury or illness, it is unreasonable to assume that if these people turned to Mæðrastyksnefnd or other charities for temporary help that they would have immediately shed all of their prior possessions. Many of the social assistance schemes have waiting periods which is of little help in the interim and this is an important need that charities address. There is no reason to expect people in these temporary situations to exhibit the stereotypical characteristics and material indicators of those who have been struggling with poverty for decades. In Kathleen Newman's (1999) work on middle-class downward mobility in the United States, it was apparent that the people she studied went to extraordinary lengths in order to preserve the material indicators of their former status. This of course was an external image which was not an accurate reflection of their current financial situations. As well, the possession of new consumer items available on credit

presents a façade of wealth which obscures the underlying debt. A senior staff member from Mæðrastyrksnefnd noted that the more relevant question is not to ask how some clients may acquire new vehicles but how long they can retain them. A social worker (*félagsráðgjafi*) from the municipal social services of Reykjavík pointed out to me that the freely available credit produces an image of a classless society: “It is much easier to get credit and loans here in Iceland than in Canada. All you really need is someone to sign for you. Because of this class is less visible. The debt problems are not so visible and this doesn’t show materially because people are buying things with this credit to fit in.”

Observers of Icelandic society have often commented on the tendency towards conformism and competitive consumption. With the easy availability of credit, inequalities are more difficult to perceive and therefore readily discounted. Paul Durrenberger writes of contemporary Iceland:

All one needs to make the fantasy real is the goods to prove the prestige. All one needs for the goods is either income or credit. For either, one needs a job, perhaps two. As long as one can maintain sufficient income, the concept of class does not become problematic. As long as one can consume at the same levels as others, one remains within the range of prestige display that defines egalitarian consumer relations, and one does not see class differences in everyday life (Durrenberger 1996:176)

Pierre Bourdieu argued in his work *Distinction* (1984) that the consumption of goods “predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class’” (Bourdieu 1984:2). In the context of a society that appears to favour conformity and egalitarian social relations it should not be surprising that the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as fellow members of the general public, should aspire to the tastes and consumption practices of the larger society. From time to time, certain goods were donated that some staff members did not feel were

appropriate for charity. As noted earlier, this included goods that were dirty, broken and insulting to the clients but this also extended to the other end of the consumer spectrum to include such items as a bag of golf clubs and skiing equipment. But I did not get the sense that the staff were opposed to these goods because they signalled a level of taste they did not expect to be found among their clients but because they did not feel that people who were in dire economic situations should be engaged in such activities. At one point during the Easter allocation of 2004, I was sitting with some senior staff members during a coffee break when the chair of the committee mentioned that one client had called asking if she could receive her assistance at another time because she was going to be away skiing. Most of the staff members present shook their heads upon hearing this and one commented: "It is ridiculous." I do not believe that the staff found it ridiculous that their clients were engaged in such activities because it was not expected of people among the 'underclass' to have these tastes but because they were perceived as spending money upon 'frivolous' or leisure activities while they still needed assistance with basic things such as food and clothing. The criticism revolved around the issue of the understanding of poverty in terms of 'competence,' much as it did for the charge of buying new cars. If the clients went skiing and had new cars, they were seen as fraudulent and not 'really' in need of assistance or else as incompetent and not knowing how to manage their money; in my opinion, they were not criticized for violating class-based barriers of taste. While I adamantly oppose the image of Iceland as 'classless' in terms of the distribution of wealth and life chances (see Chapters One and Three), I have found that I am more willing to concede the point in terms of consumer tastes. The issue of poverty and competence was a pervasive discourse which was even internalized to an extent among the clientele of

Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I had often noticed when assisting the clients with their bags that some parked unusually far away from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. In some cases I felt that it was the result of congestion outside of the building or the fact that the street on which Mæðrastyrksnefnd was located, Sólvallagata, was one-way and some clients chose to park on an adjacent street. But in certain cases a few clients had obviously made a concerted effort to park so far away that it was most likely intentional. Several times on a given distribution day clients would reject my initial offer to help with their bags on the grounds that they had parked a fair distance away. My offer was usually accepted when I insisted that I did not mind the walk. I was surprised that some clients parked as much as a block away and in one case I began to wonder if the client assumed that I was going to walk her all the way home. I wondered whether this was the result of their desire to not let the staff see their cars in light of these hegemonic discourses. One client had joked with me that she did so because otherwise “they [the staff] might not think I am poor.” But another client explained to me that what I was observing was often the result of the clients not wanting other clients to see their vehicles, which might make them a subject of gossip: “Why does he or she have to go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd when they have a new car?”

The criticisms of the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd regarding the possession of new vehicles revolved around the issue of fraudulence (why do they need to go?) as well as competence (mispending money), but these criticisms were closely aligned and sometimes difficult to disentangle. This issue applied as well to clothes and other accessories. There were certain expectations of how the clients should look in keeping with their situations. Some of the suspicions among the older staff members were rooted in their own personal experiences of Iceland in the past, especially given that they were



able to make ends meet with less by engaging in practices of food preservation and making clothes. One such staff member commented to me: "When we had young children and we were buying our first home we were really only a step away from serious problems. We scrimped and saved; I made our children's clothes and so forth, but we were able to do it. I knew a lot of people who were in our situation. But we would never think of going to a place like Mæðrastyrksnefnd." Another told me that she grew up in a rural area, one of fourteen children, and her family was able to make ends meet through certain strategies: "People then didn't throw away clothes that were worn out and people knew how to make their own food." She continued that today "people don't know what to do with too many potatoes," as an example of the current lack of food storing and preserving skills. There is no question that the material standards of living in Iceland previous to the last few decades were much more stark. But it is somewhat unrealistic to expect that, in the current context of a modern urban environment, people of low incomes would be able to partake as members of the larger society by making their own clothes or engaging in rural subsistence practices. A retired chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd recognized that the comparisons between the present and the past are not always useful in understanding the plight of their clients in the present:

"It was more equal then, not as much difference as now. Also the demands for owning this and that have changed. Now you have to own everything. Back then there were actually elderly women who came to us who made clothes for children from old adult clothing." I asked how often she felt this would be the practice today and she shook her head in the negative. Another staff member added: "Children would be made fun of today and picked on in school if they were not reasonably well dressed. But this was not so in the past. I have seen mothers holding up clothes here for young children and they shake their heads"

[imitates a child shaking her head in the negative and pulling a sour face].

The clients who I have spoken to generally agreed that it was the food assistance they sought at Mæðrastyrksnefnd rather than clothes, unless they chanced upon a particular new or vintage item that appealed to them. One client in particular told me that she was able to use items she acquired from Mæðrastyrksnefnd to clothe her children when they were very young but that, once they grew older and became aware of fashion and peer pressure, this was no longer possible: “Now my seven year old would never wear something that I got from Mæðrastyrksnefnd.”

The screening processes at Mæðrastyrksnefnd were in place for the reasons of basic logistics and in order to distribute the goods in what the staff held to be an equitable manner, but it was also an exercise in public relations. In order to maintain support from current donors and potential donors the committee had to portray their clients as needy as well as demonstrate that they were screened and evaluated. Some clients were subjected to further scrutiny as the result of their behaviours or how they presented themselves to the staff. I understood the questions raised by the clients who drove new vehicles, as I had asked myself these same questions from time to time, but I was somewhat perplexed by the suspicions directed towards the clients who took efforts to dress nicely. A television documentary from 2002 which examined the lives of three women who were clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd raised the question as to why the public seemed to expect the clients to essentially dress in rags:

We have sometimes heard that the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are there under false pretences. All you have to do is just look at the people in the line and you can see that they are all nicely dressed. And that is proof that news about poverty in Iceland is

greatly exaggerated. We have asked ourselves whether there are people who think that those with little means should be badly dressed (*Þrjár konur* 2002).

The reason why some of the clients are able to dress in a way that may not be seen to reflect their circumstances is partly related to the availability of credit and the social pressures noted above. One client grew visibly annoyed when we discussed how some clients were perceived as 'not poor' by the staff and general public because of the way they dressed: "Many people think that you are not poor if you are dressed nice." She added that "We Icelandic people have a pride...we don't want to show other people we are poor." This echoed the comment made to me by the sociologist Harpa Njáls who held that many low income people engage in a form of 'camouflage' by which sacrifices are made in some areas in order to maintain the external appearances of, if not prosperity, then at least 'normality.'

This raises the final point to be made in this chapter. There is an irony to be found within the reluctance to aiding clients who do not appear to be poor. One possible interpretation which was rarely raised by the staff, let alone to be found in media discourses, was that it was in fact the work of the charity complex which allowed the clients to consume at a level higher than possible with low wages or state assistance schemes alone. The clients I spoke to commonly explained that the goods they received from Mæðrastyrksnefnd routinely allowed them to set money aside for other purchases they would normally not be able to afford. This effect could be compounded by regularly seeking similar assistance from other charities such as Fjölskylduhjálp or Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, which some clients relayed having done from time to time. By doing so, the clients may not be able to live an entirely comfortable life, but their situations are most

definitely improved versus a total reliance upon what was available from the state or low wages. This seemed to me to be an entirely logical and sound strategy of income supplement for low income earners. The most obvious danger I saw was that this contributed to the status quo and allowed the situation of low wages and low benefit schemes to persist as the efforts of the public were channelled towards a charity complex which was not capable of the kind of changes that needed to be enacted with state intervention into the effects of material inequalities. If the clients were able to present themselves to the public as less badly off than they were, it contributed to the hegemonic discourses which denied the existence of poverty as an issue by reducing the visible evidence to the contrary. But if the clients were indeed dressed in rags and subsisting on borderline starvation levels, then the charity complex would be failing to meet even its overtly stated basic objectives. The irony is that their 'success' was often interpreted as failure, as their clients either did not look poor as a result (and therefore should not be clients at all) or else were known to collect assistance from a number of charitable sources. This charitable 'double dipping' was seen as a serious matter from the perspective of many of the staff members. A former chair told me that she had sat down with a senior official from another charity to compare client lists out of the concern that some clients were receiving help from both organizations. While the instances of 'double dipping' were not as extensive as was first thought, there were clients who did so on a regular basis. The chair from Mæðrastyrksnefnd was not overly concerned as she pointed out that, if people were going to both agencies, then "maybe they really needed the help," but it was the routine dishonesty from the clients about these practices that bothered the staff. I pointed out that, if the clients knew this behaviour was frowned upon, it was

understandable that they lied about it. But the chair was fully aware that the use of multiple agencies was generally interpreted as ‘abuse’ and that steps had to be taken for the reputation of the agency to reduce these practices. I felt that there was also a personal discomfort among some staff members at helping to enable certain clients to subsist on a combination of state and private assistance without having to work, as apparent in the comments of one staff member:

Reykjavík is a small city. We now have three places helping people with food and doing the same thing. We are going to companies for support, so is Vilborg [at Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar] and so is Ásgerður [at Fjölskylduhjálþ]. But I know there are some people who are going to Ásgerður and the next day coming to us. And that is not right! [brings her fist down sharply on the arm of her chair, catching me by surprise with her vehemence]... I know some people need the help. That is true. But we have three organizations in a small city doing the same thing. We are all spread out trying to do the same thing and I don’t know what we are accomplishing.

Indeed, I felt that the fear of what they were accomplishing among some of the staff members was the enabling of the dependency of some clients on the state and charity. A senior staff member from Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar was more explicit with me about her concerns. What they did not want was “people coming here every week.” Rather than ‘charity’ they wanted to be able to help people to “stand on their own feet.” What she did not want was the creation and perpetuation of their clients as subjects of charity and social assistance. Yet in many ways it was the efforts and discourses of the charity complex which did just that. The evidence I gathered from Mæðrastyrksnefnd suggested that, aside from a small and persistent ‘hardcore’ clientele, most clients were not habitual patrons. The eligibility screening of Mæðrastyrksnefnd communicated the message to the public that they only helped those who ‘truly need the help’ but, to my mind, the scrutiny

was disproportionate with the scale of the problem they sought to address. Aside from attempting to screen fraudulent claims based on the descriptions above, the efforts by the committee to convince the public that their clients were needy was also accomplished by the classification of their clients into typologies which resonated with the public in a positive way. However, in the process, the discursive production of subject positions such as 'single mothers' and 'the disabled' reinforced the hegemonic viewpoint that it is 'normal' that certain sectors of the public are at risk and needy, and that the contribution to and perpetuation of the charity complex to assist 'these people' is a laudable act which should be continued. In the next chapter I will turn to a discussion of how the clients were screened in terms of gender, perpetuating the image that Mæðrastyrksnefnd was an agency that helped 'single mothers.'

## Endnotes for Chapter Five

<sup>1</sup> Wagner (2005) has argued that social scientists often use terms such as almshouses, poorhouses and workhouses interchangeably. In his work he argues that the almshouses and poorhouses which existed in the United States for three hundred years tended to be less disciplinary in nature than the workhouses. However, Wagner suggests that one similarity that these institutions shared was that they often indiscriminately housed a wide range of the population whose only commonality was that they lacked the means with which to support themselves (Wagner 2005:4–6).

<sup>2</sup> There are some aspects of the power of surveillance by Mæðrastyksnefnd which extended beyond their place and hours of operations. The behaviour of certain clients in public places such as shopping malls was at times observed, reported back and discussed by the staff. Iceland is a very small nation and Reykjavík a small city. I found that it was not unusual to run into clients in stores or on the streets. Similarly, it was not unusual for the staff to encounter their clients in public places as well. In one case I observed quite by coincidence a client who claimed to have mobility issues display no visible sign of impairment at a gas station. I said nothing to the staff and gave the client the benefit of the doubt, as certain physical conditions are of a remitting and relapsing variety. Yet I overheard the staff discussing this client one day and they traded stories amongst each other of incidents and places where they witnessed this client move freely and without pain. Furthermore, clients often ‘informed’ one another regarding various claims of fraudulent information that other clients reported to Mæðrastyksnefnd, such as marital status, income and number of children. The staff who told me about these incidents felt that the clients who reported this information did so for various personal motives and, as such, treated this information with caution.

<sup>3</sup> A former cashier also explained to me that the position of cashier was eliminated in 1999, as at this juncture the incoming chair, Ásgerður Jóna Flosadóttir, took over these duties. The following chair of the committee from 2003 to 2004, Hildur Eypórsdóttir, continued these duties as well. The incoming chair in late 2004, Ragnhildur Guðmundsdóttir, who remained as chair during the final phase of my fieldwork, decided instead to hire a part-time manager (*framkvæmdastjóri*) to oversee the day to day operations. However, the interviewing and evaluation of the clients continued to be conducted at the time of application as had occurred during all of my fieldwork. The key reason why the interviewing was conducted at the time of application was that one of the major changes made by the new chair in 1999 was to offer weekly food assistance rather than just assistance during the holidays. This meant that the interviewing and evaluation procedure had to be expedited. This change also expanded Mæðrastyksnefnd’s role within the charity complex as more support and regular donations of food and clothing were required. Ásgerður Flosadóttir left Mæðrastyksnefnd in 2003 and formed her own agency, Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands (Iceland’s Family Help) which performed a similar role as Mæðrastyksnefnd.

<sup>4</sup> It was explained to me that ‘*vesalingur*,’ a term I never encountered before this book, is an unkind description meaning something on the order of ‘wretch,’ ‘no-good,’ and according to one dictionary a ‘lame duck’ (Orðabók 2006). The fact that this woman ‘works for food’ also seems to encode the view that she is of low social standing.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘*aumingi*’ is still widely used in the present and generally encodes a negative moral description of its referent, such as a ‘loser,’ or a physical description, such as a ‘weakling.’ It could also be used as in the English context to refer to someone as an object of pity, such as ‘you poor dear.’ In this context, however, it appeared to have been used to describe someone with a developmental disability, as in the ‘38 year old boy.’ I have also heard the term used in a derogatory context to refer to the clients of charities, those on disability pensions or social assistance benefits in general.

<sup>6</sup> One advantage to doing social research in Iceland is that demographic data on age is easily obtained providing that the national identification number, or *kennitala*, is included with each individual in a data

pool. Each number assigned begins with the bearer's age. For example, my kennitala is 150569-2499, the first six digits derived from my date of birth. Since providing one's kennitala is required for everything in Iceland from borrowing a library book to renting a movie it is unsurprising that Mæðrastyrksnefnd or any other organization would record the kennitala of each client along with the name.

<sup>7</sup> I noticed that the question regarding status which inquired whether the client was single made reference to both the male (*einstæður*) and female (*einstæð*) gendered forms of the word in the combined term "*einstæð/ur*", an obvious acknowledgement that some of their single clients will be males.

<sup>8</sup> Icelanders generally use a patronymic naming system; family names do exist but are somewhat rare. As such, a Guðrún Jónsdóttir (daughter of Jón) would be filed as 'G' rather than 'J'.

<sup>9</sup> Fife (1995), drawing upon some earlier work on bureaucracy by Max Weber, notes that while it is unlikely that any bureaucracy is entirely 'rational,' the look or appearance of rationality is critical for the legitimacy and authority of bureaucratic forms of power and their agents (see Fife 1995:130–131).

<sup>10</sup> I recognize, of course, that a sharp divide between the 'clients' and the 'public' is problematic. The clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are simultaneously members of 'the public' as well. As Michael Warner (1993) argues, the public subject is somewhat imaginary; such a subject position disregards a complex host of other positionalities, such as race, ethnicity, class and gender, which throws into question the very notion of an unmarked 'public' subject. Furthermore, as I argue in this dissertation, the divide between 'public' and 'private' or the first, second and third sectors are similarly flawed in terms of exaggerated 'boundedness' and reification, as seen in the ways in which social networks flow between these sectors. The social, political and material links between charities, the various levels of governments, businesses as well as individual citizens is a good example of such.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall Sahlins (1972) has referred to the collective gathering and redistribution of material resources as 'pooling,' but which is often also a form of balanced reciprocity and carried out within social groups (Sahlins 1972:188). At first glance this may appear to characterize what occurs at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities. Indeed, the notion of engaging in collective acts which benefit the common good is often how the work of charities is ideally portrayed. However, as I have argued up to this point, these acts are conducted to further a number of varied interests, not all of which benefit the clients.

<sup>12</sup> This information arose from my analysis of every client information sheet collected from the months of March and October of 2004 and April of 2005—a total of 814 sheets were examined. The patterns I noted each month were so consistent that I am confident that they held throughout the rest of each year.

<sup>13</sup> I learned in early 2007 via a senior staff member that the new 'normal' week had since risen to 120 or over and that weekly visits of 150 or 160 later in the month were not unusual. One theory by the staff as to this increase was the move by Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar out of the downtown core as well as Mæðrastyrksnefnd's close proximity in their new location (as of the fall of 2006) to a housing complex for disability pensioners.

<sup>14</sup> This pattern was fairly consistent, and occurred six out of nine months in 2003; eight out of ten months in 2004; nine out of ten months in 2005; and three out of four months from the data I collected in 2006. The data from 2003 and early 2004 were retrieved from a calendar on which the staff recorded the weekly number of clients who were assisted. Starting in March of 2004, I began to collect this data myself. With the staff's permission I collected the chits at the end of each distribution day and analyzed the information, recording any additional (and non-identifiable) information I could from these chits. I ceased collecting this information after April of 2006, as my research was coming to a close and I was satisfied that these patterns remained consistent.



<sup>15</sup> The word *vinkona* can mean both 'friend' as well as 'girlfriend,' but in this context I believe the staff member intended to say 'friend.'

<sup>16</sup> The World Bank has a website which contains a more detailed overview and further links material regarding the measuring of poverty. See <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20238988~menuPK:435055~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367,00.html>.

## Chapter Six

### **‘We only help women with children here’: Gender and the Politics of Charity**

From the very beginning of my research it was apparent to me that men seeking assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd were treated somewhat differently than women. Watching these encounters unfold during the first weeks of my fieldwork, I noticed that some clients were singled out for further scrutiny which consisted of a more intensive examination of their documents and sometimes a harsher tone and brisker pace to the questions. While it was not exclusively men who received this treatment it was only men who were admonished to seek further assistance elsewhere “next time,” such as at Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar (Icelandic Church Aid). The following are slightly edited extracts from my fieldnotes chosen to provide some examples of what eventually came to be fairly typical of the routine encounters that I observed:

One man, dressed in black pants and with a black Nike jacket perhaps in his 30s and seemingly not a native Icelandic, aroused some rather intense suspicion. He did not seem to speak Icelandic, or speak it well, so the interrogation was in English. The desk worker asked him, as I assumed he could not read the form which is in Icelandic, in a rather intense and rapid-fire manner: “Where do you live? Do you work? Why not, are you looking for work? Do you live alone?” She was seemingly not pleased with his answers, warning him that they will help him ‘this time’ but not ‘next time,’ a warning that I now hear on a regular basis.

I had mused whether it was his ethnicity or his (at the time) pattern of repeated visits which aroused this kind of suspicion. These factors can play a role but it became clear to me regarding men that it was the gendered aspect of their positionality which often seemed to be the prominent feature of the client-staff encounters of this nature. The

following is a fieldnote entry from almost a year after the one above which illustrates a similar treatment of two men where gender, rather than ethnicity, seemed to be the determining factor:

I noticed one man, who I found out later is from [Middle Eastern nation], was questioned rather extensively. I have seen him a few times and [staff member] gave him the usual speech about seeking help from the Church. But I also saw a younger native Icelandic man also being given the same speech. [Staff member] asked him what his situation was and he presented the familiar green and yellow Tryggingastofnun card to prove his disability status. [Staff member] then asked if he was alone and he said he was single and had no children, so he also got the usual 'seek help at the Church' speech.

But I would learn that this kind of treatment and the exhortations to seek help at the Church Aid were not applied to 'men' altogether but rather a certain kind of 'man' which considered other factors of positionality. In other words, the subject position of 'male client' was not uni-dimensional but complex within the context of this agency and, as such, it would be inaccurate to say that 'men' were treated differently as an entire demographic category.

Mæðrastyrsnefnd's emphasis upon helping women with children dates back to the organization's inception; however it is an emphasis that is by no means unique to this charity. The preferential provision of assistance for specific categories of the population classed as the 'worthy poor' is a fairly common underlying principle that governed the historical practice of private, as well as public, assistance in many Euro-American societies and continues to be influential today. In the case of Iceland specifically, the formation of Mæðrastyrsnefnd in Reykjavík in 1928 needs to be situated as well within the emergent forms of 'bio-power' as seen in the national interest in the health and

welfare of mothers and their children. Another important set of issues to consider is the increasing voice of women at the time in Icelandic politics who, in turn, directed attention towards the causes which motivated these engaged women. It is my contention that the charitable project in general, and the classification and filtering of the clients in particular, are not radical activities but ones which contribute to the maintenance of the status quo of inequality in the larger society. As mentioned in Chapter Five, during the time of my research Mæðrastyrksnefnd had limited resources to distribute to their clients. One effect of this is that the staff worked to direct their limited resources towards their 'ideal clients,' who included primarily single mothers (and by extension their children), the elderly and disabled people. In terms of the organization's public discourses via the media, the empathy factor acted as a valuable discursive tool with which to arouse and maintain the public's interest in the support of charities. Certain demographic characterizations of their clients, such as that of single mothers with children, were more productive in this manner than say, for example, homeless men. Particular categories of clients who did not evoke the 'romance of charity' (Wagner 2000:178), such as those characterized as homeless men, substance abusers, the mentally ill and other marginalized populations, often found themselves with fewer options for material assistance. In the context of the larger society, the 'worthy' clients are then situated as the proper clients to be helped while the rest are rendered largely as socially invisible. As a further effect of these practices of distinguishing clients, the subject position of 'recipient of charity,' inhabited by the 'proper' clients of charity, in turn becomes normalized; it is 'normal' and unsurprising to make the correlation between charities and single mothers as well as the elderly. Under these hegemonic configurations of charity, members of the public who

donate material goods are praised for assisting people in need. It is of course laudable to take an interest in the well-being of others, but the charitable option engages the energies and resources of these well meaning citizens and directs them towards an activity which, by its nature, has little potential in bringing about the kinds of long-term, structural changes needed to make substantive differences in the lives of the poor. In the process, the status quo in terms of material relations is maintained while poverty as a concept, already a rather weak social concept in terms of modern Iceland as discussed earlier, is further fragmented among seemingly disparate groups, thus making the structural similarities these people share difficult to perceive and rendering poverty as an individualizing phenomenon rather than as the result of structural inequalities found in a number of areas—such as issues of wages, prices, benefits, and taxation among others. I will now turn to a discussion of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's formative years as it pertains to their gendered focus which continues to influence, to varying degrees, the practices I observed over the course of my fieldwork some 75 years later.

### **6.1 'It is difficult to break with history'**

As noted in Chapter Three, Mæðrastyrksnefnd formed in 1928 specifically to aid the widows and the children of the seamen who perished with the sinking of the fishing trawler *Jón Forseti* in February of that year. But as I further pointed out in Chapter Three the committee was also brought into being as the result of the concerns of a number of women's organizations about the plight of widows and needy mothers in Iceland in general. Kvenréttindafélag Íslands (Women's Rights Association of Iceland) was particularly vocal about the issue of mothers' support (*mæðrastyrkur*) before this incident had occurred (Auðuns N.d.:1) and this was continued through their involvement with

Mæðrastyrksnefnd. This focus on assisting women and children continued to be a key defining feature of the committee all through its history. But these concerns are quite typical as well of the long history of charity and almsgiving on the European mainland where efforts were also largely directed towards the ‘worthy’ poor, such as widows and children. Philanthropic activities are linked as well to the emergent anxieties of local and later national governments in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (but somewhat later in the case of Iceland) regarding the health and welfare of their citizenry—the ‘bio-politics of the population’ as referred to by Michel Foucault (1980a). The welfare of women and their children were of particular concern to nationalists anxious about the preservation of the nation, language and culture. Mæðrastyrksnefnd was itself caught up with these issues of national bio-politics, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. The overall focus on assisting women and their children proved to be persistent and continued to govern the practices of the committee during the time of my fieldwork.

In a description of the formative years of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Auður Auðuns, lawyer for the committee from 1940 through to 1960 and one-time mayor of Reykjavík, noted that, once Mæðrastyrksnefnd was established “it was decided that the support should reach all mothers who were alone in supporting their children: widows, divorcees and unwed mothers” (Auðuns N.d.:1). But it was quickly apparent to the committee that women in many different situations needed assistance. It was decided that the assistance should in practice reach all women who could not find ‘sufficient work’ because of their household duties, illness or caring for an infirm spouse (ibid.). It became evident that strict adherence to the category of ‘ideal’ clients was not practical for a social aid agency given the complex nature of the situations of those who struggled with socio-economic

difficulties. As noted in my examination of some records which detailed the work of the committee in the late 1940s (see Chapter Five), Mæðrastyrksnefnd also assisted elderly and infirm women who were not caring for children as well as married women whose husbands were economically non-contributing members of the household due to unemployment, illness, substance abuse or incarceration. A former chair of the committee also pointed out to me that the care of elderly parents in Iceland during this time often fell upon their unmarried daughters and these women represented a significant component of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's early clientele as well. But the category of 'women with children' continued to remain as the formal 'ideal' category of client at Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the time of my research even though consistently one-quarter of their female clients and three-quarters of their male clients during this time did not have or were not the primary care providers for children. Over the years, the committee continued to modify their practices of aid distribution to accommodate a wider range of clients as the result of changes in the larger society in terms of demographic patterns and the nature of the needs which they serviced.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd could be seen as having a gendered bias to their work but I would argue that a key concern of the committee from its formation to the present is also with the welfare of children and by extension that of their parent(s) as it relates to their upbringing. The early members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were passionate about achieving equal political and social rights for women in Iceland as well as ensuring that their children were protected by Icelandic law. But while women struggled to secure their rights in the legal arena there were also efforts at work to further monitor and control women in terms of their bodies, reproductive processes and child rearing practices

through the organs of medicine, public health, social work as well as private social aid agencies. As I noted earlier, charities and their staff can be seen to an extent, borrowing some terminology from Foucault, as ‘agents of liaison’ (1980b:62) in these regimes of ‘bio-power.’ As Foucault argues, starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe agents of the state, medicine and the human sciences along with charitable workers and philanthropists increasingly engaged in a entire series of interventions into the health and biological processes of individuals and the population as a whole, ranging from such concerns as mortality and birth rates, longevity and reproductive processes (Foucault 1980a:139). The women of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar organizations sought to rupture the status quo of gender inequalities in one arena while subsequently acting as agents of bio-power through the attempts to monitor and govern the conduct of poor women, much of which was intertwined with the nationalist concerns about the morality and character of the mothers who were raising the future generations of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

As the Icelandic fishing sector began to modernize and mechanize at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one result was that the males, particularly in coastal fishing towns, often became absent from the household for longer periods of time due to fishing activities which ranged farther afield than they had in the past. What emerged in these situations was often a case of ‘women-centered’ households within these maritime contexts (see Skaptadóttir [1996, 1998] for Iceland; but also Brettell [1986] and Cole [1991] for similar discussions about northern Portugal). This had not been the case historically in the agricultural sector in pre-modern Iceland. Pálsson (1992b) notes that while women in Icelandic peasant society were still largely the primary care providers for children, in agriculture men and women often worked together as a complementary unit, to varying



degrees, in the acts of production. It took the opportunities afforded by the modernization of the fisheries and the emergence of capitalist production to render men as the 'sole providers' and relegate women largely to the 'domestic sphere' (Pálsson 1992b:135). As such, the cultural and moral education of Icelandic children fell largely to the mother (Koester 1995a:579). This is echoed by Björnsdóttir who contends that, "Not only did the mother bear the child but it was her responsibility to turn the individual into a true Icelandic" (I. Björnsdóttir 1989:108). Despite the glorification of women and 'the mother' as the protectors and educators of Icelandic children and culture in nationalist discourses, women came to inhabit a rather ambiguous position. While their political rights progressively came to be more on par with men in certain regards, such as with the extension of the vote, women gradually became subject to the power of bio-politics in which their child rearing abilities, morality and lifestyles increasingly came under the inspection and surveillance of public health officers, doctors, other civil servants as well as private aid agencies.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the founding members of Mæðrastyrsnefnd were intimately involved in fighting for women's suffrage as well as caught up with the general Icelandic independence movement which progressively gained support during this time. The first chair of Mæðrastyrsnefnd contended that the push for women's rights and national independence were intertwined. The women's movement "grew side by side with the struggle for independence and almost at the same time Iceland and her daughters became free" (Valdimarsdóttir, in Kristmundsdóttir 1989:82). It is not surprising that the politically active members of Mæðrastyrsnefnd became involved in supporting the health and welfare of mothers in particular. Nationalists in general perceive that the future

of their nation, its language and ‘culture,’ as they interpret it, largely depends upon the education and well-being of successive generations and as such take a keen interest in child rearing practices and early education. One speaker at a meeting in 1929 to discuss the research of the committee on the plight of widows in Iceland concluded with a comment that was fairly typical of this kind of discourse: “the most precious possession (*eign*) of society are children and the welfare and the future of the country depends on their development” (Lárusdóttir, in Vilhjálmsdóttir and Eiríksdóttir 1929:5). In an interview with the first chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, she argued that the “*mikilvægasta málið*” (the most important issue) is ultimately the welfare of children which concerns the welfare of the nation as a whole (Morgunblaðið 1930:2).

The effects of bio-politics in Iceland were particularly noticeable in the reaction by the public authorities and the population in general to the presence of foreign troops on Icelandic soil during the Second World War. In the early years of the war the United Kingdom, concerned that German forces might gain a foothold in Iceland, ignored Iceland’s declaration of neutrality and occupied the country in May of 1940 in order to prevent a possible German invasion. The American forces later replaced the British in the defence of Iceland in 1941 (Karlsson 2000:313–315).<sup>3</sup> The occupation was viewed with a measure of ambivalence. The British and later U.S. forces constructed two airfields as well as a number of roads and essentially solved the local unemployment issue at the time. The infrastructure that was built played a significant role in Iceland’s emergent prosperity. But there was also a measure of concern among the authorities and the general population regarding the dating and marriage between Icelandic women and the foreign soldiers that were stationed in Iceland. Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir (1989) reports that

Icelandic women who dated the soldiers were stigmatized, sometimes shunned by their family and friends, and suffered abuse in public and were hurled insults such as “*kanamella*” (American whore). Björnsdóttir argues that part of this was no doubt the result of the jealousy felt by the local men due to the competition posed by these ‘exotic’ outsiders with their uniforms and new forms of material culture. However, there is no mistaking the bio-politics which underlay the concern of the authorities. The surgeon general expressed concerns about the possible spread of venereal disease, prostitution and ‘immorality’ posed by the presence of these foreign soldiers. There was a call to remove all young girls from the ages of 12 to 16 from Reykjavík out to the countryside. Only the ‘trustworthy’ females would be allowed to stay but would remain under surveillance (I. Björnsdóttir 1989:103).

But the *ástand* (situation), as it was referred to, had to do with more than the concerns of public health. Björnsdóttir notes that there were few qualms about interacting with the ‘polluting’ foreigners in terms of the money, jobs and goods they offered; the key concerns revolved around the union of Icelandic women with foreign men. The *ástand* was discussed in a biological, some would say racist,<sup>4</sup> idiom in terms of fears about miscegenation and with references to the ‘diseases’ and ‘plagues’ which would afflict Iceland if women took up with foreign soldiers and especially if they had children with them.<sup>5</sup> The reference to ‘blood’ was a common theme evoked in these discourses. The close association between nationalism and the idiom of blood in modern times is but a more recent development of an ancient means of socio-cultural distinction. Michael Herzfeld argues that “the central concept of blood...has a long history in Indo-European and Semitic cultures as a marker of social inclusiveness” (Herzfeld 2005:122), a marker

which the Icelandic authorities drew upon in order to maintain a social and even biological barrier between ‘Icelander’ and ‘foreigner.’ The maintenance of this barrier was deemed by the medical and political establishment as critical to the preservation of everything Icelandic. The surgeon general declared that: “The future of the Icelandic nation depended on its youth, its faithfulness to its blood and its soil” (I. Björnsdóttir 1989:104). The nationalist interests in terms of the preservation of language and culture were closely intertwined with issues of public health as well as the perceived genetic integrity of the nation.

The prejudices towards the children who were produced as the result of these relationships continued for some time after the war’s conclusion. One client from Mæðrastyrksnefnd whom I interviewed was a so-called *stríðsbarn* (child of the war) whose father was a foreign soldier<sup>6</sup> stationed in Iceland for a time but shortly afterwards died on the European mainland. The reasons which drove her to seek assistance at Mæðrastyrksnefnd arose later in life and had nothing to do with this, but during the interview she detailed to me the prejudice she encountered as a child. She told me that she was unaware of her status as such until a schoolmate, a daughter of her mother’s friend to whom her mother had confided, stood up one day in school, pointed and declared aloud: “Þórkatla (pseudonym) is a *stríðsbarn*.” To my astonishment, Þórkatla told me that the next day she was sent to foster parents and enrolled in another school in order to conceal her status. Mæðrastyrksnefnd had assisted women in Reykjavík whose children were not supported or recognized by these foreign soldiers with both material assistance and legal representation. I have no doubt that opinions varied among the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd at the time regarding the ‘situation’ but in public discourses the committee acted as an

advocate for these women and their children. In an article penned by Auður Auðuns entitled “*Réttlausar mæður*” (mothers without rights) (Auðuns 1944:6–7) she berated the Icelandic public in general for discriminating against the children of foreign soldiers:

We do not want innocent children paying for the conduct that some people may not find appropriate so that they will be put on a lower step than other children in society. These children are Icelandic citizens and obviously they are going to be raised here and form a large part of the next generation of the country. Society must see the benefits of that group not being ostracized and not having it worse off than the other children (Auðuns 1944:6).

Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir notes that these kinds of concerns focused on the protection of Icelandic society and culture as well as the concerns about the viability of Iceland as, at the time, a potentially independent nation. But these fears were also linked with the issues of poverty and class. The paranoia about the spread of prostitution that was felt would arise as the result of the presence of foreign troops also extended to the concerns about the upbringing of any children who may be produced as the result of these unions as well as the children of the poor in general. These ‘unfit’ mothers were perceived to bear children at a faster rate than those in the ‘better’ classes and thus presented another threat to the well-being of the state (I. Björnsdóttir 1989:104). This further insidious aspect of bio-politics is often applied to the ‘underclass’ of nation-states and seeks to link poverty with the personal or moral failings of the poor. Rather than focusing on the root causes of material inequality, this form of bio-politics posits that the behaviour of the poor needs to be monitored and their lives need to be subjected to scrutiny in order to discover the causes, and thus the solutions, to their situations. In short, bio-politics here seeks to discipline and ‘normalize’ the behaviour of the poor with a

particular emphasis upon preventing further reproduction among the poor with steps taken to ensure that the child rearing practices of the poor are monitored and regulated.

As noted in Chapter Three, one of the goals of the old *hreppur* poor relief system in Iceland was to prevent the social and biological reproduction of the dependent poor. Splitting up families was one method employed in order to accomplish this goal. But the emergence of advances in genetics and reproductive technologies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries found a ready audience among those concerned with issues of national ‘purity’ and fears about the reproduction of the ‘dangerous classes’ as the result of increasing pace of urbanization and population growth. This form of bio-power materialized in practice with attempts at monitoring and reforming the ‘habits’ of the poor, such as the perceived promiscuity and poor parenting skills among the working and underclasses, as well along with forms of eugenics enacted by the state with support from the medical community, scientists and other intellectuals. Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp (1995) argue that this ‘stratified reproduction’ is a form of power relations “by which some categories of people are empowered to nurture and reproduce, while others are disempowered” (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995:3). One aspect of this can be seen, by way of example, in the words of a professor in Iceland who delivered a public lecture in 1925 on the importance of carefully choosing one’s mate to ensure that he or she had ‘good blood’ and was the product of a ‘good heritage’ (*góðum ættum*). He argued that Iceland had to take steps to ensure that the nation did not follow in Europe’s wake where the highest birthrates were to be found in poor urban neighbourhoods and where “the ‘lesser part’ (*lakari hlutinn*) of humanity’ is reproducing 75% more than what is known as the ‘better part’” (*skárri hlutinn*) (Morgunblaðið 1925:2). More extreme methods have also been

suggested in Iceland such as the bill presented before Alþingi in 1937 which recommended that allowances should be made for the forced sterilization of individuals who could not provide for their offspring (Erlingsson 2004:36).

Charities and philanthropists tended to favour counselling, education and religious instruction in order to normalize the behaviour of the poor. These efforts also included forms of monitoring and surveillance, either through the ‘friendly visits’ to the poor in their homes or through the information these agencies collected from their clients, as well as the propositions they suggested or supported that were offered for consideration at the various levels of government. In an early interview with the first chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, she argued for some practical and at the time rather progressive measures, such as promoting birth control, sex education and expanding education in general (Morgunblaðið 1930:2). But Laufey also argued for moral and ethical education beyond the simply academic to ensure that Icelandic children had a ‘proper’ upbringing in order to prevent “degeneration” (*úrkyngjun*) among the Icelandic youth and to ensure that they become “healthy in body and soul” (ibid.). Laufey had also argued for other matters which demand pause for thought. One suggestion she supported was to require medical officers to ensure that engaged couples did not have STDs or other communicable diseases and to issue certificates proving this as a requirement of marriage (ibid.). Here we are clearly moving into the realm of the regulatory controls of bio-power as outlined by Foucault. This is an example of a private charity lobbying the state to involve itself closely in regulating the sexual health and practices of its citizens.

When I first observed the activities of the staff during the time of my fieldwork, my interpretations of their practices were influenced to an extent by my familiarity with

the work of Michel Foucault as well as some of the anthropological writings on bureaucracies as a form of modern power and governance (e.g. Britan and Cohen 1980; Ferguson 1994; Handelman and Leyton 1978; Herzfeld 1992; Heyman 1995, 2004). There is no question that there were obvious power imbalances between the staff and clients within the context of Mæðrastyrsnefnd as well as within the larger society in general. In terms of a Foucauldian perspective I felt that these kinds of agencies discursively ‘produced’ their subjects through the knowledge they accumulated and the ways in which the clients were classified and ranked, though in more recent time the organization seems to have become less involved in governing their clients outside of the confines of the organization itself. In the earlier years of the committee, members such as the first chair, Laufey Valdimarsdóttir, visited with some clients in their homes and were familiar with the intimate details of some of their clients’ lives. Judgments about the clients’ conduct in general played a role in the evaluation procedures of the committee during this period (see Chapter Five). While some of the staff members during the time of my research possessed such knowledge regarding a select number of their clients, or at least to the extent to which these clients chose to divulge this information, I was not aware of any staff member who visited clients in their homes or interacted with them in social settings outside of Mæðrastyrsnefnd in any substantive way, as did I during the course of a number of interviews. In my estimation the moral evaluation of their clients in terms of promiscuity, child rearing practices or other such issues of ‘morality’ did not factor into the decisions as to their eligibility for assistance. While some staff members did not approve of the life choices and behaviours of some of their clients, they did not



engage in the kinds of blatant interventionist activities more typical of philanthropic agencies in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

However, diluted forms of this kind of bio-power became visible in practice from time to time during my fieldwork. This usually materialized as gossip among the staff which in my view had minimal effects upon the clients because they were usually not present when these comments were being made. I was not aware of any instance where assistance was denied to a client because of these kinds of judgements during the time of my fieldwork even though some staff members held strong opinions as to what constituted 'proper' behaviour. In an interview with a retired staff member we were discussing some of the situations of the clients during her tenure. At one point her words grew passionate and somewhat indignant when she noted the propensity among some of the clients who continued, in her interpretation, to compound their difficulties by having children with multiple partners when they were already in dire circumstances. As she recounted to me: "There are also cases of some women having many children with different men. There is one I remember who had children with five or six different men!" She then grimaced and shook her head, "This is awful, doing such a thing, having children with men all over the city!" As much as I disagreed with this stance of passing judgements upon others based on culturally constructed norms and was somewhat intrigued by the delivery of this pronouncement, I found that I had to confront the fact that in some regards I did not entirely disagree with this staff member either as I had asked myself similar questions regarding what I learned about some of the clients. There is a double criticism encoded here. One refers to the ethics of having children with multiple partners. The other is that of poor women who continue to have children when

their situations are already economically bleak. This is a fairly common criticism regarding social welfare recipients in Iceland and elsewhere and is an issue which scholars of modern poverty often have to confront. Social assistance is 'feminized' to an extent in the stereotypical views of policymakers, their agents and the general public about the recipients of state welfare benefits. The social assistance system in the United States for example, specifically regarding the benefits generally understood as 'welfare,' is to a large degree associated with single mothers, particularly the 'putative welfare mother' (McCormack 2006:261) who are more often than not perceived to be women of racial minorities (Mullings 1995; Stack 1997) and denigrated in certain political and popular discourses as 'welfare queens' (Hancock 2004; Zucchini 1997). The women are accused of moral failings beyond the apparent 'crime' of reliance upon public assistance. McCormack writes: "Within this moral economy, particular discursive practices frame the welfare mother as undeserving: lazy, dependent, irresponsible, oversexed; she came to be seen as responsible for her own fate" (McCormack 2006:263). During the course of my fieldwork in Iceland I encountered similar discourses practically verbatim regarding single mothers dependent upon social assistance.

However, it is my contention that while the women themselves may be seen as suspect, their status as mothers and the guardians of children elevated them to a much higher degree of 'worthiness' than, for example, childless single men and they were subsequently able to make use of the numerous public and private programs and benefits that tended, for a number of reasons, not to be available to marginalized men. This did not mean that single mothers were above reproach by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, but the criticisms of their clients were normally not very overt or direct. For example, certain

staff members were particularly critical of one client who let her toddler roam free in the main room while she collected her assistance. He crawled about on a floor that was not always very clean and got underfoot of some of the clients. The street level exit door was often propped open in warm weather which forced me at times to play 'goalie' by this door to prevent this precocious youngster from crawling out into the street. Some staff members were critical about this client and questioned her child rearing abilities but these concerns were not, in my experience, articulated directly to this client. I was uncertain as to how these behind the scenes comments and occasional frowns could influence this client's conduct and she was certainly not denied assistance. In my reading of media reports, talking to clients, and generally paying attention to the various gossip networks I was connected with, I grew aware of some complaints among the clients of how the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd 'talked down to them' and openly criticized them for a variety of reasons. But these claims generally did not match my experiences and observations of practice. The majority of client-staff encounters that I observed were brief and uneventful but I could see how the occasional conflict over goods and verbal exchanges could give rise to these kinds of claims. One day an interviewer admitted to me that she had crossed over the line in her dealings with a client and was somewhat embarrassed for doing so. I was having a coffee in the kitchen and asked this staff member about an interview I had observed earlier. The staff member replied that the information the client provided was somewhat suspicious and, according to other staff members, this client was prone to altering the details of her domestic situation on a weekly basis. From what she could understand this client had children with her current partner who had a number of other children himself from another relationship. He apparently provided for these children but

neglected to provide for the children he had had with this client. It was a rather complicated scenario. In turn, the client had indicated on the form that the income she received was from *meðlag* (alimony). This confused me as well, as to my knowledge this would only be possible if some of her children were from yet another relationship and this other man was paying her alimony directly or she was receiving this from the state. The staff member agreed and said “That’s what I didn’t understand,” adding with a mischievous but embarrassed laugh, “I told her that maybe she should take care not to have any more children.”

Despite these criticisms of some of their clients, this did not result in the withholding of assistance from these women. Nor did these views of some of the staff members shape public perceptions of their clients in a negative way. The public discourses of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, intended to garner support and public interest, did not entirely reflect some of the behind the scenes views of the staff. These discourses presented their clients in the best light possible and drew upon the depictions of their clients which were estimated to resonate with public sympathies, such as ‘struggling single mothers’ and ‘isolated elderly people.’ But the cumulative effects of these strategies and the hegemonic configurations of the clients of charity need to be considered. While certain categories of their clients are rendered as the ‘proper’ clients of charities, others are not. The gendering of the politics of social assistance noted above also have implications for those who are deemed as even less worthy than the ‘welfare mother.’ Some observers of homeless shelters in the United States (e.g. Passaro 1996; Susser 2005) have noted that both transitional housing and shelter spaces are overwhelmingly set aside for women with children to the detriment of childless men; the

resources offered for these men paled in comparison with the assistance offered to those with children, usually women. The additional resources available for homeless women, as well as other strategies with which to secure housing, have been noted as contributing factors which render the issue of homelessness in Reykjavík as a predominantly male phenomenon (see H. Björnsdóttir 2004). The preference for aiding women with children, the elderly and disabled people within the charity complex in general further exacerbates the weighting of the available charitable resources in favour of certain social groups over others. Even though I maintain that charitable resources are not sufficient in terms of being able to make long-term, substantive changes in the lives of most of their clients, at least the public attention upon these issues is captured at times by the efforts of charities, while the plight of other marginalized populations remains largely invisible to the public eye.

Charities are involved in activities that normalize their clients as the subjects of charity. They influence the views and perceptions of the general public regarding social welfare and the nature of inequality through the discourses they produce while publicizing their work. In my interpretation, the preference for aiding mothers and their children in part relates to the history of this specific organization. Mæðrastyrksnefnd is not an anti-poverty agency and does not explicitly target the poor in general nor do they make claims for doing so. According to my calculations, during the time of my fieldwork roughly 12% of their clients on a given month were childless men; in contrast nearly 36% of the total clients who received financial assistance in the country in 2004 were childless men and they comprised the largest demographic group of those who received municipal financial assistance overall (Morgunblaðið 2005d:52).<sup>7</sup> This organization clearly had a

gendered bias ideologically and in practice since consistently over 80% of their clients were women, three-quarters of whom were the primary care providers for children. Another charity, Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, which did not have such an explicitly gendered bias, had a much more equitable gender ratio among their clients in 2004-2005: 57% women to 43% men (Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar 2005:4). The clientele of Mæðrastyrksnefnd simply did not match the demography of need in Iceland in general or Reykjavík in terms of gender.

When I showed a senior staff member of Mæðrastyrksnefnd these kinds of figures she admitted that their clientele were not reflective of the larger need but, in reference to the historical orientation of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, admitted as well that “it is difficult to break with history.” The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were placed into a tension-filled and at times often contradictory position between the historical goals of the organization, the continued preference to maintain this orientation and the reality of the need they confronted in practice. This was further problematized by the fact that the subject position of ‘client of charity’ was cross-cut with a host of other factors of individual positionality aside from gender, such as age, income, health and other specificities. While other charities within Reykjavík claimed to disavow the gendering of their clients through their evaluation procedures, nevertheless they continued to make reference to specific demographic categories with which to describe their clients. These categories were drawn upon for the empathy factor but they also obfuscate the commonalities among their clients in terms of the issues of structural inequality. The preference for aiding specific demographic categories or referring to certain ‘types’ of clients in public discourses displays a certain logic of the charity complex which I will discuss next.

## **6.2 ‘We only help women with children here’**

There was a certain degree of ambiguity related to how the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were ‘filtered’ on the basis of gender. One incident in particular captured this ambiguity quite well. One day I observed a young male client being cautioned that he would be helped ‘this time’ but ‘next time’ he should try Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, as he was told that Mæðrastyrksnefnd is for ‘women with children.’ Yet I was perplexed to observe that at the same time an elderly man sat at another interviewer’s desk quietly filling out his form and was assisted without question. These kinds of contradictions presented themselves on a regular basis during my field research. While the entire eligibility screening process at times seemed capricious it also appeared decidedly patterned once I realized that the staff were considering other factors along with that of gender. These determinations of eligibility were in part based upon the client’s ‘fit’ with a particular demographic category but this was an inherently ambiguous practice because these subject positions are not one-dimensional and never adequately capture the social biography and identity of an individual client. Chantal Mouffe (2000) has noted that every social agent within a given social context is “inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations – not only social relations of production but also the social relations, among others, of sex, race, nationality, and vicinity” (Mouffe 2000:298). She continues on to argue that a combination of these social relations determines the subject position of an individual which cannot be reduced to one factor. Further, one does not inhabit a single subject position but many. The determination of eligibility of each client by the interviewer was, to borrow a term from Piven and Cloward (1993:156), based on the ‘moral arithmetic’ of the official in order to determine which client was worthy of

assistance. This decision was often based on whether or not the client conformed to the categories of ideal clients (mothers, women in need) but considered other factors as they related to the client's ability to provide for him or herself, as well as the issues of appearance and behaviour as discussed in the previous chapter. Despite the broader overall patterns this nevertheless injects a measure of ambiguity into the screening process, as the 'moral arithmetic' of each staff member differed as to what constituted 'need' and whether or not the organization should exclude clients based on gender. Further, some staff members took various causes to heart which influenced their views as to the kinds of clients the committee should focus on assisting.

Charities often operate in a rather 'grey area' in terms of the law as it pertains to how their assistance is distributed. Unlike formal welfare benefits which are an entitlement of citizenship or residency, I was not aware of any entitlements to assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd or other private charities under Icelandic law even though they often receive funding from the municipalities and the state. Modern welfare states often boast of having quantified and objective screening practices for assistance benefits based on income or complex point systems, though one still cannot exclude the effect of the discriminatory practices of some officers who try to prevent certain clients from receiving the assistance due to their entitlements. Piven and Cloward note some examples of how this is often accomplished in the United States. They write, "One device is the intimidation of applicants accomplished in part by hostile or mistrustful treatment which leads people either to avoid asking for aid or to withdraw requests once made" (Piven and Cloward 1993:152). Further, welfare researchers have also noticed the tendency to accept female clients with children and to discourage childless males. Drawing upon the work of



a field researcher in a New York City welfare office, Piven and Cloward contend that unemployed males rarely made it past the first interview stage (ibid.:154) and the battery of questions these clients were subjected to suggested that the staff did their best to dissuade further claims. A director of one of the regional centres with the social services of Reykjavík commented to me that she was personally opposed to charities, partly because of the lack of formal rights to this assistance and what she felt were the discriminatory and humiliating ways in which this aid was distributed, but admitted as well that it was not so long ago when these rights to assistance from the city were similarly vague and subject to the whims of each caseworker. She explained to me that when she first started as a caseworker with the city the eligibility rules were “very primitive.” She continued that it was not until the early 1990s that citizens under Icelandic law had a codified right to municipal assistance and a basic minimum source of financial support. Previous to this time she argued that the system was influenced, to an extent, by the old *hreppur* style of poor relief in which only the ‘worthy’ poor were helped and that the decision to grant assistance often depended upon the subjective impressions of the official. The historian Guðmundur Jónsson (2001) contends that the Icelandic social welfare system even in modern times has not fully embraced the goal of social equality among its mandates even as Iceland attempted to catch up to its Nordic neighbours in the provision of welfare:

For one reason or another, the Icelandic welfare system was less committed to social equality than that in the other Nordic countries, resting instead on a social policy which emphasized market solutions and self-reliance (with a great deal of family support), not on a socially defined minimum level of living based on a social right (Jónsson 2001:265).

Bereft of a sense of entitlement, potential clients had to make a case that they were worthy of assistance. This official from social services contended that she witnessed instances where a client was denied assistance by a fellow worker because the official did not like how the client looked or acted. Obsequiousness and deference on the part of the client, the ‘managed docility’ I mentioned earlier, was more likely to win favour with the official than by being ‘demanding’ and speaking of ‘rights’ as she argues the clients are now encouraged to do.

I have heard from multiple sources from social services that the municipal caseworkers are now encouraged to avoid using ‘*skjólstæðingur*’ to refer to their clients. The preferable alternative suggested by the director of social services is ‘*notandi*,’ roughly glossed as the consumer or user of a service. A staff member from Mæðrastyksnefnd found this curious as she pointed out to me that ‘*skjólstæðingur*’ literally means ‘those who are seeking/standing under shelter’ and did not see the term as demeaning. Lára Björnsdóttir, the head of the social welfare division for the city (*sviðsstjóri velferðarsviðs*), was behind this semantic move as well as much of the re-thought philosophy that guides the recent provision of formal assistance from the city. She argued that this was but one small change in the overall reconfigured approach to the delivery of services: “I was ridiculed when I first tried to change *skjólstæðingur* to *notandi*. Icelanders tend to use words carelessly without considering that words can belittle people, they can hurt. Language is very important about how we think about things.” She continued that the older term had connotations with the *hreppur* system of the past and the basis on which disempowered people were designated as ‘worthy’ of assistance rather than viewed as in her opinion they should be: as citizens with

entitlements. She did concede to my point that power relationships continue to mark very important differences between the status of officials and those who rely upon financial assistance regardless of the terms applied to them. However, in her view charities are an anachronistic approach to dealing with inequality and incorporate much of the older attitudes to sorting clients on the basis of 'worth.' The preference for aiding women and children at Mæðrastyksnefnd was one example of such but the efforts to include further categories of the clients also suggests that the organization was not entirely unresponsive to changes in the larger society. Given that individual subject positions of the clientele were complex, the staff 'read' factors other than gender among their clients during the interview stage. When clients were denied assistance or told to seek help elsewhere 'next time' the factor of gender was usually invoked; in the cases where male clients were accepted as eligible for assistance the staff usually considered other factors of their positionality beyond gender. One of these factors was the custody of children.

I have already mentioned the historical orientation of Mæðrastyksnefnd as well as some of the factors of nationalism and bio-power which placed primary emphasis upon assisting mothers and their children. Despite the fact that Mæðrastyksnefnd's official goal was to assist needy women and mothers it was generally unquestioned that this assistance would extend to single males who had the custody of their children. This is a fairly recent development in the practices of the organization. I have been told by former as well as long serving staff members that men rarely or never sought assistance from Mæðrastyksnefnd as recently as a decade ago. But there appeared to be a measure of disagreement regarding the recent inclusion of men among their clientele. I was surprised by the immediate change in tone and demeanour when I asked one former chair about the

issue of gender. I inquired whether men visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the time of her tenure in the late 1970s and she shook her head in the negative and firmly replied: “No, no men,” and did not seem to want to discuss the matter further. Another retired staff member and contemporary of this former chair later disputed this to an extent: “Men did come. We helped them with food and clothes, but not money. We did not ask them for an identity card because we could see that something was wrong [with them].” It appeared that while men did not qualify for official assistance from the committee at this time that some staff members assisted them unofficially when and where they could.

The committee had little choice but to confront the ongoing changes in the larger society and this is reflected in their work. There have been a number of recent challenges to the pervasive social category of ‘single mother’ in the context of the politics of social welfare and gender. The general questioning of the ‘normative’ form of the nuclear family or women as the ‘natural’ or primary child care providers has been predominant in political and academic circles for some time, particularly with regard to the ways in which other forms of the family are rendered as ‘deviant’ variations by comparison. Some feminist critics in Iceland have also challenged the use of the term ‘*einstæð móðir*’ (single mother) in favour of ‘*sjálfstæð móðir*’ (independent mother), reflecting the desire for some women to be recognized as individuals without reference to a male (Gurdin 1996:135). Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself adjusted their formal mission statement in 1995 by dropping the term ‘single’ as a qualification to ‘mother.’ The mission statement as it stood during the time of my research is as follows: “Mæðrastyrksnefnd is a cooperation between associate member societies, composed of representatives who provide free work for the committee in the interest of mothers, children and women in need”

(Mæðrastyrksnefnd 2002:1). Ongoing change in the patterns of domestic living arrangements within the larger society as well challenged the notion of 'single parents.' Over the last decade in Iceland the custody of children after the dissolution of a union has rarely been awarded to males and sole custody fathers have not accounted for more than 10% of custodial arrangements. However, joint custody arrangements in Iceland after the dissolution of a union have soared from 20% to slightly over 60% over the last decade (Hagstofa Íslands 2004) which makes the question of the category of 'single parents' more complex than it has generally been perceived to be.<sup>8</sup> On numerous occasions I overheard male clients explain to the staff that they needed assistance on that particular week because they were taking care of their children but did not need the assistance when the child or children were staying with another guardian or parent. The staff were aware that there was a complex variety of residential patterns among their clients in terms of childcare, such as children who were cared for by grandparents and other extended family members while the parent or guardian was ill, undergoing rehabilitation, or had lost custody. The desire to assist children by this organization tended to override the positionality of the guardians who applied for assistance.

The documented evidence of the custody of children by single parents was, in my experience, a guarantee that assistance would be given regardless of the gender of the client. For single parents the basis on which eligibility was then determined related in most cases to income level. As in the past, married clients were deemed as eligible for assistance as well if the household was experiencing financial difficulties. The factor of gender remained salient when the client had no children—childless males of working age and who were not visibly disabled were directed elsewhere for assistance and sometimes

denied assistance outright whereas childless females were generally granted assistance if they could provide evidence of need. But the claim to care for children itself also required documentation and suspicions lingered if convincing proof of such could not be offered. As I will discuss further in Chapter Eight, immigrant or foreign-born clients were afforded a measure of suspicion as to whether or not the children they were claiming assistance for resided with them in Iceland; for Icelandic-born clients, the issue revolved around whether they provided direct care for their children in the home. On some occasions, staff questioning of the clients about their custody of children and demanding documentation produced a measure of anger and resentment among these clients.

When Mæðrastyrksnefnd computerized their information system in the fall of 2005, they asked for and were granted access to Þjóðskrá, the national registry, which contains demographic information on every person who has received a *kennitala* (national identification number) in Iceland. This is accessible via the internet to organizations that can justify why they need access to this kind of information which includes the names, ages and familial relationships linked to domiciles. I expressed my concern to some staff members that the information in Þjóðskrá may not be entirely accurate given that the housing and residency patterns of marginalized people are often fluid and quickly changing. The issue of renting ‘in the black (market)’ was raised to me by various clients and academics. These apartments are usually rented unofficially at below the going rates so that the landlord can avoid paying income tax on this source of income. Those who rent these apartments, often out of necessity, are at the mercy of their landlords and as illegal renters do not qualify for the rental benefit (*húsaleigubætur*), administered by the city but provided by the state through the Ministry of Social Affairs

(Félagsmálaráðuneytið). This benefit is intended to help with the costs of housing for low income renters and it is an important benefit for some of the clients with whom I spoke. However, eligibility for this subsidy requires proof of a rental agreement which the landlords obviously would not issue in these situations. The residence as well must meet certain requirements for the renter to receive this subsidy, such as containing a separate washroom and cooking facilities (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2006). This requirement in effect disqualifies low income people who rent rooms in boarding houses, for example, and further reduces the income of people who are already in economically difficult situations given that rooming house tenants often lack the social protections accorded to those who provide for children. One client I spoke with insisted that this was a significant problem for many low income people. She added that within the expensive rental market in Reykjavík she was aware of situations where the tenant had to agree to under-report the rent paid as part of the arrangement. This was done by some landlords in order to minimize their reported incomes for tax purposes but this left the tenants without access to the full subsidies to which they would be entitled because this official calculation considered the amount of reported rent paid: “Most people aren’t getting the paper [proof of rent paid] they need to get that [rental benefit]. People buy apartments and then rent them out, but you have to agree not to report the full amount.” She continued, “We are making people rich, buying their apartments for them.” I was not aware of any research done on the scale of this problem, as documenting illegal practices presents a number of logistical difficulties. I can only say that the issue of renting ‘in the black’ was a theme which was raised numerous times in my discussions with those connected to these issues.

Further, the national registry only includes information on legal residences and does not reflect illegal, temporary or ad-hoc housing situations or the complex and sometimes flexible child care arrangements. The reliance upon this information thus throws a measure of suspicion upon the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd whose information did not always match the official database records. Due to these factors, I saw the potential for conflict between the staff and some clients. The staff members I spoke to assured me that they only planned to use this database as a guide and would continue to consider other information in the interview. One staff member admitted to me later that she felt that some staff members were relying too much on this database, particularly in their judgments of whether the clients were actually providing for children at their place of residence. She described one experience as an example which frustrated her:

Last week there was a young man. He was unemployed, he lost his job and had no work and was caring for his seven year old daughter. He called and asked if it was ok if he could come to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for help. I said of course. But when he came it wasn't me who he spoke to in the front. When she checked the computer in Þjóðskrá it didn't say anything about his daughter. Well, he stood up and got very angry and said that they weren't treating him well. I called him at home and his daughter answered the phone. I apologized and told him that if he came back we would help him. Well, I made up some bags and set them aside. The software only updates the fifth of every month and that is not good enough.

However, the larger issue as it appears to me is not whether these investigative tools are reliable but why it was that there was a measure of suspicion directed towards the clients about the veracity of their claims in general. It seemed unlikely to me that many people would bother to acquire used clothing and two bags of food from this organization, dealing with a measure of stigma as well as the bureaucratic hassles of



doing so, if they did not need it. These suspicions were also not uniformly applied as some categories of clients were placed under greater scrutiny than others. As argued earlier, the committee had limited resources at their disposal. In order to ensure that they could stretch supplies they relied upon filtering their clients according to their preferred categories rather than adopting a 'first come first serve' approach. As such, the staff tended to fall back upon their historic preference to aid women and children when they needed to limit the total number of clients served in a particular period. This subjected the less than 'ideal' potential clients to more excessive scrutiny than others. Yet there were a number of men who were regularly helped and not subjected to suspicion or extensive scrutiny. There were other factors at work with regards to why some men were regularly helped even if they did not have children which illustrates that the category of 'male client' was considered along with other factors.

One male client, Eyþór (pseudonym), received regular assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. He was older, disabled and married and was not providing for any children yet he received regular as well as preferential treatment from the staff at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. He had difficulty walking and received permission to park by the building and enter through the exit in order to bypass the usual routine in order to lessen the amount of time he would have to wait and stand. Eventually Eyþór would phone ahead and arrange to have his bags waiting by the door. All he would have to do from this point on was call ahead, honk his horn and I would bring his bags out to his car. Eyþór always made the effort to get out of his vehicle while I did this despite my suggestion that it was not necessary and he could remain seated within his car if he wanted. I surmised that he appreciated the efforts of the staff to assist him but was somewhat uncomfortable

being waited upon in such a way. At the beginning I had him complete his client information sheet within his vehicle but eventually even this requirement was waived. Not only was he able to bypass the usual distribution procedures but he was able to bypass the entire inspection procedure as well, as did some women who had similar arrangements. As an older and married man he was as far as one could get from the 'ideal' category of a single mother with young children yet there seemed to be no suspicion whatsoever about this client nor any effort to disqualify him from receiving regular assistance. Another older man, Tómas (pseudonym), had a somewhat similar arrangement. Whenever clients would knock on the street-level exit door I usually directed them to the client side entrance. When I first saw Tómas I noticed that he often entered this way unannounced and I assumed that he had a special arrangement to do so. On occasions when the door was locked, I admitted him without question and I was never told to do otherwise. I also learned that he always called ahead to find out whether or not fish was offered that week and the staff usually catered to his preferences. I noticed that certain staff members seemed to take an extra interest in this client and one in particular insisted that he try the vegetables he usually handed back. Whenever I asked about this client in interviews the mere mention of his name usually elicited smiles from the staff. He was quite a character in a rather gruff kind of way and he seemed to have endeared himself to the members of the organization. One senior staff member claimed that she did not know when and how this special treatment for this client started but just continued the established practice. Another pointed out that Tómas had been coming so long that he was almost a part of the organization: "He has been here so long that I know what he wants. I also taught him how to use other things [food items] as well." Another middle

aged man, Stefán (pseudonym), volunteered to help out from time to time during the earlier part of my research. He was himself disabled and cared for his elderly father but was not married and had no children. He told me that his sister was also connected to Mæðrastyrsnefnd, though he was not certain in what capacity, and she had asked him for his help and he has volunteered off and on ever since. He also occasionally sought assistance but as a client-volunteer he received preferential treatment such as being able to by-pass some of the usual inspection procedures as well as being allowed to select some items himself from the back.

As is evident with these illustrative examples, as well as others I collected, it simply was not the case that this charity only assisted women with children despite their formal mission statement. Men were regularly helped if they were the primary care providers for children, acted as client volunteers, presented visible or easily understood reasons for not working and needing assistance or, in some cases, had forged a personal relationship with the staff. The factor of 'male' in these select cases did not appear to come into conflict with the official mission statement of the organization. But in public discourses Mæðrastyrsnefnd often drew attention to the issue of single mothers as well as other demographic categories such as the elderly and the physically disabled. When the number of clients who sought assistance were referred to in public discourses the unit of measurement was described as 'families,' despite the fact that I took efforts to remind the staff that the figures I collected on their behalf recorded the number of visits by their clients as individuals, whatever their varying domestic situations happened to be, and they could not be referred to as 'families' in such a broad manner. Within the charity complex in general, the discourse of 'families' was so ubiquitous that the terms 'clients'

(*skjólstæðingar*) and ‘families’ (*fjölskyldur*) may have well been interchangeable even though I knew this was not the case in actuality. Little mention in these discourses was made of single and childless men, the homeless, those dealing with mental illness or substance abuse issues or low income workers even though these ‘categories’ were prominent among their clientele. Further, this was typical not only of Mæðrastyrksnefnd but other charities which classified and discursively produced their clients in similar ways, though variations in emphasis could be noted. Alternatively, one could dispense with these categories altogether and discuss the factors the clients shared which drove them to seek help from a charity such as low incomes and pensions, issues of taxation, high costs of housing, food and transportation and a number of other structural factors. The reason this does not occur, as I will argue, relates partly to the propensity of modern knowledge producing agencies to render the general population into discrete categories as well as the discursive tactics of charity through which their work is described and support is solicited.

### **6.3 “Einstæðar mæður, öryrkjar, atvinnulausir og eldri borgarar”**

In many ways Mæðrastyrksnefnd perpetuated the long standing historical tradition of charitable work on the European mainland even though the presence of charities in Iceland was a somewhat more recent phenomenon. The logic which governed the work of charities was often based on discerning among their clients who was ‘worthy’ of this assistance and who was requesting it out of ‘indolence.’ These views were not restricted to charity workers alone but were often shared by the members of the larger society as to who was deemed to be worthy of help. The proverbial ‘rule of thumb’ for making these distinctions commonly drew upon knowledge about such matters which was rooted in

certain contexts in theology. Carter Lindberg (1993) notes: “the great majority of the ‘worthy’ poor were those in the classic categories delineated in the Bible: widows, orphans, and the sick” (Lindberg 1993:20). The first chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was given to making references to the Biblical imperatives of helping widows and orphans in her speeches in order to criticize the Icelandic state for its shortcomings in these matters. Their work, like that of many charities, emphasized helping mothers and their children in addition to disabled and sick people as well as the elderly. But the reference to these seemingly straightforward categories by charities with which to denote their clients obscures the often rather complex mechanisms by which the subjects of charity and public relief were evaluated and classified. Robert Jütte (1994) points out that, in other parts of Europe, a more complex classification system of the poor had been underway since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Jütte noted a 16<sup>th</sup> century English attempt to classify the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor in a much more complex way than simply by bracketing widows, orphans and the infirm from the rest of the general poor who were at the time synonymous with the bulk of English society.<sup>9</sup> Within this tract, the ‘worthy’ poor were subcategorized under various headings. One could find ‘poor by impotency,’ which included numerous sub-categories such as orphans, the elderly, the ‘blind,’ ‘lame,’ and ‘diseased,’ as well as ‘poor by casualty’ which included soldiers wounded in combat. The ‘unworthy’ poor designation appeared to have been based on moral and behavioural evaluations rather than reliance upon demographic or bio-medical considerations as evident in such categories as the ‘thrifless,’ ‘rogues’ and ‘strumpets.’ (Jütte 1994:11). Jütte continues that the increasingly complex distinctions by the local authorities

regarding the 'types' of people who should be helped was also matched at this time by attempts at more comprehensive record keeping:

Poor relief officers and charitable institutions started to keep large registers in which they laboriously noted the name, profession, birth-date and place, occupation, illness and disability as well as the number of dependents of every pauper. Such orderly procedures signalled the emergence of a new bureaucratic spirit in poor relief (Jütte 1994:102).

The effects of these increasingly complex forms of knowledge and the scientific classifications of the population are central to the work of Michel Foucault, as argued earlier, in which charities play a role alongside the local authorities. The accumulation of statistics regarding the population leads to finer efforts to manage, discipline and normalize those who deviate from these constructed norms. The denial of charitable or state assistance can be seen as a form of disciplinary power as well, as the 'able bodied' poor are then forced to accept work where they can find it regardless of labour conditions or wages. Further, these efforts also produce categorizations of the poor which are then inscribed upon the social landscape and, in some cases, denote and define certain 'types' or 'sub-species' among the populace and which serve a number of purposes. However, it must not be assumed that the ways in which charities classify, rank and record their clients always corresponds to the ways in which their clients are discursively produced and portrayed to the public at large.

The pervasive reference by charities to the classical distinctions of single mothers, the elderly and disabled people in my estimation was not entirely reflective of the actual experiences of, and knowledge about, their clientele that these charities accrued. This reduction and simplification does little justice to the complex situations of their clients

and 48 for males (Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar 2005:6). But the image of the clients of charities that was promoted often focused on that of struggling young mothers with newborn babes on their arms and elderly people, even though this image was not necessarily in accordance with the less 'romantic' actuality (Wagner 2000:178). This is not to say that there were no poor seniors or struggling mothers with young children but to point out that there was a disproportionate emphasis upon these demographic categories in media discourses and in the ways in which the staff spoke of and described their clients to visiting guests. In my estimation, this was largely intentional and often strategic. As will become apparent in the final two chapters, even when this image was ruptured with reference to the increasing numbers of young disabled people or immigrants among their clients, this was done for strategic and political reasons and often had little relationship to any documented evidence.

Charities have to present the image to the donating public that the assistance is going to the 'right' people. Such people would include in this context the classic categories of the poor who are seen as dependent, frail or weak and need of the protection of others—the categories of the population for whom the public takes pleasure in assisting. Charities thrive and are sustained on the sentiment that their clients must evoke among the populace. Wagner writes: "Some descriptors (the aged, a homeless woman and child) conjure up the romance of charity, while others (the drug user, the male vagrant) conjure up correctional strategies" (Wagner 2000:178). Further, approximately 20% of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's clients received unemployment benefits, who were often included among the usual litany of single mothers, disabled and elderly people.

Yet there was an almost absolute silence in public discourses regarding the approximately 10 to 15% of their clients who were working but struggled with low wages or else were unable to make ends meet as the result of other temporary factors which precluded them from waged labour, such as those undergoing the process of rehabilitation or those attempting to acquire potentially better paid positions as in the case of university students. These omissions did not only apply to the discourses of charities alone. I was aghast when I read a parliamentary report on poverty in Iceland which admitted that low income workers fell beyond the scope of their report which only considered those who received a pension from one of the municipal or state benefit schemes:

The work group [for the report] emphasizes that more groups of people probably do live in poverty, such as parents who are in the labour market and have low incomes but who are above the qualifying level set by the municipalities for financial need. In this report there is only going to be a discussion about this defined group that receives the above mentioned benefits (Alþing 2004:6).

In my opinion any report on poverty which restricts its analysis to those who fall within the narrow confines of such delimited categories is of questionable value, but this practice of sorting the poor with a selective emphasis upon particular categories in exclusion to others was pervasive within the charity complex as elsewhere. The chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the latter portion of my fieldwork was one of the very few people within the charity complex to speak about the issue of low income workers but even her concerns about this matter were rarely reproduced in public discourses. I could only surmise that this silence about the issue was the result of low income workers as not being seen as dealing with poverty per se and thus not evoking the same kind of sympathy among the public as the elderly. Another possibility is that single mothers and



the elderly were normatively seen as the clients of charity; thus the reasons for their problems were left assumed and implied rather than explicit. The fact that working people had to turn to charities for additional assistance would perhaps raise even more troubling issues for sitting governments and their supporters and were thus quietly overlooked in discourses such as the parliamentary report mentioned above. The hegemonic configuration of poverty in contemporary Iceland thus holds the poor to be a collection of disparate groups linked to a variety of government assistance schemes as well as the long standing categories of the 'worthy' poor. Such a view of poverty overlooks the common issues many of these people face such as low income (regardless of source), high taxation, and the general high costs of living such as housing, food, transportation and medicine. Poverty is therefore seen as an individual issue or as afflicting only a select number of delimited groups rather than as the result of broader structural issues—a perception which is sustained by the insistence of charities in drawing upon and reproducing these categories in their discourses and work.

The public discourses produced by the charity complex as well as in media reports on poverty in general were often framed in terms of 'groups' rather than discussions about structural issues or factors. These discourses in Iceland routinely made reference to the '*bágstaddir hópar*' (needy/deprived groups) in society who, more often than not, contained the usual triumvirate of need such as single mothers, elderly and disabled people. In the context of Mæðrastyrsnefnd I found that this talk about these 'groups' was contagious and formed a ready and simplified discourse which could be drawn upon in response to the question from members of the media and visiting guests as to 'who' their clients were. The selective emphasis on certain groups was unmistakable. A newspaper

article that discussed the work of the charities Mæðrastyrksnefnd, Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands and Hjálparstarfi kirkjunnar during the Easter allocation of 2005 is a prime example of the discourses I found emanating from material aid charities during the time of my research. The words of the chair of Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands were drawn upon in a subheading within this article in order to describe their clients as largely “*einstæðar mæður, öryrkjar, atvinnulausir og eldri borgarar*” (single mothers, disability pensioners, the unemployed and senior citizens) (Morgunblaðið 2005c:52)—a phrase which I chose as the subheading to this section of the chapter to underscore this issue. In these kinds of articles it was quite common to find subheadings or pullouts which were usually culled from the words of those who were interviewed for the piece. In my estimation, these quotes were chosen in order to try to capture the attention of the cursory newspaper reader as well as to distill the essence of the story into a media ‘sound-bite.’ But in fact what would be overlooked for the casual newspaper reader in this case was this chair’s qualifying comment reported in the body of the story and which preceded this quote, where she argued that these were the predominant clients who visited her organization but overall the clientele were quite “varied” (ibid.). The emphasis upon certain selective demographic categories was not always the result of the intentions of the staff of these organizations but in some cases the result of selective editing or reporting by the media as well. Since these categories were frequently invoked regarding charities or poverty in Iceland it was perhaps unsurprising that journalists and editors made use of them. During the Christmas allocation of 2004 I observed a few journalists dropping by Mæðrastyrksnefnd to observe the proceedings. In most cases these journalists’ stays ranged from twenty to thirty minutes or in rare cases the better part of an afternoon. But no one, during the time of my research, engaged in the

kind of participant observation research I was involved with let alone conducted primary statistical research. I was surprised one day to see in a newspaper article one of these reporters make the following claim: “Young people were the majority of those who sought assistance from Mæðrastyksnefnd and Fjölskylduhjálpi yesterday. Also there were disabled people and senior citizens.” Further, “Prominent were young mothers who were getting food and clothing for their children” (Sigþórsdóttir 2004:6). It may well have been the case that young mothers were ‘prominent’ among the clients at Mæðrastyksnefnd at that particular time, though I knew clients who did not bring their children with them or else brought the children of others who they were minding so I am not clear how the status of motherhood could be ascertained from observation alone. But I was particularly flabbergasted as to how the assertion could be made that ‘young people were the majority’ of their clients even on that particular day based on a brief period of observation. I noted other distortions, factual errors and omissions in a number of stories as well emanating from the charity complex during the time of my research. Given the fact that only a handful of donors ever spent a length of time volunteering at Mæðrastyksnefnd, in my estimation the general public at large were not well informed about the work of material aid charities in Reykjavík or the issues afflicting their clients.

The invisibility of the clients who struggled with homelessness, mental illness, chronic unemployment and substance issues was almost entirely complete in the discourses emanating from many charities. Partly this was related to the politics of soliciting for aid and the emphasis upon the ‘ideal’ clients of charity. However, while the classic categories of the ‘worthy’ poor have a long history with the work of charities it must not be forgotten that charities in turn have been influenced by the growth of

statistics and the professionalization of social work, all of which can be placed within the emergence of bureaucratic governance in modern nation-states. The way in which these charities classified their clients influenced to an extent how they were viewed and discursively portrayed. When I was tasked to produce some statistical analyses based on the information the clients noted on the information sheets I was quickly struck with how this form forced the clients to define themselves in a number of delimited ways. A prime example of this was the question: "*Ertu einstæð/ur, öryrki, eldri borgari?*" (Are you single, disabled or a senior?). The expectation from the staff was that I would be able to produce for them a graph or pie-chart noting which percentage of their clients represented each specific category. The immediate problem I saw was that a given individual of course could exhibit one or more of these demographic features or subject positions. He or she could be single in terms of the lack of a legally or culturally recognized union; be 'disabled' in terms of being the recipient of a disability pension as per bureaucratic and medical definitions; and be a 'senior' according to the culturally understood notion of being an elder, elderly and/or a senior as per reaching the legally defined age of 67 in Iceland. Such efforts to pigeon-hole people into discrete categories are quite typical of the work of knowledge producing agencies in general. Kertzer and Arel (2001), discussing the racial, ethnic and cultural categories employed in governmental censuses, argue that the effects of classifying people in such ways are profound. They note that it is often in the state's best interest to create simple and one-dimensional categories in order to classify the population not only for the purposes of logistical ease but so that these categories may be employed for purposes of governance, such as by restricting access to resources and controlling the movement of people at national borders based upon such

designations of identification as citizenship, nation of origin, or 'race' among others. Furthermore, Kertzer and Arel contend that these constructed categories also have a profound effect on how social reality is constituted: "Rather than view social links as complex and social groupings as situational, the view promoted by the census is one in which populations are divided into neat categories" (Kertzer and Arel 2001:6). These categories, given the stamp of authority through their use by officials and statisticians, subsequently "gives a legitimacy to the categories and to this mode of thinking about people" (ibid.:11). Kertzer and Arel go on to note that these devised categories are not always accepted by the populations they are purported to represent and census categories are often resisted (see e.g. Kertzer and Arel 2001:15–16; 23–25).

Some of the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd did indeed react to these ascribed and limited definitions of identity by either circling all categories which they felt applied or writing in additional information. As such, I was forced to expand the number of 'categories' beyond those which Mæðrastyrksnefnd offered on the form such as student, maternity leave recipient, unemployed, temporary rehabilitation patient and so forth. I also felt uncomfortable when I had to re-classify a number of clients as other than 'senior,' for example, if they were under the age of 67 even though they had defined themselves as such on the form. Legally, they were not 'seniors' even though they may have been recognized as such by various socio-cultural definitions and by themselves and their families. I also found it curious that the form did not include a category for married or common-law marital relationships which meant that clients were forced to append this information themselves.

The form that Mæðrastyrksnefnd employed with which to gather information about their clients and to reproduce these findings in public discourses essentially sought to evaluate the extent to which their clients conformed to their operative categories. In many ways they merely followed and reproduced the similar definitions used by the state to classify people with respect to what can be viewed as somewhat arbitrary cut-off points, percentages and levels. I did the best I could to draw the staff's attention to the complexities of their clients' situations in the reports I produced but was limited by the information they collected. Other organizations collected more detailed and comprehensive information but expanding the number of 'groups' of the poor did not necessarily solve this problem. The Icelandic Red Cross produced a report on poverty in Iceland in 2000 (Rauði Kross Íslands 2000) in which the categories of those 'worst situated' generally expanded upon the classic subject positions of the poor. This version included low-income earners and pensioners, the mentally disabled (*geðfatlaðir*), single people and "certain groups of children and teens" (*ákveðinn hópur barna og unglinga*) (ibid.:8). An updated report from the Red Cross followed in May of 2006 (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006) which was similar in many ways to the one issued several years previous but was perhaps more overtly 'political.' The latter report placed particular emphasis upon the shortcomings of the social assistance system and suggested raising pensions as well as reducing taxation upon low-income earners. Much of this work drew upon and reproduced the key arguments of Icelandic scholars who have been working in this area for some time (e.g. Njáls 2003; Ólafsson 1999). However, in its conclusion this report basically expanded upon the number of 'categories' of those worst situated in Icelandic society. The 2000 report has listed four groups which was now expanded to seven in

2006: disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*), single mothers, immigrants (*innflytjendur*), the elderly, single men, mentally disabled (*geðfatlaðir*), and children who live in difficult situations (*börn sem búa við erfiðar aðstæður*) (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006:30). This expansion may indeed be warranted, yet there is no inherent characteristic within each of these categories which condemns one to a life of economic difficulty. There are of course disabled people, single mothers and immigrants in Iceland as elsewhere who are doing well in economic terms. Further, given these kinds of findings one has to wonder at the extent to which the discussions about poverty among charities and in the media have progressed. This taxonomic litany of the 'types' of the poor appears to be an updated version of the 'worthy' poor as delineated by charities over the centuries in Europe and perhaps is no more complex or detailed than the efforts to classify the poor that Jütte (1994) noted were underway in other parts of Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is of course laudable that charities and non-governmental organizations seek to draw attention to these issues. However, one has to be mindful about not just the limitations of the focus on subcategories but also about how these findings are presented. The release of this report coincided with a news conference in May of 2006 and the report was commented on by the President of Iceland. This story was briefly picked up by media but, as in one typical example, the findings of the report were distilled down to the President stating that poverty was an increasing problem in Iceland and a summary of the seven 'groups' who are at risk of poverty (Vísir 2006). Expanding the number of groups does not necessarily solve the problem of selective reporting and the simplification of the factors which produce and reproduce poverty and inequality. In the discourse of 'groups,' we not only lose some of the common factors which unite those who struggle with economic

difficulties but we also perpetuate the dividing practices and classificatory procedures employed by the very forms of power/knowledge that we should be trying to unravel and analyze.

While the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd may have chosen to portray their clients as fitting certain categories which reflected the orientation of their organization and which would appeal to the donating public, this does not mean that the staff members agreed as to 'who' they should be assisting or whether the clients should be sorted and filtered at all. The public discourses emanating from this organization did not reflect the ambiguity and doubts among some of the staff regarding how the clients were filtered by gender or any other demographic category in general. A few of the staff members were quite blunt about their views on the eligibility proceedings. One senior staff member commented to me: "Why should we close doors for some and not others?" Another stated: "In my opinion we should help those in need, but it should be for everyone...we should not be sorting people." Others exhibited varying degrees of support for the official goals of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in terms of assisting women and children. Some were adamant that they continue their historical trajectory and would defend this position by alluding to the name and history of the organization ("after all, it is Mæðrastyrksnefnd") or else by suggesting that men had other options such as turning to Samhjálp or Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. One staff member began her answer to this question with the standard response but which also suggested that she had a measure of ambivalence about this position in recognition that rigid adherence to the policy of assisting women with children would mean turning away people who are nevertheless in need:



Mæðrastyrksnefnd was originally for widows and single mothers. Back then there was no *barnabætur* [child allowance], nothing from insurance. It has not been more than eight or ten years since men started coming here. Personally I think it should be for single women with children but also men with children, which we are seeing more these days. I am not against having men coming, as the society [Mæðrastyrksnefnd] invites you to do what you can to help people in need.

Early in my research, another staff member was quite firm in her assessment that Mæðrastyrksnefnd should maintain its historical mandate. I had asked her in an interview why it was that single parent mothers and fathers were acceptable as clients but childless men received much more scrutiny and admonitions to seek help elsewhere than childless women. I noted a flash of surprise in her eyes when I asked this question and she replied: “You know, that is a good question. I never really thought about it.” Towards the end of my field research I was surprised one day in the kitchen when she raised this issue on her own. I surmised that she had been mulling over this issue for some time or that some recent events had caught her attention as she declared to me: “Some of these men are in difficult situations. What about the ones who are paying alimony? They really have no where to go. The Church [Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar] only helps three times a year and that is nothing.”

The majority of the staff I spoke to held to the desire to maintain the historical orientation of the committee but acknowledged that the complexity of the need in the city they encountered meant at the very least that disabled people and elderly men were acceptable as clients as well as all those in particularly difficult situations. Not all agencies agreed with Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s overtly gendered bias. Fjölskylduhjálp Íslands, which formed in late 2003, sought to distance itself from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Many of

their members had recently left Mæðrastyrsnefnd to form their new organization and the immediate statement they issued that their organization assisted people “regardless of gender” (Fréttablaðið 2003:24) was interpreted by some of the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd as an intentional slight against them. Fjölskylduhjálpi continued to describe their work in similar ways: “Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands gives people who need it the basic necessities regardless of gender or where they live” (Morgunblaðið 2004h:9); the latter also a slight against Mæðrastyrsnefnd’s policy of restricting their assistance in most cases to those who live within Reykjavík. During a seminar at which I presented some of my research at the University of Iceland, I discussed the practice of charities classifying their clients. A participant pointed out that it might be laudable that this organization sought to avoid reproducing Mæðrastyrsnefnd’s gender bias, but she continued that she felt that the very name of the organization—Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands (Iceland’s Family Help)—nevertheless reproduced the ‘positive’ and romantic descriptors of charity by invoking the discourse of the ‘family.’ Indeed, when references were made to the number of clients this organization assisted in public discourses the ‘unit’ of measurement quantified was always ‘families’ rather than individuals. As I mentioned earlier with respect to this usage, it distorts who the clientele are by overlooking the significant numbers of single and childless people who visit charities in the city.

Wagner argues that “charity’s success is not based on any empirical evidence of real effectiveness, but on its symbolic importance” (Wagner 2000:73). Part of this symbolic importance depends upon communicating to the public, governments and businesses which support charity that the aid is directed towards the ‘worthy’ or ‘those who need it the most.’ The prevalent use of categories such as single mothers, the elderly

and disability pensioners with which the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were evaluated as well as discursively rendered draws upon longstanding views about the 'worthy' poor and the specific history of this organization as well as the nature of the larger charity complex within which it is immersed. The discursive employment of these categories was strategic and selective for overemphasizing the predominance of some of these categories among their clientele as well as omitting the mention of others. This was partly related to the need to evoke the most sympathetic response among the donating public which is accomplished more effectively with certain images of their clients, such as young single mothers and elderly pensioners. Reproducing these discourses contributed to reproducing the larger status quo of inequalities within the larger society by capturing the attention of well meaning citizens about these issues in a sanitized and pre-fabricated manner while offering a charitable solution which, in the long-term, does little to alter the fundamental structural issues which produce poverty. The continuing reproduction of these categories serves to render poverty as something that afflicts only certain groups or individuals, drawing attention away from the common, broader issues. The 'worthy' poor become the normative poor, as these categories are repeatedly emphasized in charitable discourses and, in turn, are perceptually strengthened and defined as 'groups' which populate the social landscape. Helping single mothers is construed as a laudable act (which of course it is in certain contexts), but charity then becomes synonymous with good will in the eyes of the donors and the public rather than associated with the failures of state and society.

But these failures did not go unnoticed among the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the workers and officials of other agencies with whom I spoke. The staff encountered the reality of inequality on a regular basis yet sought in some contexts to frame their

understandings of these inequalities in terms of their understandings derived from the larger society. Gramsci's (see Chapter Four pp. 96–98) discussion of contradictory consciousness and 'common sense' are useful ways in which to understand the ambiguities and conflicts which arose among the staff during the execution of their duties. Each member brought with her to Mæðrastyrsnefnd her own personal understandings of poverty in Iceland. Almost without exception among those I spoke to, these personal understandings were in turn thrown into question as the result of their experience at Mæðrastyrsnefnd. Yet these kinds of questions that were raised were generally not communicated to the public at large. Short of direct participation as a volunteer or the intentional raising of these issues in public discourses, the general public at large had no method with which to receive an understanding of these issues without direct experience short of what was communicated via the mass media. In my interpretation, charities carefully balance their need to keep the issue of inequality alive through their discourses in order to encourage further donations and interest, but avoid a more radical approach in order to avoid antagonizing those in government and corporate circles who also provide them with material support. Without explicit attempts to put pressure on the state and related business concerns either directly or through public appeals, it is difficult to see how the charitable project as it stands could ever hope to rupture the status quo of inequality. The continued reliance upon the categorization of their clients could in effect be seen as contributing to the status quo and the larger state project by assisting to render poverty as related to individuals or select groups, in the process minimizing the role that economic practices and governments play in producing and reproducing these inequalities. The fact that some charities began to address the issue of the gender bias in

the distribution of aid is a positive sign that some questions regarding how charities conduct their business are starting to be raised. But the overarching issue which needs further attention is the larger roles charity play, questions I raise here but which are virtually absent in the discourses of charity in Iceland.

A positive sign I noted within Mæðrastyrksnefnd was the fact that some staff members were indeed unhappy with the efforts to classify their clients and the restriction of aid to certain categories of their clientele, but some also took this further and took it upon themselves to learn more about state and municipal policies in order to begin to ask larger questions. One staff member in particular was a member of Félag eldri borgara (Association of Retired Persons) and eagerly took the opportunity to discuss with me, in addition to the statistical information she provided, the shortcomings of the retirement pension system in the context of the high levels of taxation and cost of living in Iceland. The questions regarding the long-standing policy of excluding single and childless males were also increasingly raised by the staff towards the conclusion of my research. Mæðrastyrksnefnd took efforts to raise this issue publicly with the launch of their website in the fall of 2006 and a statement regarding their work:

Mæðrastyrksnefnd Reykjavíkur's history is a story of a battle for fair and humane social welfare laws. The committee's work has had a great impact, both on public opinion and on the laws and the implementation of them. The committee's work has changed during the years. There is a constant increase in the numbers of those who seek the committee's help. It is no longer just single mothers but also men, both single and men who have children to support. It is also noticeable how the numbers of disabled and elderly people have increased in the last few years (Mæðrastyrksnefnd 2006b).

Yet, the practice of discursively producing their clients as discrete categories remains firm. The committee's newly designed logo also recalls their well established maternal focus, as reproduced below:



Lastly, the statement on their website that “It is also noticeable how the numbers of disabled and elderly people have increased in the last few years” (ibid.), also raises interesting questions about the discourse of charity for reasons that will become apparent. I will now turn to a discussion regarding the issue of disability pensioners as clients of charity which exhibited many similar themes as the issue of gender discussed in this chapter.

## Endnotes for Chapter Six

<sup>1</sup> One can note a wide range of similar and parallel interventions by philanthropists into the lives of the poor, often but not exclusively those of poor women, in a number of different states. See, for example, Lützen (1999, 2000) in the case of Denmark; Proschaska (1980) in England; and Wagner (2000) and Friedman and McGarvie (2003) in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> For a diverse overview of the range of bio-politics in practice, specifically regarding women and issues of reproduction, see Ginsburg and Rapp (1995).

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. airbase at Keflavík closed in 2006, ending the American military presence in the country.

<sup>4</sup> These anxieties were indeed intertwined with concerns about 'racial' integrity, most evident in the repeated requests by the Icelandic authorities to the U.S. government not to station African-American soldiers in Iceland (see Ingimundarson 2004 for a further discussion.)

<sup>5</sup> This kind of thinking is perhaps seen in its most extreme form in Nazi Germany with the exclusion and later systemic murder of Jews, homosexuals, the physically and mentally disabled, and others who were perceived by the Nazi eugenicists as "fouling the purportedly healthy German populace" (Proctor 1995:170).

<sup>6</sup> I have opted to omit the nationality of her father as well due to issues of confidentiality.

<sup>7</sup> I learned in early 2007 that men had become increasingly predominant among the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, particularly single, childless men. One staff member estimated that they now accounted for roughly a third of their overall clients. This figure closely approximates the demographic patterns of need in Iceland overall in terms of gender, marital and parental status. The staff have since set aside bags for single men which contained less generous amounts of goods than the bags reserved for those with children, while they debated their next course of action. The staff members I spoke with since were uncertain as to why they were seeing an increase in childless male clients. One possibility is that the charity Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, the organization to which Mæðrastyrksnefnd often sent childless males, had moved out of the downtown core. As a result, some of the very same men whom the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd sent to the Church Aid for assistance during the time of my fieldwork may be returning to Mæðrastyrksnefnd as the result of their proximity to the downtown core as well as a large housing complex for disabled people.

<sup>8</sup> The strong association with women as the primary care providers has been weakening to an extent in recent years. One way this is evident is with recent shifts in child care benefits. Women are entitled to nine months of maternity leave but have the option of splitting this time with the child's father. Married to an Icelandic citizen, I was able to receive three months of paternity leave (*fæðingaorlof*) as a student with the birth of our child in Reykjavík in 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Polanyi (1957) noted that one has to take care not to transpose modern sensibilities onto the terms used to discuss poverty in the past. In the language of the English Poor Law of 1601, for example, the term 'the poor' at the time was synonymous with 'common people' and not paupers; perhaps closer in meaning to the phrase 'the working poor' as understood in the present. Polanyi writes that at the time "the gentlemen of England judged all persons poor who did not command an income sufficient to keep them in leisure" (Polanyi 1957:87).

## Chapter Seven

### Charity and the Bio-politics of Disability

In the previous chapter, I discussed the gendered aspects of the practices I observed and participated in during my fieldwork at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. As I have noted previously, single mothers and widows have long formed key components of what, particularly on the European mainland, constituted the ‘worthy’ poor—sectors of the populace who subsisted under conditions of poverty and who were perceived, by poor relief officials, charity workers and the general public, as destitute through no fault of their own. Some historians of charity (e.g. Lindberg 1993) argue that the distinction between the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor can be traced back as far as the Judaic and Christian Scriptures and subsequently came to inform much of the European approach to poor relief. Along with single mothers, widows, orphans and the elderly, ‘the disabled’ have also formed a key part of this distinction of being worthy of assistance from public or charitable relief efforts. While I had initially paid primary attention during my early field observations to the ways in which the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd distinguished their clients in terms of gender, I shortly thereafter realized that disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) would also come to be a key theme of my research. However, as I will discuss further, such distinctions as those who are ‘worthy’ of assistance from charities are not unproblematic and free of tensions and contradictions. The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd had some ambivalent ideas about the *öryrkjar* designation, as the notion of disability is a legal-bureaucratic distinction but it is also a cultural one and, as such, forms part of the larger hegemonic understandings of the social order.



One scene which played itself out time and time again during my fieldwork while I observed the interview process at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was that of the prospective client offering a yellow and green plastic identity card to the staff for inspection. I quickly learned that this card is known as the *örorkuskírteini* (disability card) and is issued to the bearer by Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute). The card attests to the fact that the bearer receives some form of disability benefits (*örorkubætur*), whether the benefits in question are the full disability pension (*örorkulífeyrir*) or the partial disability allowance (*örorkustyrkur*). The card may be presented by the bearer in a wide range of contexts in order to receive discounts on purchases ranging from prescription drugs to public transit fares among others. Another function, it would seem, is that the card attests to the bearer's eligibility as a client of a private material aid agency. In line with Mæðrastyrksnefnd's operative categories, my statistical research at this agency revealed that disability pensioners constituted a very significant 'group' among their clientele—accounting for between 49 to 54% of their clients on a monthly basis in 2004–2005. In comparison, disability benefit recipients accounted for only 12.5% of the overall population of Iceland in the same time period (Tryggingastofnun ríkisins 2004:48).<sup>1</sup> Other charities in Iceland, such as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, also had similar numbers of disabled clients. During 2004–2005, on average 60% of the clients of Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar received disability benefits (Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar 2005:4).<sup>2</sup>

Scholars who have done research in the area of poverty and the social welfare system in Iceland have pointed to a number of factors with which to explain why so many disability pensioners exist under difficult social and economic conditions in Iceland, noting such issues as low benefits, high rates of taxation, combined with the high costs of

living— particularly of food, housing, transit and medication (see e.g. Njáls 2003; Ólafsson 2005a). Similar factors were cited in my discussions with the staff of various charities, their clients and disability advocates. As important as it is to document the numerous factors which propelled so many disability pensioners to seek help at private material aid agencies, in this chapter I will examine some of the further implications of the ways in which the work of the charity complex challenges but also reinforces the category of *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners) through their operational practices.

The practice of charities classifying their clients, involving the examination of their documentation, the evaluation of their circumstances, the recording of their numbers as well as reporting these findings in public discourses, mirrors the activities of the official knowledge producing agencies in form and function as agents of ‘bio-power’ as theorized by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1980a). Furthermore, charities are but one more context in the lives of some disability pensioners where they must declare themselves as disabled pensioners (*öryrkjar*) in order to qualify for assistance or benefits. I contend that charities contribute as well to the process of subjectification through which people come to understand themselves as particular kinds of subjects (Rabinow 1984:11; Yates 2005:73) —in this context the repeated declaration and assertion of the status of being disabled plays a key role in this process. Once these categories are in place they form part of the taken for granted social landscape; ‘the disabled’ come to be seen, and often see themselves, as particular ‘kinds’ of people. In the context of my research I have found that this ‘kind’ of people, specifically *öryrkjar* (the recipients of disability pensions), as a denotative label carries with it a rather negative connotation which I did not anticipate at the outset of this project. I had assumed, rather erroneously, that disability pensioners

would be perceived as part of the 'worthy poor,' but have found instead that the category *öryrkjar* often carries with it in the public imagination in Iceland the connotation typical of how 'welfare recipient' is perceived by many in North America; in other words, a stigmatized category of people who are often perceived as shiftless and indolent, criticized for living on public assistance rather than waged labour. Moreover, the association between disability with charity and inequality is further strengthened through the repeated calls by aid agencies for assistance for their clients, most of whom are the recipients of disability benefits. As the category of *öryrkjar* is filled with meaning, albeit tension-laden and conflicting, these calls by charities for help to aid disability pensioners can also have negative implications in terms of providing further 'evidence' that disabled people are relying too heavily upon private as well as public assistance at the expense of paid labour. Further, while it is indeed laudable that charities call upon the public to take an interest in helping people in need, in this context what is being suggested ultimately is a charitable solution for structural problems. The calls to the public made by charities tend to be calls for goods and labour rather than appeals for political, economic or social change. Rather than calling for positive changes to the benefit system, further efforts for rehabilitation and job training, focusing on inequities within the labour market, or even confronting the prejudices about their clients head-on, the relationship between disability pensioners as the subjects of charities and as 'second class' citizens is further strengthened and forms part of the hegemonic 'common sense' view of the social order.

What I found particularly intriguing during my fieldwork was the extent to which 'the disabled' as a social category was also, to varying degrees, a stigmatized category. The historic 'worthy' poor, as mentioned above, were distinguished as such primarily in

terms of the perceived lack of blame for their predicaments. In other words, single mothers, the elderly, orphans and disabled people were generally perceived by governmental agents, welfare officials, charity workers and the general public as both defenceless and in need of the care and assistance of others, as well as destitute through no fault of their own; their reasons for being poor were either deemed to be self-evident or easily understood. These categories of the poor appealed to charity workers as well as donors, whereas male vagrants, for example, did not. Yet it must not be assumed that the 'worthy' poor were entirely free of either social stigmatization or the suspicion that revolved around those who depended upon the state and/or charities for subsistence. The single mothers who sought help at Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the time of my research, for example, were nevertheless still viewed with a measure of suspicion by the staff as to whether or not they were truly single. I have found in my discussions with Icelanders from all walks of life that there was a high degree of suspicion about 'single mothers' in general, whether they were the clients of charity, social assistance recipients or even fully employed. Largely this centered on the belief that these single mothers were declaring themselves as such in order to enjoy certain municipal and state benefits accorded to single parents, while in reality they were often believed to be cohabitating with an undeclared partner.<sup>3</sup> There was certainly no shortage of anecdotal evidence offered to me during these discussions to shore up these claims, yet there also appeared to be an admittance that this practice was understandable given the high costs of living in Iceland—such tactics were an understandable practice even if they were illegal and, in some opinions, considered to be devious if not immoral.

The stigmatization of disability pensioners as a social category is complex, but it partly involves some similar suspicions as those levelled against single mothers—suspicions that their claims for governmental and charitable assistance are somehow illegitimate. In the case of disability pensioners, this applied to suspicions as to whether they were single, if they claimed to be, but also whether their claims to being disabled were legitimate. Erving Goffman noted some time ago (Goffman 1963) that socio-cultural stigmas revolve around ‘spoiled identities’ in a great variety of historical and cultural contexts. He identified three typologies of stigma, two of which are applicable in this context: stigmas which revolve around ‘defects’ or ‘abnormalities’ of the body as well as issues of morality, which Goffman referred to as “blemishes of individual character” (Goffman 1963:5). The stigma applied to those who exhibit certain differences of the body is by no means unique to Iceland. In Euro-American societies in general, Goffman argues that this stigma applied to disabled people is a reduction of their worth and abilities as human beings, usually based on visual indicators, “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (ibid.:3). I assume that commonplace ignorance about disabilities and prejudice governed, to an extent, some of the negative views of disabled people that I encountered in my research. However, it was the seemingly widespread belief that disability pensioners were fabricating or exaggerating their situations in order to make use of governmental and charitable benefits which caught my attention. This was less related to the stigma of the body but related more to Goffman’s notion of stigma as it applies to ‘moral blemishes.’ In this sense disability pensioners shared much with single mothers.

The perception that many disability pensioners were receiving their benefits fraudulently consumed much of the energies of disability advocates who worked to counter these claims. As I will discuss, this was a much talked about and particularly heated debate in Iceland during the time of my research, which coincided with a rather alarmist report about the increasing number of disability pensioners in the country released at this time and produced by the Institute of Economics at the University of Iceland at the behest of the Icelandic government (Herbertsson 2005). The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were involved in the issue of disability pensioners as well. The organization drew attention through press releases to their position that more and more disabled people were seeking help at their organization in their solicitations for donations from the public. However, many of the staff members were ambivalent about the overwhelming presence of disability pensioners among their clients. The ‘common sense’ view of the matter—the Gramscian ‘common sense’ which exists in the tension-filled position between the knowledge of the specialists and the folklore of everyday life (Gramsci 1999:326)—held that not all of their clients were ‘truly disabled’ despite their official status as such. The staff were influenced in their views by the hegemonic perceptions of disability pensioners which held sway in public and political discourses even if these views clashed with their first-hand experiences at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The dominant discourse at the time, arguably to an extent a view engineered by the state and its supporters, that the supposedly increasing numbers of specifically young disability pensioners are proving to be a drain upon the state treasury as well as potentially eroding the work ethics of a generation through their dependence upon public and private assistance rather than waged labour, influenced the practices of private charities. The

rather harsh and mean-spirited approach by certain political sectors to discredit disability pensioners in order to reduce public support for the pension system, possibly to render potential changes to the system more politically palatable, used the significant presence of pensioners seeking help at charities as evidence that the system is being abused. The position that the disability benefits were generous carried with it the implication that the pensioners who sought help at charities did not need it and were therefore morally suspect. This was compounded by what I have found to be some rather distorted views of how much pensioners received in benefits, even among some charity workers. The perception that many disability pensioners were living the proverbial life of luxury on the pension system cast their overwhelming presence as the clients of charities in an even more negative light. This in turn cast further suspicions upon their claims of being disabled as well. Charity workers were not immune to these views and did not accept the status of 'disabled' in and of itself as evidence of material need. Additional scrutiny of the client's information, both in terms of documentation and physical appearance, helped to inform their decisions as to whether or not the client was a 'legitimate' claimant.

As I will discuss further, Foucault argued that bio-power functions to 'normalize' the patients or inmates over whom these efforts are exercised. Bio-power works to discipline its subjects and to render them 'docile' so they may be amenable to the efforts of doctors, wardens, and officials (Foucault 1979:138–139). But the creation of these subject positions, which essentially came to form sub-categories among the populace, has further social, economic and political implications, as these categories become filled with meaning beyond their initial origins in the medical-legal-judicial context. The category of *öryrkjar*, or disability pensioners, is an artefact that is partly medical and bureaucratic

in origin, but it is also reinforced as a social category through the work of other agents such as charities. The efforts by charities to screen their disabled clients and their refusal to accept their status as 'legitimate' clients based on their disability status alone can be seen as one way in which disability pensioners were disciplined, as the staff of these agencies were concerned that they were contributing to perpetuating a cycle of dependency or, in the extreme, enabling fraud. But I contend that the cumulative efforts at work to produce and maintain the social category of 'disability pensioner' acted not only to normalize the pensioners themselves but the members of the public in general. Even charities, which took pains to emphasize that they assisted anyone regardless of social status, still referred to their clients in terms of a collection of demographic categories which were assumed, by way of implication, to reflect an underlying reality. The evaluation and classification procedures at work within the charity complex helped to strengthen the existence of these 'groups' (disability pensioners, single mothers and so on.). A major issue with regard to this is that these categories themselves are not value-neutral but associated with particular 'natures,' perceived qualities and assumed codes of conduct. Rather than directly countering the stigmas and stereotypes associated with these categories, through their practices charities contributed, unintentionally in my estimation, to strengthening these hegemonic configurations by the constant referral to these 'groups' when discussing their clientele. In such a way, charities help to contribute to the status quo of inequality in a material sense (drawing in attention, help and resources to an activity that is poorly equipped to foment structural change), but also through contributing to the maintenance of hegemonic views of the social order. While charities usually defend their clients from the charges of abuse of the system, they nevertheless



help to strengthen the association between charity and certain social groups in the public imagination rather than drawing attention to the structural similarities these 'groups' share vis-à-vis the social assistance system, taxation regimes, the high costs of living and the labour market among others. 'The disabled' merely becomes one more social group the public expects to see and help during the holidays; it becomes 'normal' to assist single mothers, the elderly and disability pensioners in these contexts as it is 'normal' that these sectors of the populace will struggle for a decent standard of living. I will now turn to a discussion of the ways in which disability pensioners are constructed as a social category and as the subjects of charity.

### **7.1 The bio-politics of disability**

A number of scholars in the field of disability studies and related disciplines have of late been finding inspiration in the work of Michel Foucault, as the collection of works edited by Shelley Tremain (2005) suggests. Foucault's notion of 'bio-power' has figured prominently in such efforts. Foucault argued in his later work that, in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the concerns of governments shifted from that of sovereignty over a geographical territory to include the management of the population as well as the micro-management of individuals in terms of conduct (see for example, Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991; Foucault 1980a, 1980b). These emergent forms of power depended upon the work of knowledge producing agents and agencies (for example, medicine, academia, government bureaucracies) through whose various endeavours the populace was examined, measured, divided, classified and whose efforts were ultimately directed towards normalizing the subjects they governed. But the authorities needed comprehensive access to individuals in order to accomplish these goals. Foucault writes:

“power had to be able to gain access to the bodies of individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour” (Foucault 1980b:125). The emergent dividing and confining practices as seen in hospitals, poorhouses, asylums, prisons and other institutions was one way in which the authorities could gain such access and attempt to normalize conduct through the means of isolation, surveillance and rehabilitation. Foucault’s work considers as well other points of access such as the efforts by the ‘agents of liaison’ (ibid.:62) such as charity workers and philanthropists who extended these forms of surveillance into the lives of the poor and into their very homes in some contexts.

The public authorities were also concerned about broader issues such as disease, sanitation, birth and death rates, child rearing practices and so forth regarding the population in general and not just select segments of the populace. In short, what emerged was a form of ‘bio-power’ or ‘bio-politics’ in order to address these concerns (Foucault 1980a). Power insinuated itself into regulating everyday practices and behaviours as it pertained to the body and its processes, through methods of surveillance, rehabilitation, juridical sanctions, education, voluntary and involuntary examinations by doctors and public health officials, as well as the collection of census data regarding a wide range of issues about the population in general. Foucault’s focus on ‘bio-power’ posited that a vast apparatus emerged in which every member of the population came to be examined, classified and ranked in numerous ways; the aims of this apparatus were ultimately to know in order to normalize: “A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life” (Foucault 1980a:144). A critical aspect of bio-power and of Foucault’s understanding of the workings of power in general is that power

needs to be considered as a productive force rather than as merely repressive as it is often portrayed:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (Foucault 1980b:119).

Tremain (2005) argues that Foucault's notion of bio-power is a useful approach in the field of disability studies in order to understand the processes through the apparatus of bio-politics which "caused the contemporary disabled subject to emerge into discourses and social existence" (Tremain 2005:5). There is not adequate space here to provide a comprehensive discussion of the body of theoretical work produced by the discipline of disability studies and allied fields except to point to a few issues as they pertain to my research. One key approach to understanding contemporary notions of disability emerged as the result of the work of disability activists in the United Kingdom in the mid 1970s. This 'social model' of disability is often associated in academic discourses with one of its proponents, Michael Oliver (Oliver 1990). The earlier 'medical model' of disability was criticized as it held that the basis on which one was determined to be disabled was predicated on the nature of the physical 'flaw' of the individual without considering the larger social, political and economic context where this 'flaw' was rendered as disabling. To rectify this, the social model of disability holds that there is a contrast between the physical or cognitive 'impairment' of the body and that of the imposed social and economic limitations, restrictions and exclusions which produce disability. In other

words, the fault does not lie with the 'flaws' or imperfections of the body but the limitations of built form which prevent access, the prejudices which guide hiring practices in the labour market, and the stigmas which exclude individuals in social contexts; all of these work to produce 'disability.' Proponents of this theory (e.g. Priestly 2003) have gone on to argue that 'impairment' and 'disability' are as such distinct categories with no causal relationship between them.

This position has been criticized (e.g. Tremain et al. 2005) because it has been pointed out, among other issues, that the proponents of the social model do not argue that other forms of socio-economic exclusion based on racism or homophobia are disabilities, which suggests that there is nevertheless an implied linkage between impairment and disability regarding the body despite the claims otherwise. As such, Tremain (2001, 2005) contends that the strict separation between 'impairment' and 'disability' is fanciful because one cannot avoid the fact that both concepts involve notions of physical factors relating to the body and its mechanisms. It is also debatable whether a notion of impairment can exist in a 'natural' form without reference to the discourses which give it meaning. Tremain asks how one can conceive of a 'normal' body free from impairment without the cultural knowledge from which these understandings and evaluations are derived. She continues:

Indeed, it seems politically naive to suggest that the term 'impairment' is value-neutral, that is, 'merely descriptive,' as if there could ever be a description that was not also a *prescription* for the formulation of the object (person, practice, or thing) to which it is claimed to innocently refer. Truth-discourses that purport to describe phenomena contribute to the construction of their objects (Tremain 2001:621).

From my discussions with those who were denoted as having a disability or impairment during the course of my research, there was no question that the body was involved in some way; the questions revolved around what societies do and should do regarding these differences. In an interview with Arnþór Helgason, who at the time was the *framkvæmdastjóri* (director) of Öryrkjabandalag Íslands (the Organisation of Disabled in Iceland or ÖBÍ), he argued that disability must be understood as a process which is linked to the body but which is also connected to social-structural issues. As he put it, people with certain kinds of physical limitations “cannot stand the demands of the [labour] market” and are gradually moved on to the disability pension system as the result of governments and businesses that are unwilling to implement certain reforms that would accommodate the varying needs and limitations of workers, usually out of deference to the interests of the maximization of profit. Arnþór continued that being disabled is also a relative concept: “Every person is disabled one way or the other depending upon the environment.” He used himself as an example in that his visual impairment did not preclude him from waged labour in his position—it did not make him ‘not-able’ in this context but that this also depended upon the employer as well as the assistance of others in some instances or with assistive technology such as a scanner which can render text into Braille so that he could perform his required duties. Once these issues were overcome the factor of having an ‘impairment’ or being ‘disabled’ receded. As Barry Allen (2005) notes, “In a world arranged to accommodate the difference, it is not an impairment” (ibid.:95), which suggests that the notion of impairment, like disability, depends upon the socio-cultural context for meaning and significance and does not operate within some kind of ahistorical or pre-cultural ‘natural’ context. This is not to

argue the case for an extreme version of nominalism regarding bio-physical conditions of the body, but to note that it is difficult and perhaps unproductive to maintain the sharp distinction between impairment and disability. However, within the context of my research, the distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability' was significant in certain contexts for reasons that I will explore below.

Another aspect of bio-power to consider as it relates to the notion of disability is that the subjects who are defined as such by these knowledge producing bodies may come to understand and view themselves in these terms. Paul Rabinow (1984) has delimited three modes by which Foucault explored how humans are rendered as subjects. 'Dividing practices,' through which segments of the population were bracketed-off and physically or socially isolated from the general population, and 'scientific classification,' through which these segments of the populace were labelled, evaluated and targeted for rehabilitation, have already been discussed at various points in this dissertation. The notion of scientific classification is particularly useful when considering the processes by which doctors and government officials evaluate and classify their disabled clients. However, I have so far said little regarding the third mode by which subjects are rendered, which Foucault has referred to as the process of 'subjectification'—the "way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject" (Foucault, in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:208). Rabinow continues that subjectification often entails the mediation of an external authority figure during the processes of self-understanding and provides by way of example a priest receiving a confession or the therapeutic role of the psychoanalyst (Rabinow 1984:11). But as it pertains to the subject position of 'disabled,' the process of subjectification can be seen in the ways in which the patient or subject comes to

internalize the category into which he or she is designated by the medical or governmental authorities and, in turn, may come to build a personal identity around this category.

The subject position in Iceland of being disabled is further reproduced by the medical establishment, the administrators of the governmental disability pension system, and the media where this category is discursively produced and reproduced as if it referred to a specific 'kind' or subcategory of personage. But in the context of charity and the politics of social assistance, the 'type of being' that concerns us here is not generally someone with an impairment but specifically those who receive a disability pension. Here we move from a category created as an artefact of bio-power to hegemonic configurations of the social order where these social categories are assumed to have a corresponding 'reality' and have implications beyond their medical-legal-bureaucratic origins. I use hegemony here in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1999) whereby hegemony is not merely a dominant ideology which has taken hold but a set of beliefs and views which are contested and only held in place in a very unstable and tension-filled manner (see Chapter 4:4.1). Disability rights organizations, such as ÖBÍ, played an important role in producing counter-hegemonic discourses through educating the public about people with disabilities as well as working against the stigmas which held sway in the larger society. Material aid charities in Iceland played a somewhat different role through both challenging but also reinforcing these social typologies and how they were perceived. It is important to note that disability rights organizations lobbied on behalf of people with impairments in general whereas material aid charities generally referred to disability in terms of pensioners. In the context of my research, the criticisms about disabled people that I

encountered were primarily directed towards those who subsisted on governmental benefits and sought assistance as well from charities.<sup>4</sup> Charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd reinforced this designation of *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners) by demanding proof of their status as disability benefit recipients from their clients, if they were so classified, as well as requiring them to state that they were disabled on the client information sheets. In turn, charities routinely noted the prominent numbers of disabled clients who sought help at their organizations during their respective solicitations for support. The rather complex and convoluted way in which people were classified as disabled in general fascinated me as did the realization that there was an entire governmental edifice dedicated to administering these pensions in addition to the numerous charitable, advocacy and social aid agencies which, to varying degrees, also depended upon disabled people for their existence. As Tremain argues, the governmental practices (for which I would include the whole medical, academic, bureaucratic and philanthropic complex) that produce and reproduce the disabled subject as a social entity which needs to be governed and administered, in turn “provides the justification for the multiplication and expansion of the regulatory effects of these practices” (Tremain 2005:11). I will now turn to a discussion of the role that charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd play in the production of the disabled subject.

## **7.2 ‘Ég er 75% öryrki’**

In the context of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities in Iceland, the term ‘*öryrkjar* (*öryrki* sg.)’ was used in reference to disability pensioners. The term was also in wide usage by governmental officials, politicians, members of the media and was commonly invoked in the discourses of daily life to refer rather broadly to disabled



people in general. The term derives from the word '*örorka*' which means 'disability,' usually in the context of the evaluation of diminished work capacity. The sociologist Stefán Ólafsson (2005a) quotes a definition of the word from an Icelandic dictionary: "A large or total impairment in work ability as the result of an accident or illness, for example paralysis" (*orðabók Menningarsjóðs* in Ólafsson 2005a:9). Ólafsson continues that researchers inside and outside of Iceland often see this definition of disability as limited and posit that disability pertains not just to one's relationship to the labour market, but more broadly to a general exclusion from participation in the larger society in a number of contexts which often leads to a marginalized existence (Ólafsson 2005a:10).

The word *öryrki* also has an older meaning with similar connotations to the English term 'invalid,' which is dated and not much in use today. Early in my research a few staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd had glossed the word *öryrki* as 'invalid' when speaking to me in English in reference to their disabled clients, unaware of the negative connotations and dated usage of the word. One staff member later asked me whether the word 'invalid' was appropriate or not. This staff member's command of English was exceptional and she expressed to me her view that the term 'invalid' struck her as implying that the referents were 'not valid' and if so she did not feel that the term should be used. I explained that was most likely the reason why the term fell out of usage in contemporary English. Nevertheless, the use of the terms *öryrki* (disability pensioner) and *örorka* (state of disability) were predominant among the discourses of the staff during the execution of their activities and were in widespread usage in the media and government bureaucracies in reference to the recipients of the disability pension system. For example, the following official terms are all derived from the word *örorka*: *örorkubætur* (disability

benefits in general)<sup>5</sup>; *örorkustyrkur* (disability allowance); *örorkulífeyrir* (full disability pension); *örorkumat* (disability evaluation rating) and so forth. A person receiving one of these benefits or pensions from the state was referred to as an *örorkulífeyrisþegi* (disability pensioner) or simply as being *öryrki*. The term commonly used in the charity complex, media and popular discourses to refer to these people as a group or social category was *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners).

In contrast, the term *fatlaður*, which can be glossed as ‘disabled’ or ‘handicapped’ was generally not used in reference to the disability pension system and its recipients but was usually restricted to references to the body—much in keeping with the social model of disability which makes the distinction between the ‘impairment’ of the body with the social, economic and bureaucratic factors which produce ‘disability.’ I could not recall or find in my notes or interview transcripts one instance where a disabled client at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was referred to by the staff as ‘*fatlaður*.’ In part this was so because it was explained to me that one can have an impairment of the body, a *fötlun*, but if one is working and/or not receiving a disability pension one is therefore not likely to be a disability pensioner (*öryrki*) in the bureaucratic sense. It was the latter category of individuals whom, among others, the committee targeted for assistance.

This semantic distinction was replicated elsewhere in Icelandic society, for example, in the public transportation system of Reykjavík. Reduced fares for the bus system were offered for students, the elderly and those who received a disability rating from the state (*öryrkjar*). But there was also a separate transit service offered by the city for those with a physical impairment who could not make use of the general bus system or had limited mobility capacities and needed to go somewhere the transit system did not.

These specially equipped small buses had to be ordered beforehand and those who did so had to have a physical impairment of the body which prevented or hindered their use of the standard transit services. According to the transit system's website (Strætó 2006), this included wheelchair users, people with visual impairments and those with 'long-term' impairments. In other words, while disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) in general were eligible to receive a discounted fare regardless of the nature of their specific disability, only people with physically impairments (*fatlaðir*)—those with a physical impairment of the body which limited or restricted mobility—were entitled to use this specific transit service. The service was as such referred to as *Ferðaðjónusta Fatlaðra* (disabled or 'handicapped' transit services) and not *Ferðaðjónusta Öryrkja*. Reduced fares, fees and ticket prices were also offered in numerous other contexts aside from transit. Disabled people were routinely offered these discounts but again the term of reference was usually *öryrki* rather than *fatlaður*, as the former suggests dependency upon a pension and a fixed income whereas the latter refers to the body which may or may not have any bearing on one's financial status.

As I noted above, Tremain (2001) has argued that the categories of disability or impairment are not natural in that these distinctions always derive from cultural knowledge which informs how these physical differences are perceived and the meanings and values attributed to them. With the rise of modern social welfare states and their various pension schemes, the category of 'disabled' has become a bureaucratic and medical designation which in turn helps to inform the dominant discourses and understandings of what it means to be disabled. In the case of Iceland, this bureaucratic designation of 'disabled' appears to have mixed variously with the older cultural

emphasis upon ‘work’ and the long-standing suspicions that cling to those who depend upon municipal assistance, as discussed in previous chapters. How it is that individuals in Iceland are classified by Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute) is complex and only a few points will be discussed here.

The first issue to mention is the ubiquitous use of the phrase ‘75% öryrki’ (75% disabled), familiar to anyone who is disabled in Iceland or involved in some way with disability or social welfare issues. One of first noticeable patterns that I encountered when I began analyzing the data from Mæðrastyrsnefnd’s client information sheets was the fairly regular way in which the clients who circled ‘öryrki,’ in reference to the question on the sheet which inquired as to their status, also appended to this denotation that they were ‘75% öryrki.’ The clients usually indicated this on the form by adding the phrase ‘Ég er 75% öryrki’ (I am 75% disabled) or else they simply wrote ‘75%’ on the assumption, correctly, that the staff would understand the meaning of the reference. Shortly afterwards I learned that a 75% disability evaluation from Tryggingastofnun ríkisins denotes that one is ‘fully disabled,’ which means that one is therefore entitled to receive the full *örorkulífeyrir* or disability pension.

Two questions came to mind immediately once I had learned this, only one of which I was finally able to answer. The first was that I realized that it would be useful to learn to what extent the disability pensioners who sought help at Mæðrastyrsnefnd were ‘fully disabled’ in contradistinction to those who were not. The possible significance of this distinction was first raised to me by the sociologist Harpa Njáls who mentioned to me that what is often lost in the discussions about the situations of disability pensioners in Iceland is that some have to make do with the lesser disability allowance rather than the

full pension. Although the pensioners who have to rely upon the reduced disability allowance rather than the full pension are in the minority in Iceland,<sup>6</sup> I was curious to see whether or not they were overrepresented as the clients of charities. But I was not able to learn the answer to this question as Mæðrastyrksnefnd did not collect this information.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, I grew curious about the designation ‘75% öryrki’ itself, as I wondered ‘75% of what?’ and why it was that a ‘fully’ disabled person is classed as 75% rather than 100% disabled. None of the clients, staff members, officials or scholars I spoke to during the course of my research were ever able to adequately explain this 75% designation to me. Towards the conclusion of my research the mystery was finally solved for me when I interviewed Halldór Baldursson, *aðstoðartryggingayfirlæknir* (assistant insurance chief physician) for Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute).

My first question to Halldór inquired as to the designation ‘75%’ and what this 75% is in reference to. He replied, somewhat cryptically and with a bemused grin, that “it is not 75% of anything.” I had assumed, like many of my research participants including some who are themselves classed as 75% disabled, that this 75% was in reference to some kind of bureaucratic point system linked to the necessary medical evaluation in order to receive the disability evaluation as a prerequisite for disability benefits. Halldór explained to me that the 75% designation is not in reference to the body, like many people assume, but in fact the 75% historically referred to the loss to one’s income as the result of accident or illness. He explained that, until the changes to the disability statutes in the 1990s, if one was not able to earn at least  $\frac{1}{4}$  (25%) of the median income amount in a specific ‘district’ (*héraði*), then this amounted to a loss of a  $\frac{3}{4}$  (75%) earning potential. I was surprised when he added, “But that amount is not specified, nor can you specify it.”

Halldór explained to me that the wording of the original law was quite interesting in its inherent vagueness. Halldór retrieved an old volume of the disability statutes from the collection of bound volumes located in the shelves around his office to illustrate his point. He pointed out that, in the wording of the law, the geographical distinction of ‘district’ (*héraði*) is not specified nor is it specified as to what constitutes the ‘median income’ from which to calculate this ‘75% loss of income’ necessary to qualify for assistance. He showed me the wording from the older law which was quite surprising in its vagueness as well as its implications for and assumptions about the underlying class-based divisions within Icelandic society. According to this statute (Lög um almannatryggingar nr. 67/1971 gr.12), in sub-section ‘a’ the right to a disability pension is reserved for those ‘men’ (*menn*,’ an obvious use of the masculine as the unmarked, which Halldór drew my attention to) who have a legal residence in Iceland, are aged between 16–67 years, and have had “an undiminished work capacity before they took legal residence here” (*ibid.*). Aside from the gendered language, sub-section ‘a’ is not much different from sub-section ‘a’ of the statute which replaced it in 1993 (Lög um almannatryggingar nr. 117/1993 gr. 12) and which formed the basis of the disability pension system—a system that was heavily modified again in 1999 and continued to be tinkered with by the state during the period of my research.

Halldór then drew my attention to the critical difference between the 1971 and 1993 versions of the law with regards to sub-section ‘b.’ In the older version it is stated that disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) are those who “are not able to work for ¼ of what those mentally and physically whole men are accustomed to earning in that same district [*héraði*] in work befitting their physical strength and work skills and reasonably may be

expected of them, taking into consideration their upbringing [*uppeldi*] and previous work” (Lög um almannatryggingar nr. 67/1971 gr.12). Halldór paused for a moment so I could digest this information and then added that, not only was the law rather imprecise as a tool with which to calculate benefits, but it clearly recognizes the underlying class system of Iceland which so many Icelanders reject in terms of their collective self-image as an egalitarian society, as discussed earlier (see Chapter Three). In this law there was clearly no consideration paid to an idea of a generally recognized ‘standard of living.’ Rather, benefits are to be paid to those who cannot make  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the amount of what the applicant is ‘accustomed’ to earning befitting his or her class—here based upon local expectations and norms, work status, and previous income. Furthermore, it struck me that this class system as such was not assumed to be very mobile, given that one’s income, status and expectations appears to be linked and, perhaps, bound to one’s ‘upbringing’ (*uppeldi*). Halldór then pointed to the revised version from 1993 (Lög um almannatryggingar nr. 117/1993 gr. 12) which dispensed with the explicit language of class and was replaced with a more neutral-sounding medical discourse that focused on the body. Sub-section ‘b’ was revised to state that disabled people “are considered to be at least 75% disabled in the long-term because of the consequences of medically accepted disease or disability” (ibid.). Here, Halldór pointed out, is the source of the confusion that now exists with the 75% label as the ‘75%’ designation has been de-linked from its original financial reference and has morphed into an implication that an individual is 75% disabled in the body rather than its historical reference to a 75% loss of income. Regardless of its historical reference, in the context of my research ‘75% öryrki’ certainly acted as an

adjective with which to describe oneself in terms of 'being disabled' and its associated social implications rather than an estimated loss of income.

Halldór continued that the changes to the Icelandic disability pension system in 1999 reformulated the system as one based upon a criteria of points that itself is a mixture of evaluations designed to chart not only diminished work capacity but also the ability to perform basic tasks in daily life. The new system is more medically oriented and focused on the health of the body rather than primarily emphasizing one's ability or lack thereof as a potential labourer. However, Halldór added that he was not convinced that these changes made the system necessarily any less ambiguous, as he shrugged and summed up the revised system by commenting that it is basically reduced to: "if you score this, you are disabled." As such, the current 75% designation is a hold-over from the previous system but now its specific denotative value is empty; in his estimation it is "completely arbitrary" as it essentially does not refer to any specific value other than the fact that one has been evaluated as 'fully disabled' by the point system. Furthermore, he pointed out that, despite what I have periodically heard to the contrary, the tales of those who contend that they were short-changed by the insurance system by being evaluated at only '74%' disabled in order to keep people from receiving the full disability pension are apocryphal. It is true that I have heard tales about malicious insurance doctors who have denied patients one or two percentage points in order, presumably, to keep the full disability pension rolls down. However, Halldór insisted that this is not the case, as no one can be finally evaluated at '73%' or '74%' in terms of receiving a pension. The category is simply '75%' and could easily be labelled 'category A' or 'category 1'; in other words, one is classed as 75% or one is not for the purposes of being eligible for a full pension.



The next category is '50–65%' for which one receives the *örorkustyrkur* or disability allowance. Under 50%, the category is referred to as '10–49%,' and such claimants do not receive a monthly pension but a lump sum payment, usually for an injury.<sup>8</sup>

The interview concluded with a discussion about the socio-cultural implications of the terms for disability. Halldór agreed with my estimation that '*öryrki*' refers primarily to financial matters, work ability and the pension system, whereas '*fatlaður*' is usually in reference to the body. He added as well that there is also the term '*miski*' in reference to a medical disability and that all of these terms can and have been used interchangeably. But the term *öryrki* is generally related more to one's ability to work than the latter terms. He pointed out that the prefix '*ör-*' refers to 'something diminished.' The stem of the word '*orka*' means 'power.' In conjunction, the compound word '*örorka*' (disability) literally refers to diminished or reduced energy, power or work potential. Similarly, '*yrki*,' the root of the word '*öryrki*' (disability pensioners), is derived from the verb '*yrkja*' (to work). This word also carries with it certain historical connotations in regards to the old agricultural society that Iceland had once been, as seen in phrases such as '*yrkja landið*' or to 'work the land.' *Öryrki* therefore refers to a reduced or diminished capacity as a potential worker. The relationship between being a disability pensioner and a 'non-worker' is encoded within the term itself and I felt that this is perhaps a key reason why there seems to be a much closer semantic relationship in the public imagination between *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners) and 'social welfare recipient' in Iceland than what I was accustomed to in North America. Even though Iceland has since shifted towards the medical model of disability, it would seem that older associations between disability and one's status as a (non)labourer persist.

As touched on above, as the result of changes in September of 1999 to the disability evaluation system, Iceland shifted towards the medical model on which the condition of disability was now determined as the result of a diagnosis as per the body rather than the previous emphasis upon the individual's capacity to work (Ólafsson 2005a:9). A medical diagnosis is required for potential claimants and, based on these findings, the claimant is assessed and given a disability rating expressed as a percentage. Those who qualify for a full disability pension are evaluated at 75% and receive the *örorkulífeyrir* whereas those who are evaluated as within the 50–65% category receive the disability allowance (*örorkustyrkur*). On their website, Tryggingastofnun (2006a) provides the disability evaluation standards (*örorkumatsstaðall*) on which these evaluations are based. In order to receive a 75% rating one must achieve 15 points as per the physical (dis)ability criteria or 10 points as per the 'mental' (*andlega*) criteria, or a combination of 6 points from either section. The physical criteria seek to determine such things as details about one's capacity for activities such as how long one can sit on a chair, stand, walk, how well one can see and so forth. For example, if one cannot stand at all without support or can only stand one to ten minutes without sitting, one receives 15 points; those who can only stand 30 minutes without sitting receive 7 points and those who have no problem standing at all receive 0 points. The psychological criteria include such things as being unable to answer the telephone and take a message, lack of interest in personal appearance and environment, drinking alcohol before noon, needing encouragement to eat and drink and a host of other issues.

While the current incarnation of the system may appear more 'medical' or 'objective' with its finer degrees of evaluations, I remain unconvinced that this medical

model is necessarily divorced from the earlier emphasis upon determining one's ability to work. Recall that Foucault had argued that one of the fundamental shifts in the nature of power in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as it applied to the management of the population was that there was a 'dismemberment' of the institutions which cared for the sick and the poor. Charities and religious orders provided a wide range of services for the elderly, disabled people, sick, and 'indigent,' which have since been fragmented into an array of institutions governed by professional care providers. Foucault contends that one result as well was the further fragmentation of the rather vague categories of 'paupers' or 'the poor' into finer and finer categories for the purposes of governance and ultimately normalization—denotations which are far more technically complex than the rather broad operative categories and distinctions historically employed by charities. He writes, "The process of dismemberment is also carried out as a result of a finer grid of observation of the population and the distinctions which this observation aims to draw between the different categories of unfortunates to which charity confusedly addresses itself" (Foucault 1980b:169). I disagree, however, to a certain extent with Foucault's consideration of charities. I concede that modern scientific management of the population, with the support bureaucracies, research bodies, professional staff and computerization, can amass far greater amounts of detailed information which can lead to finer and finer categorizations and evaluations of the populace that, in turn, have a greater potential to bring even more new 'types of beings' into social existence. But I would not agree that charities on the European mainland prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century were entirely 'confused' about whom they targeted and their objectives. It is certainly not the case that charities treated their clients as an amorphous mass. As Robert Jütte (1994) pointed out,

as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century in northern and central Europe, poor relief organizations had in place a rather complex grid with which to filter and classify the needy in order to distinguish the 'worthy' from the 'unworthy' poor. While these practices may not match the precision or rigour of modern government social welfare bureaucracies with their elaborate systems of points and percentages, these older charitable efforts were not entirely lacking in these regards. Jütte continues: "Poor relief officers and charitable institutions started to keep large registers in which they laboriously noted the name, profession, birth-date and place, occupation, illness and disability as well as the number of dependents of each pauper." Furthermore, "Such orderly procedures signalled the emergence of a new bureaucratic spirit in poor relief" (Jütte 1994:102). I believe Foucault's thesis regarding the 'dismemberment' of the old ad-hoc poor relief agencies into the modern array of social welfare institutions to be correct, but I would suggest that the process of the fine and detailed classifying of the poor, as well as the general population, began earlier than the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and that charities and philanthropists indeed played a significant role in setting the tone for what was to come and continue to play an ancillary role in these regards into the present.

Foucault argued as well that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European administrators, supported by economists and business concerns, grew frustrated with what they saw as the vast amounts of the 'idle poor' materially supported by charities and religious orders. One of the tasks these administrators set for themselves was to "set the able-bodied poor to work and transform them into a useful labour force" (Foucault 1980b:169). However, I would suggest that the long-standing distinction of the 'worthy/unworthy,' or 'able-bodied/infirm' poor had played this role in Europe previous to this time. While it is true

that the 'idle poor' were tolerated to an extent as they played a theological and sociological role in early Medieval Europe as the recipients of alms so the donors may atone for their sins, Lindberg (1993) contends that questions began to be raised as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century with regards to keeping able-bodied workers idle through charity. These concerns gathered force among administrators and the general public in the post-plague years which saw a dramatic reduction in available labourers (Lindberg 1993:38). By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, tracts began to appear in order to educate relief officials as well as the donating public so they could spot 'fraudulent' beggars and public orders began to be issued which criminalized begging itself (ibid.:51). The task of setting the poor to work and distinguishing the infirm from the able-bodied poor was a task that charities and philanthropists were involved with to varying degrees for some time. Private poor relief agencies continued their role into modern times in these regards as, Foucault aptly notes, "agents of liaison" (Foucault 1980b:62), monitoring the poor and attempting to govern their conduct. As I will argue in the next section, modern charities such as Mæðrastyrsnefnd continue to view their clients with a measure of suspicion which is largely related to the staff's concerns as to whether or not they are enabling dependency upon public and private relief and contributing to disincentives to waged labour. I would contend that these concerns can be noted within modern disability pension systems as well. As seen above, Iceland has moved towards the 'medical' model of disability assessment which purports to focus on the body rather than evaluating the applicant as a potential worker. However, while the processes of official disability evaluation do indeed focus on these concerns, as I will discuss in the next section it would appear that the 'stamp' of medical legitimacy accorded to successful disability claimants was not

sufficient in and of itself to allay suspicions that these claimants could not find suitable work; simply, even when disability pensioners have been screened by a doctor and the claim evaluated by an official from Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute) there nevertheless still remained suspicions in the public imagination as well as among some charity workers that the pensioner could still work in paid labour—a position which totally disregards the realities of the labour market. These suspicions became apparent to me through analyzing media discourses and in the context of my fieldwork and will be discussed in the next section. Before discussing these issues, I will first consider some of the further implications of the practice of classifying people as disabled.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd attempted to filter their clients in terms of gender but, as I pointed out, other factors such as age and caring for children also played a role in how the clients were evaluated. The factor of gender was only one of a number of other aspects of the clients' positionalities that was considered by the staff. Similarly, this organization did not accept clients as eligible for assistance based solely upon their status as the recipients of a disability pension. I have witnessed disabled clients (as evident only by their presentation of their disability cards) who were working age males turned away and sent to other charities for assistance, usually if they were perceived in some way as visibly fit and in addition did not have children. I have also seen and heard a fair amount of suspicion levelled at specific females who appeared, at least from visible cues, to be healthy and able-bodied. From the perspective of some staff members, even the display of a physical infirmity was not in and of itself a justification for clients not being involved in the waged labour market and thus raised questions as to

why they needed to subsist on a pension and seek help from a charity. This organization, through their practices and discourses, helped to sustain the social category of the *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners) by recognizing this distinction as one of the categories of people they targeted for assistance and communicating this to the public through media releases. In turn, the staff also reinforced this category by drawing upon and reproducing through their practices some of the suspicions which revolved around disability pensioners in the larger society. Even though these suspicions towards some of their disabled clients were not communicated via public discourses and were only apparent to the staff, clients and observers of these practices such as myself, nevertheless this organization still acted as one site in which such cultural knowledge and views of disability pensioners was made and re-made in practice. But the staff simultaneously challenged as well the integrity of this category through overruling the bureaucratic designation of who is 'disabled' and by relying upon their own knowledge of specific clients, visual indicators and general 'common sense' to decide who was eligible for assistance at this organization. One could argue from a Foucauldian perspective that these classifying practices render certain categories of people 'visible' through producing them as social constructs. But the idea of visibility also applies in this context to how the staff of charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd 'read' their clients through visual indicators of the body. This form of surveillance and visual appraisal played a parallel role with how their disabled clients were evaluated by the staff in conjunction with the plastic identity card issued by the Icelandic state which attested to their official status as disabled.

One case in particular by way of example was a male whom I estimated to be in his late 30s or possibly early 40s. He appeared to have a cognitive or developmental

disability as did his partner whom the staff referred to as his 'wife,' though I was not certain as to their legal marital status. Neither of them had children and both were assisted on a regular basis without question. In the instances where fraudulent claims were detected by the staff, often the result of the clients providing conflicting or false information regarding their circumstances, these clients were usually dealt with in a rather stern manner; they were verbally admonished, asked to seek help elsewhere or helped but told not to come back. Yet in the case of this couple in particular, their fraudulent claim of having children was dismissed light-heartedly when it was detected. This couple routinely indicated on the form that they had children. A few senior staff members mentioned to me their belief that this claim was false yet they did not seem overly concerned. When the staff began to insist that the clients with children produce their *sjúkratryggingaskírteini* (health insurance card) which lists the number, ages and identification numbers of their dependent children, the fact that this couple did not actually have children was made apparent. One day a staff member mentioned to me in reference to this couple: "Did you see that couple that just left? They used to say they have three children but since I can check this suddenly they no longer have any children." The staff member was not angry at all and added with a smile, "but I guess they can't help it."

This couple was always above suspicion in my estimation due to the fact that their impairments were apparent. This lack of suspicion generally applied to clients who were in wheelchairs or used other assistive devices, were in visible pain, appeared to be physically or mentally ill or displayed other such indicators. In other cases the clients were either distressed or exhibited indicators in body language or speech which the staff



interpreted to denote that something was 'not right' with the client. In this context, it was the evident impairment of the body or mind which attested to the client's eligibility for charitable assistance more so than the medical-governmental designation of 'disabled.' The presentation of a disability card or the receipt of other assistance benefits did not always deem the clients as eligible for assistance from this organization nor guarantee preferential treatment. 'Disability' as a bureaucratic category simply did not connote the symbolic weight accorded to a visible 'impairment' (*fötlun*) of the body. In the case of the man with the developmental disability, his *fötlun* and that of his wife was plain for the staff to see and his socio-economic marginality was seen as being beyond his control. The staff regularly accepted people who displayed these visible indicators of disability without question as clients and usually made additional efforts to help them, either through the provision of additional goods or special arrangements, such as by asking me to help them with their bags or being assisted ahead of other clients.

The absence of one of these visible indicators of disability was liable to produce statements of doubt among the staff despite the display of the governmental disability card on the client's behalf: "She looks fine to me, I don't understand why she is not working," in the words of one staff member to me in reference to a specific client. Doubts regarding the clients' claims for being disabled or in need extended to a degree even to those who were youthful and physically attractive. Towards closing time one afternoon a young woman came by Mæðrastyrksnefnd who, by the standards of the larger society, was unusually attractive. This did not go unnoticed and one staff member mused as to why she sought help at a place like Mæðrastyrksnefnd. "She could be a model," this staff member exclaimed but another quipped in reply, "Pretty people can be poor as well." But

for some of the staff members it became increasingly obvious that external appearances are often unreliable indicators of the clients' situations, whether it pertains to disability or overall poverty. One staff member, Helga (pseudonym), started volunteering during the 2004 Christmas allocation and continued to stay on afterwards. We were discussing the incident of a client from the previous week who generally looked well-dressed and 'normal' but who exploded in a rage one afternoon at one of the interviewer's questions. Another staff member later told me that she was concerned that the client was about to physically assault this staff member as at one point during the altercation she drew her hand up and formed a fist. Helga had witnessed the incident from the kitchen area and commented to me: "Many of them [clients] have problems with their minds. I find so anyways. The woman from last week, she looks ok if you see her but she is not."

While I contend that the governmental social welfare system and its supporting medical complex plays the key role in fashioning and sustaining social designations such as disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) in its current context, assisted in turn by charities, I would suggest as well that these designations influence, and are in turned influenced by, older cultural understandings and stigmas regarding disabled people. The evaluation of one as *öryrki* has to contend as well with 'common sense' understandings of what disability means in the larger society—understandings which are themselves, of course, also historically and culturally situated and reproduced hegemonically as well in the past. In short, I suggest that the dominant views of disabled people are in fact hegemonic in the Gramscian sense—comprised of the official discourses of the state and its allies as well as part of the discourses of everyday life. Though widely accepted, these hegemonic views are only held in place in tension and are by no means without challenges from scholars,

activists and disabled people themselves. Before examining the ways in which charities such as Mæðrastyrsnefnd simultaneously challenge and reinforce these dominant views of disabled people in Iceland, I will conclude this section by considering one of the further effects of a system which evaluates and classifies people into social typologies such as ‘the disabled.’

As mentioned earlier, Foucault argued that one effect of power/knowledge is that the subjects of these practices of classification may come to internalize these categories in the processes of subjectification. The construction of the disabled subject within the politics of welfare and the charity complex exhibits aspects of these processes at work. Scott Yates (2005), in his research on the governance of the learning impaired, argues when “people are rendered knowable according to their membership in the category of people who ‘have learning difficulties,’ institutional interventions, judgements, decisions, prohibitions, imperatives, and sanctions around their lives and their conduct are made available” (Yates 2005:73). Furthermore, Yates makes a point which can be applied to many subject positions created by the effects of bio-power: People are as such constituted as subjects and “are led to observe, and to understand, themselves as *subjects of a particular kind*” (ibid.). During my observation of the practices of aid distribution at Mæðrastyrsnefnd I had witnessed clients providing evidence of their disability status as a regular occurrence. This usually involved the client answering in the affirmative whether they were disabled or else pre-empting this question with the presentation of the disability status card, often unprompted. This scenario was repeated 40 or 50 times on a given distribution day as the ‘average day’ was between 90 to 130 visits and roughly 50% of their clients were disabled. By the conclusion of my fieldwork I had witnessed this

process hundreds of times but wondered how often these disabled clients had to make these affirmations as a matter of routine in other aspects of their personal lives.

This affirmation of their status as disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was recorded on the client information sheets where the clients were required to circle the category '*öryrki*' if it applied to them. Given the limitations of the client information sheet, some respondents appended additional information as it pertained to their situations. After charting hundreds of these sheets, I realized that these statements also offered insights into the ways in which the clients identified and perceived themselves. The inclusion of additional biographic details was such a pervasive practice that I created a 'miscellaneous' category in my client information database in order to record these responses. Even if they were difficult to quantify I felt that these comments offered insights into the clients' complex situations. One possibility is that this additional information was included for strategic purposes, as the specificity and degree of the client's particular disability in this context was offered as evidence to the staff of the severity of his or her situation in order to maximize the chances of receiving assistance from this organization. Another possibility is that this additional information provided by the clients, sometimes bordering on 'mini-biographies,' was offered in order to resist or challenge the seemingly one-dimensional labels such as 'disabled.' Some examples of such instances include, with some minor editing to preserve anonymity, short responses as "*krabbasjúklingur*" (cancer patient); "*vegna bílslyss*" ([disabled] because of car accident); sentence length responses such as one client who explained that he or she has been fighting for an insurance payment as the result of a debilitating injury due to a car accident in 2003 and needed help from Mæðrastyrksnefnd

in the meantime; as well as a collection of longer notes that were affixed to these sheets from the client's representative (usually a relative) who had picked up the client's food assistance on their behalf explaining why he or she was too ill or in too much pain to visit Mæðrastyrksnefnd in person. But in contrast, another prominent theme by disabled clients was to note their status in less detail simply by circling 'öryrki' on the form. Another variant was to state on the form "*Ég er 75% öryrki*" (I am 75% disabled) or simply "75%" with the meaning left assumed. The label represented the justification in and of itself of the client's need for assistance as well as a concise summary of their statuses and situations. But looking at these responses, I very much got the sense that some of the clients identified themselves as 'öryrki' or '75% öryrki' as part of their personal identity.

I had mentioned this to a senior official with the charity Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. This official was trained as a social worker and has professional experience working with disabled people. She observed in her own work these processes of self-description as well and had some serious reservations about this phenomenon. She explained to me that her clients would often come in and state that they were '75% öryrki' as if this was an explanation and justification in and of itself for charitable assistance. She contended that there is a "huge difference" between those who receive a full disability pension and those who do not in terms of income. Furthermore, she lamented that this kind of self-labelling is also intertwined with issues of low self-esteem, as the category of *öryrki* in her estimation comes to define who they are in the social landscape in a delimited and self-limiting way. This official described for me a common practice at her organization where a prospective client will come in or call and state: "I am *öryrki*, what can you do for me?" In contrast, she noted that low income workers or the unemployed will often come to her

with very specific reasons for needing assistance, such as the unexpected expense of a refrigerator breaking or being unable to make that month's rent. She expressed concern about the detrimental social impact this may have on children when they see their grandmothers and mothers living on social assistance and charity in terms of their own goals and expectations of life. Indeed, there was a similar heightened concern among the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd as well regarding clients who came from families with other disabled members which had been dependent upon social assistance for two or three or more generations in depth; as one staff member put it: "There is some suspicion when there are multiple generations in a family who are [öryrki]."

I agree that in certain cases the extent to which some disabled pensioners readily adopted the label 'öryrki' appears to be a cause for concern. In one sense there is the concern that this label becomes self-ascribed in a delimiting way. Another is that the pervasive use of stating 'I am disabled' when requesting assistance or discounts may have negative implications for how disabled people in general are perceived within the wider society. It is rather routine in Iceland when looking through buy and sell ads in newspapers or, more recently, online in web-logs and discussion sites to find requests for certain items which carry with it the addendum that the seeker is öryrki and looking for a discount. The following is one example taken from an online message board entitled '*Barnaland*' (Children's land): "75% öryrki óskar eftir smáhundi mjög ódýrt eða gefins" (75% disabled looking for a small dog, very cheap or for free) (Barnaland 2006). On the one hand this request is another example of the common use of '75% öryrki' as a self-descriptive label that I routinely encountered at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. But in my conversations with Icelanders in a variety of contexts I very much got the sense that these

kinds of requests were viewed with attitudes ranging from mirth, to doubt, to outright derision. I am not suggesting the declaration 'I am disabled' when looking for discounts or price reduction is in some way illegitimate. Rather, my concern is that the pervasive and wide-spread use of this tactic may lessen its impact, or worse contribute to the level of suspicion that is already linked to this social category, especially when used in conjunction with requests for things that many people may not perceive as material necessities. However, castigating disability pensioners for using these tactics is not a very productive approach. Rather, I would suggest that it would be more productive to examine the larger system which demands that these people constantly identify themselves as '*öryrki*' as well as the structural issues which forces pensioners to rely upon discounts in order to subsist at the normative levels of material existence in terms of the larger society.

One has to bear in mind that it is not surprising in the context of seeking charitable help that many disabled clients would bring this aspect of their positionality to the forefront as a strategic tactic, but such a tactic also extracts certain costs. The disabled clients I spoke to were indeed aware of the stigmas and suspicions within the larger society which revolved around the category of *öryrki*. These clients often began interviews with an unprompted discussion of their medical histories, despite my protests that this was not necessary. One client even went so far as to have her supporting financial documentation ready for my inspection in order to prove to me that she was legitimately a client of Mæðrastyrsnefnd. Most of the casual conversations and formal interviews I had with disabled clients began with a rather defensive tone on their part initially until we knew each other better, as if they felt that it had to be first established

that they were 'legitimately' disabled as well as legitimately in need of material assistance before we could discuss other matters. The assumption, it would seem, was that I shared these dominant negative views of the *öryrkjar* as well, despite my status as a foreigner. It struck me that not only did these people have to continually assert their status as disabled in order to qualify for discounts and assistance, but they most likely also had to defend themselves from numerous accusations in multiple contexts which questioned their status as disabled and not working. It must not be overlooked that for some of the disabled clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd this process of declaring one's disability status and affirming it to the staff was a weekly occurrence. If they sought help at other similar charities, such as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar or Fjölskylduhjálp, this process was replicated and compounded. These clients would also have to interact on a repeated basis with the staff from Tryggingastofnun ríkisins, the medical establishment and perhaps as well the municipal social services where one's disability status is again re-affirmed and noted. Discounts at pharmacies, recreational and cultural facilities and in other contexts also demanded proof and assertion of this status. As I mentioned previously, disability pensioners were entitled to receive a reduced fare from the municipal transportation services of Reykjavík and were issued different tickets which must be accompanied by the disability card. The declaration 'I am disabled' for some was a fairly routine occurrence and it should not be surprising at all that some disability pensioners would invoke this phrase as an economic tactic and in terms of self-reference.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd is but one site or node in a larger complex in which the processes of identification and subjectification are played out on a regular basis. These effects of the modern regimes of bio-power apply to varying degrees to all citizens but it



would seem to be the case that it is the most marginalized, disempowered and impoverished sectors of a given society who must make these declarations and subject themselves to inspection to a disproportionate degree in comparison with the general public. In this case, every instance of such is an affirmation that one is disabled and it should not be surprising that this form of ascriptive identification and labelling may become internalized and self-descriptive. Considering the pervasive negative views applied to disability pensioners, one could argue that the category these people are being forced to accept as applied to them is, in Goffman's (1963) terms, a stigmatized and 'spoiled identity.' In one sense it is laudable that discounts, reduced fares and other benefits are offered to those who are perceived as having financial difficulties, such as disability pensioners. Yet eliminating barriers to employment, improving low wages and the pension system would render the need for these discounts moot and the work of the charity complex largely redundant—thus reducing the effects of these practices of dividing, classifying and the resultant subjectification, in the process removing the enormous potential for marginalization and stigmatization.

Mæðrastyksnefnd and other similar charities continue to rely upon these categories in their evaluation procedures in order to assess eligibility. Regardless of their individual feelings about the matter, the category of disability pensioner (*öryrki*) was presented more or less as an acceptable designation or subject position for assistance among their clients as were those of single mothers and the elderly. This is the formal position of the organization and acted as the norm of daily practice, aside from the exceptions noted earlier. The acts of requesting to see the disability card and having the clients declare this on their forms, later electronically inscribed in their computers,

contributed to the production and reproduction of ‘disabled’ as a subject position. Furthermore, this category among others was emphasized in their public discourses to describe their clients in order to solicit for support. Given the extent to which disability pensioners were perceived in a rather negative light in the larger society, this was a problematic tactic for charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as every declaration that a significant proportion of their clients were disabled engaged with the larger political and cultural discourses which revolved around this issue. In the final section of this chapter I will examine the ways in which the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the charity complex in general had a hand in reproducing, as well as challenging, the hegemonic discourses regarding disability pensioners in Iceland.

### **7.3 “*Hér eru of margir ungir öryrkjar*”**

As I argued earlier, the designation of disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) in Iceland is partly a bureaucratic denotation but it is related as well to the hegemonic configurations of the larger society in terms of how certain ‘groups’ are perceived and treated. The label *öryrkjar* is ascribed by the agents and encoded within the statutes of the state disability pension system, the municipal social welfare infrastructure, medicine and health care professionals, and further reinforced by the charity complex and the media. This bureaucratic-medical-legal distinction also draws upon older socio-cultural understandings of the impaired body as well as the perceptions of the poor and the status of a ‘non-worker’ in Iceland. I also suggested that as the result of the numerous contexts in which disability pensioners must declare themselves as *öryrkjar* in order to receive assistance, discounts and benefits (charities being one key site in which this occurs), this label appears to have the ability to become self-ascribed and internalized by the

pensioners as well; a view shared by some charity workers, scholars and governmental officials I spoke to during the course of this project. But for many Icelanders the social label of *öryrki* carries with it a host of negative connotations; it acts in many ways, following Goffman (1963), as a stigmatized 'spoiled identity.' One key component of this 'spoiled identity' relates to the disability pensioners' status as non-working in terms of waged labour and suspicions about their reasons for needing governmental and charitable assistance. What had initially surprised me was the extent of the related suspicions about disability pensioners that their claims of being disabled were exaggerated and even fabricated in order to make use of the pension system as an alternative to waged labour and to defraud the social welfare infrastructure in a number of other ways. This was not merely the routine murmurings of these suspicions that I encountered from some charity workers and even some clients but explicit statements of such emanating from political circles and reported in the media.

I contend that these views of disability pensioners in Iceland are hegemonic. They form part of the 'common sense' view of disability pensioners in that they are related to long-standing cultural stigmas and folkloric knowledge in Iceland applied to those who did not work and needed to rely on municipal relief for their upkeep. But these views are also informed by the knowledge of modern 'specialists,' such as doctors, bureaucrats and analysts in the hire of the state. I would suggest as well that the practice of screening the clients at charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the way it was done contributes as well, albeit unintentionally in my estimation, to casting a pall of suspicion over their clientele. Given the extent to which their clients are *öryrkjar*, this organization becomes one more site in which these discourses are given strength. In current contexts, disability pensioners

are perceived in similar ways to other stigmatized categories of Icelandic society such as the pervasive image of the 'single mother' who is allegedly manipulating the social welfare system. These views of disability pensioners are also upheld and reinforced through the ongoing efforts of certain political sectors and their supporters within the governmental bureaucracies and academia. But these views are hegemonic not in the simplistic sense that they are merely dominant views but, after Gramsci, they are only held in place in tension and with effort and subject to challenge. During the course of my research there was indeed a healthy and active counter-hegemonic discourse which arose to challenge these views from critical scholars and disability advocates as well as some charity workers.

I suggest that Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the rest of the charity complex in Iceland sits in a rather contradictory position in these regards. On the one hand, charities in Iceland routinely solicited support for their clients and, in so doing, drew upon the select demographic categories of their clientele they knew would elicit the most sympathy from potential donors—such as single parents and the elderly as well as disability pensioners. On one level these categories encompass the traditional sub-categories found among the 'worthy poor' but they also encode a number of negative associations in Iceland, particularly with the suspicions regarding single mothers and disability pensioners mentioned earlier. Drawing upon these categories in order to describe their clients within newspaper articles and in other public forums encodes complex messages. One message attests that these people are deserving of the public's support and assistance as well as, by way of implication, signalling that all was not well with the labour market and social assistance system if they needed to seek charitable assistance. Yet, the staff of these

organizations were also influenced by these dominant views, as they are after all part of the 'public' and members of the larger society as well as charity workers. The reality that the clients were evaluated and screened by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd attested to the fact that a simple request for assistance was not interpreted by the staff as evidence in and of itself of need. Doubts and suspicions remained about some prospective clients that they 'really did not need the help' and some were abusing the charity system by relying on the combined help of the charity complex for years. I also routinely encountered suspicions and doubts raised about certain clients as to the truthfulness of their claims and situations. In certain cases disability pensioners, usually single, working age males who appeared fit, were asked to seek help elsewhere. The screening system in place at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was used to communicate to donors that they were a responsible charity and did not provide assistance indiscriminately, but the very existence of this system also reinforces the belief that a number of fraudulent claimants are expected to be found among their applicants. In other words, the screening system itself suggests that it is expected that there will be those among their applicants who either 'do not really need the help' or are seeking assistance under false pretences, or else the staff would not be involved with interviewing and screening prospective clients at all.

In my view, as well as those of some staff members (but expressed in confidence to me), the mere fact of appearing for assistance at a place like Mæðrastyrksnefnd was evidence in and of itself of need. If a few clients were assisted who maybe did not need to go to a charity for help, this was not seen to warrant a great deal of concern as these people most likely had other problems if they were not material or financial in nature. But in another sense it may not be advisable to dispense with the screening system altogether.

As I will discuss below, one criticism that was levelled directly at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was the suggestion by a sitting member of the Icelandic parliament which appeared in the media that this organization did not screen their clients at all. The claim, of course, is entirely false considering that I spent a great deal of time observing and documenting Mæðrastyrksnefnd's screening processes. But it was articulated by this politician as part of a larger criticism of the disability pension system which played on the public's suspicions that these pensioners were living a life of leisure upon the public and private assistance systems. Material aid organizations were thus in the difficult position of wanting to assist their clients in a benevolent manner but needing as well to allay the fears of political and public supporters regarding dependency and fraud.

I will conclude this chapter with a small case study to illustrate one way in which these hegemonic discourses operated in practice and the charity complex's role in both challenging and reinforcing these views of disability pensioners. In late 2004 and early 2005 I began to note an emerging discourse which held that there were an increasing number of young disability pensioners in Iceland. The title to this sub-section, "*Hér eru of margir ungir öryrkjar*" (there are too many young disability pensioners here), is in fact taken from the title of a newspaper editorial which advanced this view (Jónasson 2005:22). While there is no question that in recent years there has been an overall increase in disability pensioners, the available data, as I will discuss, do not adequately make the case that this increase was specifically among young pensioners, unless one were to stretch the meaning of 'young' beyond most understandings of the term. The disabled clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were primarily middle-aged women—a fact of which I made the staff aware through the ongoing collection of my statistical data. Yet, to

my surprise, the staff of this agency began to articulate the discourse of 'increasing young disabled' as well. I finally came to the conclusion that this discourse was a political discourse designed as most likely to erode public support for the pension system with the alarming image of an emerging generation of young disability pensioners living upon the taxpaying public. That Mæðrastyrksnefnd, as well as other charities, articulated this discourse despite the lack of empirical evidence, or even the careful consideration of the evidence, well illustrates how hegemonic discourses are created and sustained. In my estimation, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd articulated and reinforced the discourse of 'increasing young disability pensioners' for a variety of complex reasons, some of which were politically strategic and some of which illustrated the way in which 'common sense' views are formed, as Gramsci (Gramsci 1999:326) had so well articulated, as part of the contradictory and tension-laden middle ground between the knowledge of the specialists and that of the folklore of everyday life.

Before I commenced my fieldwork at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I began to encounter some of the discourses critical of the *öryrkjar* through my exposure to the media and personal social networks. The suspicions about disability pensioners had initially struck me as rather odd. In Canada I was well accustomed to encountering discourses critical of people 'on welfare,' but could not recall people living on long-term disability pensions being much of a social or political issue in these regards. Admittedly, I did not give these discourses I encountered in Iceland much consideration at first. I began to take serious notice when I encountered an editorial in a local newspaper written by an anti-poverty activist who responded to an earlier editorial where it was claimed that a number of disability pensioners were 'faking it.' In the rebuttal, this activist countered: "It is bad

enough to be disabled because of an accident or illness and to have to make do with low benefits, without being met with suspicion and insinuations that they are faking it” (Reynisdóttir 2004b:54). By the time I started my fieldwork at Mæðrastyrksnefnd I was becoming aware of the strength of these discourses critical of disability pensioners, which usually revolved around the suspicions about their claims at being unable to work or the position that the pension system was generous and the pensioners had no reason to complain or seek additional help.

While the clients’ presentation of the disability card issued by the state was generally accepted by the staff as an official reason for needing charitable assistance, suspicions remained regarding those who did not exhibit an easily identifiable marker attesting to one’s ‘disability.’ Such evidence was usually visible in nature, such as the presence of wheelchairs or assistive walking devices, difficulty with movement, or something that looked ‘not right’ with the client as it was usually framed by the staff—which referred to some evidence of mental illness or a developmental disability. These visible indicators attested to, in the eyes of the staff, the legitimacy of the clients’ claims to being disabled and for not working. However, not all staff members accepted these physical limitations of the body as evidence of their inability to work. One staff member in particular expressed her doubts to me that even those with physical liabilities cannot find work. She repeated the often invoked mantra in Iceland: “Anyone who wants to work in this country can work”—ergo those who do not work choose not to—an argument which also takes into consideration modern Iceland’s generally low levels of unemployment. As she told me this she slapped the armrests of the desk chair she was sitting in for emphasis and pointed out that there is nothing preventing people in



wheelchairs from working jobs that do not require standing, such as computer or telephone based work by way of example. I paused for a moment to ease my frustration before replying that while this was true on the surface her argument does not consider the prejudices of employers, employers who are not willing to tolerate the adjustments necessary for the varying abilities of all employees, or those who may not understand the special needs or unplanned absenteeism associated with certain physical or psychological conditions. Furthermore, there is also the issue of education and training in addition to the fact that there are developmental, cognitive and psychological issues that may curtail one's involvement with the labour market.

As noted earlier, the designation of 'disabled' in Iceland in terms of the pension system can also be based on psychological conditions some of which, such as acute depression and the often related fatigue, are not easy to see. Furthermore, some diseases and neurological conditions are remitting and relapsing in nature and not always visibly apparent, especially during the short inspection periods at charities such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I have found that some staff members from Mæðrastyrksnefnd were not well informed about these matters, although most staff members with years of extensive experience seemed to have a reasonable grasp of these issues. Admittedly, my patience for the discourse that 'anyone who wants to work in Iceland can' began to wear thin once I learned the details of some of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's disabled clients. If there was any common factor among the disabled clients I spoke to it was that there was usually no sole over-arching factor that was responsible for their plights but a host of interconnected issues. Some of the clients had to deal with a serial or combined number of physical and social issues that I felt was too much for any one person to have to bear.

One client I interviewed, Þórunn (pseudonym, with certain details altered or omitted for confidentiality), was engaged with a lifelong struggle with clinical depression, followed later in adult years with substance abuse, cancer, marital issues, the death of her supportive parents and capped off with a number of issues with her adult child in addition to the ongoing factors of psychological and physical health. To see Þórunn she would of course look 'normal' and I found her to be quite intelligent and well educated. But all of these issues combined with the depression which, for some people, renders simply getting out of bed in the morning to be a Herculean task, makes it unlikely that these individuals would be able to withstand the demands of the open waged labour market unless employers are able to take these factors into consideration. Another client, Ásta (pseudonym), struggled with a life-threatening disease for a number of years which left her unable to move without great difficulty and pain. She was clearly unable to work and cited the cost of her expensive medications as the key reason why she needed assistance with food from Mæðrastyksnefnd. At one point during the interview in her kitchen she had nearly collapsed when she stood up to retrieve something from the refrigerator and needed my support to return to her chair, but she insisted on continuing the interview. Even Ásta needed to defend the fact that she drove a relatively new mini-van, purchased with financial assistance from the state, as she would remain a veritable prisoner in her apartment otherwise. I was quite surprised when she mentioned that the charges of abusing charities based upon such 'evidence' as new vehicles were not only raised by some charity workers and members of the public in general but that some of the most vociferous perpetrators of these accusations were her fellow clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd. She explained to me that she knew of some clients who parked at a distance from

Mæðrastyrksnefnd, not to hide their vehicles from the staff but from the gossip and accusations of other clients who would often ask accusingly, in her words: “Why does he or she have to go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd when they have a new car?” At one point later in my research Ásta had called me on my cell phone when I was at Mæðrastyrksnefnd one day to thank me for all of my help, as I had set aside certain items I knew she needed from time to time. I very much got a sense of finality from the way she was talking, as she explained that her illness had taken a turn for the worse. She continued that she was going to be hospitalized; the prognosis was not good and she would not be coming to Mæðrastyrksnefnd anymore. Some time afterwards I found out from her daughter that she had passed away. Suffice it to say, as the result of this case and a number of others I found that I had increasing difficulty remaining objective and detached when I encountered the routine charges which questioned disability pensioners for not working and needing charitable assistance.

I agree that being engaged in labour, whether waged labour or otherwise, is important in terms of social status and psychological health. It should be the goal of any society to have roles available for all members. However, I found the suggestion that many people subsided on either disability pensions or social welfare benefits as an alternative to waged labour or because they did not ‘want’ to work to ring false. Time and time again in my interviews with the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, disabled or not, the will and desire to work emerged as a major theme of these interviews. While the cases of Þórunn and Ásta mentioned above may appear to be rather extreme examples of why many of the disabled clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were not able to be engaged in waged labour, sadly they were not that all unusual from others I have seen and heard.

Not only were disability pensioners maligned in these discourses critical of the *öryrkjar* in terms of suspicions as to the validity of their claims of being unable to work, pensioners were also charged with intentionally seeking a disability claim as an alternative to work or because the disability pension benefits were higher than those available in other schemes, such as with unemployment benefits. Such claims would be laughable if they were not so pervasive and articulated by persons of stature and power. The Minister of Health at the time, for example, was quoted in a newspaper voicing such sentiments when asked why in recent years there has been a greater number of disability pensioners: "It can also be that some of these people are squeezed between systems since disability benefits are higher than unemployment benefits" (Kristjánsson, in Jónasson 2005:22). The author of this article conceded that there are disabled people who need the help of the state, but continued "others maybe go on disability because it is higher than the unemployment benefits" (Jónasson 2005:22). When dissecting these discourses it became obvious to me that many of them were predicated on such speculation and hearsay in conjunction with prejudice, whether they were editorials in newspapers or the discourses of daily life, interspersed with the legitimating chorus of politicians, officials and specialists. Such is typical of hegemonic 'common sense' views, as Antonio Gramsci argued, which is generally "half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy, science, and economics of the specialists" (Gramsci 1999:326). The 'common sense' view that many disability pensioners sought benefits because they were higher than other forms of social assistance was in need of regular reinforcement from these specialists and was, in turn, echoed in the views and discourses of charity workers and the general public.

One example of such a supporting and legitimating specialist discourse was published during the time of my research. A report was released in 2005 regarding the issue of the increasing number of young disability pensioners in Iceland, authored by Tryggvi Þór Herbertsson, the *forstöðumaður* (chair/head) of the University of Iceland's Institute of Economics and published by the Ministry of Health and Social Security (Herbertsson 2005). This report garnered a high degree of media attention and received, for example, a two-page centre spread in Iceland's leading newspaper *Morgunblaðið*. Though normally a reserved and respected newspaper in comparison with the other papers in the country, even the editors of *Morgunblaðið* could not resist running such sensationalist headings as: "*Fjölgun ungra öryrkjar hér á landi er svo hröð að furðu sætir*" (increasing young disability pensioners here in this country so fast it is unbelievable) (*Morgunblaðið* 2005e: 24–25). Another article within this spread proclaimed: "*Sex skýringar á fjölgun öryrkja* (six explanations for the increase in disability pensioners) (*Morgunblaðið* 2005f:24–25). What is intriguing is that three of these six explanations revolved around the theme discussed above—that people were seeking disability benefits because the disability pension was higher than other social assistance systems or low-waged labour. For example, the third reason offered by the report stated that because of the discrepancy between disability benefits and low-wages, "there is a financial motivation for those with the lowest wages to apply for a disability evaluation" (*ibid.*). The fourth reason was a variant on the third: "Discrepancies between the lowest wages and benefits means that the returns from leaving the disability rolls and entering the workforce is very small and even negative" (*ibid.*). The fifth reason claimed that higher disability benefits over unemployment insurance and municipal social

assistance “creates a motivation for those who receive unemployment or financial assistance to apply for a disability evaluation so that they can improve their financial situation” (ibid.).

The view that the unemployed, low-income workers and social assistance recipients were doing everything in their power to have themselves declared disabled in order to, presumably, increase their financial rewards and/or avoid low-waged income or working in general promotes a rather bleak view of humanity and, in my estimation, not a very accurate one on a number of accounts. The first is that such a position assumes that disability benefits offer a desirable financial alternative to other social assistance schemes. In the early part of my research in 2004, a single person with no children would stand to receive ISK 77,083 monthly from the municipal social services of Reykjavík; ISK 79,767 a month from unemployment benefits (*atvinnuleysisbætur*); and ISK 101,936 a month from a full (75%) disability pension from the state (Alþing 2004:5), bearing in mind that these are the optimal amounts from these pension systems. While it is true that the disability pension system did offer somewhat higher amounts in monthly benefits than other schemes, one also has to bear in mind that the disability pension system hardly presents itself as an easy alternative. Successful applicants have to be evaluated by a physician and assessed by Tryggingastofnun ríkisins (the State Social Security Institute); one cannot simply walk into their offices and demand to receive this pension on a whim. Yet I found it surprising how often this fact was overlooked by the proponents of the view that people receiving municipal assistance or unemployment benefits are engaged in some nefarious plot to have themselves declared disabled, as if the gate-keeping agents of the state are not already engaged in preventing this from happening. Further, the disability

pensions only offer more in comparison to the other schemes at the full (75%) rating—those who receive the lesser disability allowance have to turn to the municipal system for additional assistance anyway.

Secondly, it is debatable that subsistence on the pension scheme is enviable in financial terms in comparison with the larger society. In 2004, the average monthly income for men in Iceland was ISK 242,000 a month and for women ISK 180,000 a month (Hagstofa Íslands 2006e:2). Aside from the obvious issue of gender inequality, both figures are substantially higher than what was available from any pension scheme, keeping in mind that a full disability pension at the 2004 rates for a childless single person was ISK 101,936 a month. This is hardly a grand sum even in comparison with wages at the lower end of the scale in Iceland. In 2005 terms, a general labourer in a fish processing plant, for example, could expect a median income of ISK 236,000 a month.<sup>9</sup> While it is true that some people at the very low end of the wage scale may receive less of a before-tax income than some people on disability benefits when all benefits, especially for children, are factored into the equation, it seems dubious to me that the pension system is still all that attractive. Furthermore, there is no escaping the fact that one has to be evaluated as disabled by a physician. Making a decent living on a disability pension is not as easy a life as many seem to believe. In addition to the evaluation process, which can take an inordinate amount of time for some and sometimes take on Kafkaesque qualities as in terms of the bureaucracy, successful claimants have to be regularly re-evaluated. Should one need further assistance, there are the regular hurdles one must traverse in terms of public and private agencies with their gate-keepers and inspection processes. Subsisting upon a disability pension literally opens up one's body and life to

inspection by the agents of a number of organizations, charities often being a key example.

In addition to these issues, one also has to consider the prejudices and suspicions that are regularly applied to the *öryrkjar*. As mentioned above, these suspicions revolved around the pensioners' claims of not being able to work and their need for further assistance. This is quite similar, it struck me, with how the paupers and landless people of Iceland of old were viewed as a burden upon the society and seen as a "redundant and inferior population" (F. Magnússon 1989:142). But these prejudices seem to run even deeper than these material and economic issues. A number of disability advocates, scholars, charity workers and even some government officials have commented to me that the discussion about the issue of disability pensioners often occurs in Iceland on a very 'low plane'; in other words, rather than a detached and objective look at the pension system the discussion often devolves into mudslinging and derision, more often than not applied to disabled people themselves more so than their advocates. These views go beyond the claim that disability pensioners are 'lazy' for not working, or devious for 'choosing' the disability pension system because the benefits are higher than other systems; there is an implication that they are somehow morally suspect by their very nature. It was in these regards where I sensed that the prejudices towards disability pensioners were more than the usual charges against those who subsist upon the state but spoke to some kind of visceral prejudice that, in a few cases, seemed to border on abhorrence.

Within these discourses which criticized the *öryrkjar* the phrase "*örorkusvikarar*" (disability cheats) would rear its head from time to time in reference to the perceived



widespread way in which fraudulent pensioners were purported to bilk the system. Aside from the perception that their claims at being disabled were suspect (how it was that these people ‘fooled’ the medical system is left unexplained), a popular theme within these discourses was that the pensioners actually worked ‘in the black’ (under the table) and received a tax-free unreported income in addition to their pension. I am not arguing that this does not happen, but question the extent and scale to which it is a problem, as nothing more than speculation or anecdotal evidence is ever offered in support of these claims. Another popular charge was that many disability pensioners also lived with an undeclared spouse and thus enjoyed a number of benefits and concessions to which they were not entitled. In this regard, disability pensioners shared much with ‘single mothers’ and ‘welfare recipients’ who were routinely accused of similar practices. For example, the authors of one rather inflammatory newspaper article on this matter, entitled “*Stórhert eftirlit með örorkusvikurum*” (tightening control on disability cheats) (Fréttablaðið 2005a), claimed to have ‘confirmed sources’ that many pensioners were working ‘in the black’ (untaxed and unreported income) and therefore defrauding the pension system. These claims were made without providing any indications as to the actual extent of this problem or of course mentioning the fact that there are disincentives in the pension system which penalize disabled people from working and provide a structural incentive not to report this income out of necessity. As typical of these hegemonic configurations, persons in respectable positions in terms of education or status were called upon in order to give the stamp of legitimacy to such claims. In this case, the paper quoted Sigurður Thorlacius, a senior official and doctor from Tryggingastofnun, to advance these views:

‘It is not only the black work we are talking about with the disability pension,’ says Sigríður. ‘There are many people who are untruthful with us. We are talking about individuals who have children but claim not to be living in a common-law relationship. That means that they receive a much higher pension from us. This also means that those who are in dire need and completely depend upon their benefits are suffering for those who are lying to us about their situation’ (Fréttablaðið 2005a:1).

Typical of these discourses as well was the tactic which established that there are those who ‘are in dire need’ or ‘truly need the help’ (in other words, the worthy poor) in contradistinction from ‘those’ who are fraudulently manipulating the system. Yet I always came away from hearing these kinds of conversations or reading these accounts with the impression that the fraudulent *öryrkjar* were always in the majority, which in turn cast a pall of suspicion upon the long suffering ‘truly needy’ minority. What is lacking in these discourses is any empirical evidence regarding the extent of this fraud. I always assumed that figures existed regarding the number of cases in which a pension was terminated due to fraud. The fact that such numbers never seem to be forthcoming suggests that the magnitude of the problem is either unknown or else not as significant as implied in such accounts.<sup>10</sup>

There were, of course, a number of disability advocates, critical scholars, charity workers and media figures who defended disability pensioners in public forums from such claims. However, their continued effort does not suggest that the dominant discourses are on the verge of collapse or even weakening. In my interpretation they speak to how these dominant views of the *öryrkjar* are hegemonic in that hegemony, as formulated by Antonio Gramsci, is not a static edifice of beliefs but a series of views regarding the social order which may be dominant but are always under attack from

counter-discourses. As Raymond Williams argues, hegemony is not total but fluid and actively responsive to counter-challenges (Williams 1977:113). Kate Crehan (2002) contends that what sustains hegemony is the fact that it incorporates some of the concerns of the subordinate classes in order to serve the overall vested interests of the ruling elite and its allies (Crehan 2002:96). The resentment towards disability pensioners and others who rely on taxpayer funded assistance schemes does not seem to be restricted in terms of class or income. I could easily see how the resentment towards the pensioners from low and middle income workers could be stoked to further elite interests.

Some of these counter-challenges came in the form of critical newspaper articles which were often rebuttals to particular pieces or statements made by politicians or governmental officials. These articles usually assumed knowledge on the part of the readers. While I routinely encountered these negative views of the *öryrkjar* in the verbal discourses of daily life, it was rare to see them in print. I surmised that, since they were so widely subscribed to, only a periodic reinforcement of these views was required. As an outsider, I learned what these hegemonic views were in the early stages of my research through reading between the lines in the challenges made by social critics. One of the first instances I encountered of such was an article by a member of parliament from Vinstri-græn (the Left-Green Coalition) shortly before I began my research at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. The author discussed the nature of unemployment in Iceland and used the opportunity to make a number of points against the sitting government. He articulated the view that the low levels of unemployment in Iceland have allowed greater opportunities for those with diminished work capacities to find employment but that recent increases in the unemployment rate tend to affect disabled people first. What caught my attention in

particular was the comment: “We now have, in addition, predictions of continuing unemployment and it is not surprising that many lose the fight and decide to get a ruling on their medical condition. These decisions are based on fact and it is absurd to insinuate that they are false” (Jónasson 2004:14). Who was making the case about the falsity of these disability claims and why was not apparent to me when I first read this article. Once I began to comprehend the issues at hand in greater depth it became clearer.

What I found particularly disturbing was not only the way in which disabled people were criticized for not working and defrauding the state once they have been awarded a pension, but the extent to which these hegemonic discourses amounted to moral attacks on the very characters of disability pensioners. A senior official with the Pentecostal charity Samhjálp told me that people who seek help at charities are often perceived in the larger society as ‘*aumingjar*,’ a rather rich and complex term which could in one sense be glossed in English as ‘losers.’ He continued that he felt that it largely revolved around the issue of work—if you do not provide for yourself then you are a ‘loser,’ whether it is a case of the ‘able-bodied’ poor or not. But he conceded that there is an unusual amount of prejudice against disability pensioners in Iceland. He said that it is a common view that disabled people are seen as “sucking out of the insurance system” and that people will often spend an inordinate amount of time calculating what disabled people receive in benefits and then making a decision about their situation based on this sum. In many ways the term ‘*aumingjar*’ (*aumingi* sg.) summed up the general feelings about the poor and disadvantaged in Iceland.

This was not a term used by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, government officials or even those critical of social assistance recipients or disabled people in public

discourses. This was a term which tended to arise in private or semi-private contexts and 'behind the scenes' discursive acts. The word is not synonymous with 'disabled,' but I felt that it was how many people did perceive the *öryrkjar*. The standard definition that one finds in dictionaries usually denotes *aumingi* to mean 'weakling,' 'sissy' or 'bum' or something along those lines. It can also mean 'poor,' not in relation to economic poverty but in reference to a state of being pitiable, such as 'you poor boy' (*aumingja strákur*). The anthropologist Gísli Pálsson informed me that the term is complex and that the gloss 'bums' or 'losers' does not do the word justice. He explained that term more or less refers to those "who have no control over their lives," which could include the poor as those who depend on others to get by but it could also be extended to include drug addicts, alcoholics, people who are excessively promiscuous and anyone "not in charge of themselves." The pervasive views towards disability pensioners took into consideration their status as 'non-workers,' their subsistence upon state benefits and the perception that once on the pension system that they demanded or expected numerous discounts and concessions. In addition to this, my sense of the matter was that not only were the pensioners perceived as being an economic 'drain' upon the larger society but that they were seen to be unable to help themselves and, if anything, made matters worse through their own actions, such as with excessive alcohol or drug use, smoking, promiscuity, poor diets and the mismanagement of their finances and their lives in general; in other words, they were not seen as being in charge of themselves. While it may be impolitic to say, in my estimation the term '*aumingjar*' seemed to encapsulate the feelings that many people had regarding disability pensioners.

What was additionally troubling about this were the instances I encountered where disability pensioners and the clients of charities used this term in a self-descriptive manner, albeit often in a rather sarcastic or tongue-in-cheek way. Early in my research I encountered an article in a newspaper in which a woman detailed her ordeals with the social assistance system in Reykjavík. She described herself as an unemployed, single mother of two in her early 30s. After moving numerous times over the last decade she attempted to settle in the city. She had difficulties finding employment due to her hearing impairment and struggled to provide for herself and her children. The woman expressed a measure of frustration and exasperation with the classification systems of the various pension and assistance schemes. She pointed out that she is not fully disabled as she is only rated as having a ‘38%’ hearing loss. She receives the rental subsidy (*húsaleigubætur*) which is a benefit available for all Icelanders, subject to income and other requirements but does not pertain to location. However, since she recently moved into the city she claimed that she only receives eight of the twelve points needed to receive the additional housing supplement (*viðbótarhúsaleigubætur*), as this benefit has a three year residency requirement. Trapped within a seeming labyrinth of bureaucratic regulations and restrictions, this woman poignantly commented: “I am evaluated as *aumingi* but not enough of an *aumingi*” (Fréttablaðið 2004k:8). It seemed to me that the woman felt herself to be a ‘partial loser,’ evaluated as being disabled ‘enough’ to have difficulties in providing for herself but not disabled enough to receive full benefits and support, in addition to being penalized for the fluid residency patterns that are typical of people in marginalized positions. Shortly afterwards I met a client of Mæðrastyrksnefnd who uttered the same phrase almost verbatim as the woman in this article. This young

woman, also an unemployed mother, volunteered on a few occasions during the spring of the first year of my fieldwork and left shortly afterwards and I did not see her again until the following Christmas allocation. She worked at an unusually hectic pace stocking shelves and at the other duties assigned to her. I was uncertain as to why she was always in a rush but it seemed to me that she was making a show of her work abilities which continued while we chatted. She explained to me that she represented one of the “holes” in the Icelandic social welfare system. Her previous employment history had precluded her eligibility for a job training program, she explained, and a number of other factors acted against her eligibility for other kinds of assistance. She commented in English to me that she was “not enough of a loser” to qualify for the kinds of assistance that would help her out of her situation. Had she been speaking Icelandic I have no doubt that she would have used the term ‘*aumingi*’ in place of ‘loser’ as had the young women in the article mentioned above.

These represent more instances of the processes of subjectification at work, as detailed earlier. However, some disabled people I spoke to interpreted their position more in social-structural than individualistic terms. During a trip to northern Iceland, I spoke with some individuals who were disabled—one of whom worked and helped to support his partner who could not. He discussed with me the case of a friend who suffered a work related accident. This woman suffered from autism and she was blamed for this accident which resulted in a struggle on her part to receive compensation. He insisted that such treatment was the result of the larger stigmas regarding disabled people in Iceland and contended that disability pensioners rate even lower in Icelandic society than most groups and are perceived even as ‘third-class citizens.’ I had encountered the term ‘second-class

citizens' (*annars flokks borgara*) from time to time in reference to low-income and disadvantaged people in Iceland, but this man was pointedly commenting on the social position of the disability pensioners who in his view were located at the lowest rung of Icelandic society.

The continued discursive construction of disability pensioners as a stigmatized category has material consequences in terms of income and the quality of life. I had long pondered what advantages were to be had for the state and its allies in terms of the stigmatization of certain sectors of the society. Arnþór Helgason, who at the time was the *framkvæmdastjóri* (director) of Öryrkjabandalag Íslands (the Organisation of Disabled in Iceland or ÖBÍ), had also voiced his vexation about this matter to me in an interview. Commenting on some of the structural disincentives within the pension system which penalized pensioners who sought waged labour, he commented: "The Icelandic state does everything they can to keep these people as poor as possible...I simply don't understand the philosophy behind it." It is difficult to ascertain whether the structural issues of the pension system and the set of negative discourses regarding the pensioners—which were sometimes articulated explicitly by the agents of the state as well as by its supporters—were designed intentionally to keep disabled people as poor as possible, though they seemed to function that way in effect. But in my estimation these policies and discourses certainly acted to maintain the status quo through upholding and reinforcing these negative views of disabled people and other disadvantaged sectors of society, thus aiding in keeping popular support for policy changes at bay. In this regard the charity complex, as I have maintained throughout this body of work, played an ancillary role in maintaining the status quo in a number of material and discursive ways.



As mentioned previously, at the request of the senior staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd I undertook a statistical analysis on their behalf of the information they collected from the client information sheets. The committee used this information partly to address particular questions or issues raised by the staff about their clientele as well to have some empirical data at hand when speaking with reporters and visiting dignitaries. Some of the senior staff members also drew upon the information I provided when they penned articles in newspapers soliciting for support. I was pleased in one instance, for example, when a staff member wrote an article for a local newspaper (Morgunblaðið 2004g:41) which drew upon two key themes which came out of this research and that I had emphasized to the committee. First, that the individual situations of the clients are complex, which the pervasive practice of conceptualizing the clients of charities as specific ‘groups’ does not capture. And second, that the clear majority of their clients only visited once a month, suggesting that most clients only ask for assistance when they need it rather than out of habit. I also provided information on a wide range of other demographic patterns, such as those relating to age, status, income and so forth.

During the Christmas allocation of 2004 there were a number of visits by reporters to Mæðrastyrksnefnd which spawned a series of stories regarding the work of the charity complex in Reykjavík. At various points, I noticed my statistical reports were referred to when I observed senior staff members being interviewed by the media. As such, I was quite surprised when I later read the lead caption of one of these articles which proclaimed in bold type: “More seem to be in a dire need this Christmas than before if demand for food and clothing is anything to go by. The age group is wider and young disability pensioners are more now than ever before” (Fréttablaðið 2004d:4). I was

perplexed as to the reference to the increasing number of young disabled clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd as I had not provided any data at the time on the median age of specific demographic categories among their clients aside from the median age of their clients in general. I was the only person who did any statistical work on the clientele of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and was flabbergasted by this assertion. As I scanned the article further I noted that the caption was paraphrased from a quote by the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd: "We are seeing a wider age group. We get people here from 18 years old and upwards. The young disabled have increased greatly" (ibid.).

I was quite stunned by this statement and for some reason a little hurt, given that I spent so much time, effort and care to produce this data only to see a staff member pluck such a 'fact' seemingly out of thin air. I provided no data to the committee to make this claim and I knew that such evidence did not exist. None of the staff had the time or inclination to manually compile this data from the hand-written client sheets, especially given the time that would be required to make a statement regarding longitudinal demographic change. The initial conclusion I drew was that the staff were basing these claims on visual impressions which, as I had earlier demonstrated to the staff with regards to their assumption about weekly visiting patterns, needed to be treated with caution. Out of curiosity I re-checked my data for this variable and found that the median age of the disabled clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd was 45 years of age. Furthermore, between March and October 2004 there was in fact a decrease in the number of disabled clients who sought help at the organization, from 54% of their overall clientele down to 49%. The 'great' increase of disabled young clients remained a mystery to me, but I decided to let the issue drop rather than risk a confrontation with the senior staff. I also consulted

Statistics Iceland to see if they had any data on the relationship between age and disability pensions, which in fact they did. According to their latest data at the time there was a relationship between age and the disability pension but it was the inverse of what was being claimed in these discourses. In 2003, the largest age group of disability pensioners (*örorkulífeyrir*) for both men and women were those between the ages of 55 to 66, a total of 4452 pensioners in that age group—2784 women and 1668 men. With each subsequent age bracket there was a decrease in the number of disability pensioners with the smallest category being the youngest, the 16 to 24 age group for a total of 688 pensioners (Hagstofa Íslands 2004). The evidence for an increase in young disability pensioners at Mæðrastyrksnefnd or for the country at large appeared to be lacking.

During this time other stories emanating from the charity complex began to appear in the newspapers which spoke of increases in young clients, disabled or otherwise. One organization combined this with the common charitable discursive practice of referring to families rather than clients: “Many of those who seek assistance from Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands now before Christmas are young people with families who just cannot make ends meet” (Fréttablaðið 2004e:6). Another story which emerged from the holiday allocation of 2004 reported that “Young people were the majority of those who sought assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd and Fjölskylduhjálpi yesterday” (Sigþórsdóttir 2004:6)—an assertion which was also repeated in the banner headline. This frustrated me as well. All of the reporters I observed at Mæðrastyrksnefnd during this time only visited for short durations, generally twenty to thirty minutes in length, while only one stayed the best part of an afternoon. The limitations of such short periods of observation should be apparent. Definitive statements about age distributions should be

based on the recording and analysis of the clients' actual ages or at the very least extended and regular periods of observation, neither of which was done in these instances. It may well have been the case that there happened to be primarily younger clients during this reporter's visit, but there have been other occasions at Mæðrastyrksnefnd when most of the clients in the building at specific intervals were representative of other demographic categories which does not necessarily speak to larger overall patterns or even the demographic patterns of one specific day.

In the New Year of 2005 I began to make some low-level inquiries about the 'increasing young disabled' discourse, trying not to imply that some staff members were deliberately fabricating numbers and assertions for the media. One staff member replied that she heard that the recent policy changes at Tryggingastofnun resulted in a greater number of young people being classified as disabled which was assumed to be reflected among their clientele of late.<sup>11</sup> Even if this was the case, I remained dubious that such changing demographic patterns would emerge so quickly at Mæðrastyrksnefnd given the time it takes to be assessed and to receive a disability pension. However, as I expected the media interest in charity vanished after the holidays much as it did throughout Mæðrastyrksnefnd's early as evident by my archival research—a pattern of increasing numbers of stories regarding poverty and charity in early December to a crescendo right before Christmas and subsequent dissipation in the New Year. In this context the discourse of 'increasing young disabled' at charities dissipated as well. I felt that perhaps it was only a strange anomaly but decided to pay attention if it should re-surface, for which I did not have to wait long.

In February of 2005, a delegation from the municipal opposition party Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn (the Independence or 'Conservative' Party) visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd in response to the request of the staff members who have ties with this party through their personal links or through their connections through Hvöt, the women's group affiliated with this party. I was asked by the staff to speak to the delegation about my research. The senior member of this delegation was the city councillor Vilhjálmur Þ. Vilhjálmsson, who later became the mayor of Reykjavík in 2006. This visit was part of the general lead up to this election. I could tell that Vilhjálmur was a seasoned politician who listened politely, asked the few expected questions and came across as a likable person. But some of the younger delegates represented a particular strain of young Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn members I encountered in various contexts who came across, to myself anyway, as arrogant and dismissive of anyone they perceived to be on the political left or who held views which diverged from the fundamental party platform. During the meeting, when I mentioned that the majority of the clients who came to Mæðrastyrksnefnd were disabled (*öryrkjar*), one of the younger delegates snorted in derision and wanted to know what I meant by 'disabled' people and did it include "people with mental and alcohol problems?" I remained calm and hid my annoyance as best I could and replied in a steady voice: "I mean *öryrki*, the clients who have been evaluated by and received an identity card from Tryggingastofnun." This was followed by a moment of uncomfortable silence. A senior staff member from Mæðrastyrksnefnd, with ties to this party, diplomatically steered the conversation away from further exchanges between myself and this delegate and interjected: "and most of the disabled clients are younger." I was already unsettled by yet

another example of the derisive and dismissive attitudes towards disability pensioners, so I was entirely blindsided by and unprepared for this comment about increasing young disabled clients. As the delegates turned to me for confirmation I did my best to hide my confusion, as nothing in the data I provided for the committee supported this position. I knew it was not the truth but I did not want to contradict this staff member in front of her peers but I also did not want to lie, so I opted to say that the situation was “complex.” During the rest of the meeting after my presentation I drifted in and out of paying attention while I pondered the re-emergence of the ‘increasing young disabled clients’ and its significance.

The Easter allocation is another major period of activity for the charity complex in Reykjavík and it therefore coincides with another surge in donations as well as interest in the issues of charity and poverty from the media. I expected to see a number of articles in the newspapers as had occurred during the previous Christmas. One such article proclaimed that there was ‘more need than ever before this Easter,’ which I noted were statements that were made in the media almost verbatim since Mæðrastyksnefnd’s founding in 1928. Again a senior staff member from Mæðrastyksnefnd was paraphrased as saying that “she sees much more young disabled people” (Morgunblaðið 2005c:52). I was at a loss to explain this discourse and was uncertain of how to approach these key staff members about this issue out of the concern that I would be implying that they are intentionally constructing these accounts. Even without the statistical data I had, my visual observations of the clients did not accord with these statements either. Each year Tryggingastofnun ríkisins publishes a booklet of statistical information regarding the disability and seniors’ pensions they administer as well as reporting on their other

activities. They provide a wealth of clearly presented information which is easily accessible either on their website or published as glossy booklets. As noted above, I already confirmed from the 2003 data that most disability pensioners in Iceland were in the oldest age brackets. As I expected, the 2004 data revealed that the largest age group of disability pensioners in Iceland was in the older 60 to 64 age bracket for both men and women respectively (704 men/1241 women). Each subsequent younger age bracket revealed smaller and smaller numbers of pensioners with the smallest bracket being the 16 to 19 age group with 107 male disability pensioners and 88 women. I was quite surprised to find that in the two youngest age brackets—16 to 19 and 20 to 24—there were more males than females receiving disability pensions.<sup>12</sup>

Admittedly, there is no question that there were increasing numbers of disability pensioners overall in Iceland over the last decade. This fact is conceded to by the full spectrum of political ideologies in Iceland as the evidence is undisputable—the points of contention revolve around the significance and interpretations of this increase. This increase is clearly revealed by the data provided by Tryggingastofnun over the last decade and in the period leading up to and including my field research. Between 1994 and 2004 the number of disability pensioners in Iceland effectively doubled in proportion to the general population.<sup>13</sup> But the data I have regarding this matter (e.g. Tryggingastofnun 2000, 2004, 2005; Hagstofa Íslands 2004) all detail that the age brackets representing the largest number of disability pension recipients coincides with the ages of 60 to 64, with a subsequent decrease in number linked to age down to the smallest brackets in the age ranges of 16 to 19 and 20 to 24. There is simply a paucity of data with which to support the claim that there are increasing numbers of *young* disability pensioners, or in particular

young disabled women which was another variant of this discourse. The relationship between age and gender with the receipt of the disability pension for all of Iceland in 2004 is reproduced in Appendix E.

The data from Mæðrastyrksnefnd in this appendix differs slightly from the country in general in that the largest age brackets of disability pensioners who sought help at their agency were in the age ranges of 35–39; 40–44; and 45–49. The common interpretation among the staff at Mæðrastyrksnefnd for the relative under-representation of older disabled clients at their organization, as well as older clients in general, holds that the strong stigma associated with seeking charitable assistance acts as a disincentive to seek help at these kinds of organizations which is thought to be particularly marked with the older generations of Icelanders. However, the data from Mæðrastyrksnefnd also reveals that over the duration of the bulk of my fieldwork there was no substantive increase in the number of young disabled clients at all, whether in terms of men or women. In the youngest age brackets, encompassing the ages from 16 to 29, there were only nine disabled clients of these ages in March of 2004; eight in October of 2004; and ten in April of 2005. Of course the notion of ‘young’ is perhaps a relative concept but the bulk of their disabled clients were in their mid 30s to late 40s which I do not believe corresponds to the notion of ‘young’ in these discourses.

The statistical data satisfied me that there was no empirical basis on which to argue that there were increasing numbers of specifically young disability pensioners in recent years, either in the country as a whole or as clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular. But I was still left with the question as to why this discourse circulated and what was so important regarding the concern over young disability pensioners in order to



sustain the production of these claims by charities and the media. When I first encountered this discourse I sought input from Icelandic scholars who worked in these areas of research. The sociologist Harpa Njáls, at the time working at the Institute of Urban Research at the University of Iceland, was as curious and perplexed as I was and told me that she was hearing statements to these effects emanating from the government, in particular the Ministry of Health and Social Security. I also contacted Rannveig Traustadóttir, professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Iceland as well as president of the Nordic Network on Disability Research. She was similarly curious about this discourse about increasing numbers of young disability pensioners. She added as well that she was aware that the charity Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar informed the Organization of Disabled in Iceland (ÖBÍ) that they were seeing a “dramatic increase” in young disability pensioners who sought assistance from them, but her colleagues were perplexed by this as well. My tentative conclusion was that interests in the state government were looking to erode support for the disability pension system. It seemed to me that the belief that there were increasing numbers of young disability pensioners would alarm the public and give the sitting government the political capital in order to implement whatever policy shift regarding the pension system they envisioned. It seemed as well that there was already a receptive audience among the public, generally prone to negative views about disability pensioners, to believe such claims. All that was required to cement these views further was the legitimizing input of specialist knowledge.

This specialist knowledge came in the spring of 2005 with the release of the report *Fjölgun öryrkja á Íslandi: Orsakir og afleiðingar* (Increasing [numbers] of disability pensioners in Iceland: Causes and Consequences) (Herbertsson 2005), which was

produced by Institute of Economics at the University of Iceland and commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Social Security. As mentioned earlier, this report focused, among other things, on a number of allegations regarding the actions and motivations of low-income workers and the unemployed to have themselves evaluated as disabled in order to receive a disability pension. Mentioned earlier as well, the release of this report was covered by the print media as well as on television and radio, including a two page center spread in the newspaper Morgunblaðið (Morgunblaðið 2005e:25-25). I found very few people I spoke to in connection with my research examined the original report directly; rather, they received most of the information from this report distilled through the media accounts of its contents. The majority of the flurry of media accounts regarding this report did not appear to be very objective and they simply accepted the report's findings and expressed outrage over the increase of young disability pensioners in the country. Some of these accounts were pointed criticisms of the disability pensioners themselves and blamed the pensioners directly, rather than taking aim at the pension system itself and its architects and agents. One article proclaimed in bold letters on the front page: "*Stórhert eftirlit með örorkusvikurum*" (tightening control on disability cheats) (Fréttablaðið 2005a:1) which went on to contend in some rather harsh language that "Tryggingastofnun ríkisins is now declaring war [*að skera upp herör*] on those who defraud the disability pension" (ibid.). An editorial decried: "*Hér eru of margir ungir öryrkjar*" (there are too many young disability pensioners), the author of which then re-articulated some of the more inflammatory findings of the above mentioned report such as the 70% increase between 2002 and 2004 in the number of those who applied to be evaluated as disabled; of course, the article does not go on to say if these applications were successful, how

many of these people were deemed to be eligible for the full disability pension and the various reasons why a ruling was sought. In the latter half of the article the author then includes the qualifier of 'young' in the discussion to argue that: "It is not just bad for young people to go on disability, but also there are increasing costs for society due to these issues if people are on disability for most of their work lives" (Jónasson 2005:22). The concluding speculation is perhaps the most significant: "It is known that some part of society needs assistance from the community, and they should be helped so that they can lead a decent life, but others maybe go on disability because it is higher than the unemployment benefits" (ibid.). Another editorial accepted these claims as fact and reiterated the findings of the report, urging changes to be made to the disability pension system which would tighten the evaluation procedures and to return the system to its previous focus on individual labour capacity rather than medical evaluations of the body (Morgunblaðið 2005g:25). The report and its supporters assumed that some nefarious reasons were behind these increases and assumed that it was the pensioners to blame. Rather than focusing on the labour market, hiring practices, demographic changes and other structural factors, the emphasis which emerged from this report focused largely on negative perceptions of the character of some of the disabled people themselves.

There emerged from this a rather vibrant counter-hegemonic discourse from disability advocates, critical scholars and some members of the media. In the newspapers one reporter detailed the position of some disability advocates who pointed out that it would be more productive to focus on the issues of rehabilitation, education and training (Huldudóttir 2005:31). An occupational therapist at an area hospital criticized the state for 'producing' disabled people as the result of the lack of investment in counselling and

therapy which, in some cases, could prevent or limit the physical or psychological factors which lead to disability (Fréttablaðið 2005b:6). ÖBÍ and its director at the time, Arnþór Helgason, were particularly vocal in the media in attacking this report and its negative portrayal of disability pensioners—some of their claims were in turn counter-attacked by governmental officials (e.g. Fréttablaðið 2005d:12). A counter-report by the sociologist Stefán Ólafsson (2005a) was later commissioned by ÖBÍ in order to challenge many of the claims of the earlier report issued by the state.

This counter-report challenged, among other things, the empirical evidence which was offered to argue that there were of late increasing numbers of young disability pensioners. The sociologist Stefán Ólafsson (2005a) challenged this from a sound statistical position by noting that the largest increase in disability pensioners in Iceland was in fact in the 40–49 age group, followed by the 50–59 age group and then the ages 30–39. There was also a decrease in the youngest 16–19 age group (Ólafsson 2005a:43). Oddly, the Ministry of Health and Social Security and the Ministry of Finance claimed that Ólafsson ‘misunderstood’ the data. In reply, Ólafsson issued another rebuttal, published on ÖBÍ’s website (Ólafsson 2005b), where he reiterated that the majority of newly evaluated disabled people were ages 36 and older and that the majority of newly evaluated pensioners will not receive the full benefits from a recent pension increase enacted in 2003, asking “What is the misunderstanding?” (Ólafsson 2005b:5). Indeed, it seemed that both in Ólafsson’s experience as well as my own there was a resistance and even refusal by some parties to consider the evidence: it was decided that young disability pensioners were increasing in Iceland and that was the end of the matter. In retrospect, a political criticism needed to be mounted in addition to the statistical data as the

presentation of the empirical data alone did not appear to suffice. The discourse that there were increasing numbers of young disabled clients became hegemonic—this knowledge formed part of the ‘common sense’ view of the matter, shored up with the supporting documentary evidence provided by certain sectors of the academy and sanctioned by government bureaucracies. It mattered not so much what was said, but who said it and in what manner the information was presented. Björgvin Guðmundsson, who often pens colourful attacks on the state regarding social welfare issues, commented: “Numbers on increasing *öryrkjar* (disability pensioners) are supposed to weigh more if that institution (Institute of Economics at the University of Iceland, author of the report) publishes them than if Tryggingastofnun or the Ministry of Health publishes them” (Guðmundsson 2005:24).

Ultimately I found the entire matter rather depressing, from the ways in which numbers and figures were seemingly plucked from thin air, the manner in which the available data was creatively interpreted, to the ease with which the public seemed to accept positions emanating from the state merely because they were dressed up in the garb of legitimacy. Most unsettling for me above all was the way in which the disability pensioners were maligned in these views which questioned and attacked their characters. If indeed there was a dramatic increase in young disability pensioners this should be a cause for concern on a number of fronts, but the tone of the debate which impugned the pensioners’ claims of being disabled and suggested there was a high degree of dishonesty underlying their motivations for seeking a claim drew my ire. There was some solace to be found in the form of the counter-hegemonic rebuttals from disability advocates and critical scholars to these claims. I was also consoled by the fact that not all government

officials I spoke to were so easily swayed by the claims made by this report. The underlying logic of the motives and value of the 'increasing young disabled' discourse was presented with stunning clarity and insight for me by a senior member of the municipal social services of Reykjavík. I had raised the findings of this governmental report and the discourses I encountered in the charity complex to her but expected that I would be presented with the 'official position,' so to speak. I was entirely caught off-guard by the candour of this official and the criticism she directed towards the state. I asked for her insights on the discrepancy between some of the findings of this report and the data. I was surprised by her admission that she did not bother to read the report and she explained why:

You have to remember why these reports are written and by who. It is not an academic report. The report is biased to support a political position. In this case it is used to justify going after those who are said to be cheating the system. The discussion after this report was horrible as was the reaction, 'now we will take very strongly those who were cheaters.' This is the wrong way to take. In every system there are those who cheat. But they are the minority. Most people are honest. You should not use all of your efforts on the 5% but try to think of ways to help the 95%.

Lastly, what I found particularly distressing, but also illuminating, were the discourses emanating from the charity complex on this matter. As I have discussed earlier, material aid charities such as Mæðrastyksnefnd regularly deal with disability pensioners among their clientele. Along with front-line governmental agencies these organizations are at the vanguard in terms of encountering the effects of unemployment, policy changes and the shifting nature of demographic patterns within the larger society. They are also particularly well-suited to become engaged with the subsequent debates about these issues. Mæðrastyksnefnd in the late 1920s and 1930s was at the fore-front of

debates about social issues in Iceland. But this is often no longer the role of material aid charities in the present. The public discourses emanating from this agency shored up the claims of the state regarding the increasing numbers of young disability pensioners by claiming that they were witnessing this increase at their organization. I finally decided to confront the senior staff member from Mæðrastyrksnefnd who made the comment that most of their disabled clients were younger on the occasion of the meeting between the committee and the visiting delegation from the municipal branch of Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn, detailed earlier. I compiled a set of data which illustrated that in 2004 most of the disabled clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd were in their late thirties to their fifties in addition to the data from Tryggingastofnun which made a similar point regarding the nation as a whole. To my surprise this staff member appeared to slump a little in her chair when confronted with these numbers and appeared somewhat 'deflated,' which was the term I used in my fieldnotes. It struck me that for some reason she was not pleased to see this evidence. I surmised that some of the politically connected members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were aware that this report was in the making or else were exposed to the position of the sitting government that there were increasing expenditures in the disability pension system and that efforts were in the works to curtail these developments. The case for tightening the disability system is best made with a focus on the young disabled people who represent a greater lifelong cost to the state to support and perhaps are an easier and more politically palatable target for criticism.

In addition to the ways in which the work of the charity complex contributes to the status quo in a material sense, such as by directing attention, resources and labour towards an activity that has little ability to foment structural change, these organizations

contribute to the status quo by supporting and reiterating hegemonic points of views. This was not limited to the statements made by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in newspaper articles mentioned earlier. Charities also acted as focal points for those who wished to shore up the positions of the sitting government. I detailed earlier (see Chapter Five) how some senior Icelandic politicians used the ‘long lines at Mæðrastyrksnefnd’ and their holiday assistance giveaways in order to make the case that charities are being abused and are frequented by those who merely ‘want something for free.’ By way of implication, such a position argues that the claims of poverty in Iceland are exaggerated and that the social welfare system and the labour market are adequate to meet the society’s needs. This throws into question the motives of those who seek assistance at places like Mæðrastyrksnefnd. Furthermore, since charities are private organizations the charge of their supposed lack of client screening processes and overall rigour (in contradistinction to the parallel state and municipal systems) often figure prominently in these discourses in order to convince the public that these agencies are wantonly giving away goods to any who ask. While such critiques are often used to criticize the clients of charities in general, they have been used to criticize disability pensioners in specific.

An intriguing example of this occurred during Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s Christmas holiday allocation of 2005. Pétur Blöndal, a sitting member of Alþingi for the centre-right Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn and a noted critic of social welfare programs, publicly maligned the disabled clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and its staff members. In a newspaper article (DV 2005a), Pétur Blöndal commented that he demanded to meet with the members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in response to a letter the committee had sent to Alþingi asking for an increase in their funding so they could help their disabled clients. It would seem that he



was less than impressed with what he heard: “There were few answers but the women [from Mæðrastyrksnefnd] who came here insisted that the disabled pensioners have it really bad. What kind of nonsense is this anyways, this does not add up. My neighbour is disabled and one of the richest men in the country. This is just rubbish and the system does not work the way it is supposed to” (DV 2005a:6). He continued that his own daughter goes to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for help not because she needs it but because she cannot manage her money: “It is not only my daughter who abuses the system, there are many more and it seems like just anyone can go there and ask for food. This is utter nonsense” (ibid.). My first response to this is that, as usual in these discourses, there is a reliance upon anecdotal evidence (‘my neighbour does so-and-so; a friend told me such-and-such’). But there is also an interesting conflation here of ‘disabled’ with ‘disability pensioner,’ as it is highly unlikely that one of the richest men in Iceland, who may indeed have an impairment of the body, would subsist on a disability pension; the comment is simply irrelevant to the issues at hand and hardly adds to the argument in any substantive way. Further, the suggestion that Mæðrastyrksnefnd does not screen their clients is absurd. I spent over a year and a half observing and documenting the screening and evaluation practices of this organization. Lastly, as is typical of the criticisms of disability pensioners, there was an inclusion of some exaggerated figures of what pensioners are believed to receive in benefits. Interestingly, an acerbic critique of this position was included in this article which came from Blöndal’s former wife, Monika Blöndal, in defence of their daughter Stella, whom he accused of abusing the help offered at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the disability pension system: “It is not true what Pétur says that our daughter Stella has 135,000 *krónur* after taxes from her disability pension. I have seen

with my own eyes that Stella gets 91,000 *krónur* a month, but she might get 135,000 if she got *heimilisuppbót* [pension supplement for those who live alone] but Stella lives with me and does not get it.” She continues that her former husband often ‘pads’ [*smyrja* lit. ‘smears’ or ‘lubricates’] these kinds of numbers when he makes these kinds of claims: “He usually calculates like this. I know him because I was married to him” (ibid.).

The charity complex acts as a collection of sites in which hegemonic discourses are fashioned and reinforced. Yet they also have a great potential to aid in the mounting of counter-hegemonic discourses. Unfortunately with the issue of disability pensioners it appeared that, as the result of their screening practices and public discourses, it was in the former that organizations such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd primarily played a role. However, one has to bear in mind that the reasons for this agency’s contribution to supporting positions such as the ‘increasing young disabled’ are difficult to disentangle and as such speak to the complex nature of the workings of hegemony in practice. The staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd are in turn connected in various complex ways to a number of other organizations, including political parties. In my estimation, some staff members supported the sitting state government’s position on disability pensioners for strategic reasons while others most likely encountered the discourse of increasing young disability pensioners and reproduced it without question because the claim seemed plausible, the source appeared credible, or it may have accorded with their experiences at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I must emphasize that I am not making the case that the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular or the Icelandic public in general are ‘gullible,’ but that many are not accustomed to critiquing (let alone reading) such reports and excavating discourses. Indeed, had I not been researching the issue prior to the release of the report

discussed above, I may well have accepted its findings as it was well-written and persuasively argued, at least on the surface. Bear in mind as well that Gramsci argued that 'common sense' exists in the mid-way point between the folklore of daily life and the knowledge of the specialists. Had these negative views regarding disability pensioners in Iceland not existed, the report and its supporters may not have found so many willing to accept its claims.

The emphasis by charities on the *öryrkjar* is not undertaken in order to draw attention to the plight of disabled people or to lobby for change in the labour market or pension system but to call for further support for charity. What is offered is a charitable response to inequality which has little or no potential to rupture the status quo. Furthermore, the disabled clients, like single mothers and the elderly, are rendered as the 'normal' and expected subjects of charities and in the process their marginalized positions within the larger society are also rendered as unremarkable and perhaps even expected. Charities operate as 'agents of liaison,' in effect if not in intention, through their co-articulation with discourses emanating from the state in some contexts as well as their reliance upon the dividing and classifying procedures imposed on their respective subjects which parallels the practices of state bureaucracies, with one classification system complementing and reinforcing the other. In the last chapter of this dissertation I will examine another contentious set of issues in Icelandic society, the presence of which was increasingly apparent within the charity complex: that of immigration, immigrants and 'new Icelanders.'

## Endnotes for Chapter Seven

<sup>1</sup> A comparison with the data on disability rates in Canada suggests that the situation of Iceland is not that unusual. According to a report published by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada 2001), the national disability rate for Canada was 12.4% of the population—quite similar to the rate of 12.5% in Iceland during the time of my research.

<sup>2</sup> This agency presented their findings divided along gender lines as well—56% of their female clients were disabled and 64% of male clients in 2004-2005 (Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar 2005:4).

<sup>3</sup> It is true that these charges were levelled primarily against 'single mothers,' but I do not feel that there was any particular gendered ideology at work here. Rather, I feel that this reflected the fact that it is much more common to encounter single mothers caring for children than single fathers.

<sup>4</sup> I strongly suspected that within these critical views of disability pensioners were interwoven further stigmas and prejudices regarding people with disabilities in general. I did not explore the history of Icelandic attitudes towards the physically or mentally disabled, though this is a project that I would be interested in pursuing.

<sup>5</sup> This term can also apply to a form of worker's compensation paid in lump sum as the result of a work related injury. This fund is administered by unions and not Tryggingastofnun.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005, 12,755 pensioners were in receipt of the full disability pension (*örorkulífeyrir*) in Iceland; in contrast, 797 received the lesser disability allowance (*örorkustyrkur*) (Tryggingastofnun 2005).

<sup>7</sup> I had mulled over the idea of asking the staff to ask the clients this question during the interview stage in order to collect this data. However, I had also learned from many of the clients I spoke to that they were generally frustrated with the existing level of questioning and information gathering at Mæðrastyksnefnd as it stood, so I decided that I did not want to add to their burdens.

<sup>8</sup> Despite this clarification I routinely encountered references, even within governmental policy statements and benefit guidelines, to the pensioners who have been evaluated as '75% disabled or more' as well as references to the '50–65%' category as '50–74%' disabled.

<sup>9</sup> The median monthly income in Iceland in 2005 for general employees in fish processing facilities was ISK 236,000, with the average being ISK 247,000 a month. The lower quartile was 185,000 a month and the upper quartile was at ISK 301,000 (Hagstofa Íslands 2007b).

<sup>10</sup> I had also considered the possibility that the disability pension system was in such a shambles that any evidence of rampant fraud would not be reported in order not to cause embarrassment to senior officials or the sitting government. However, given the context in which any opportunity seemed to have been taken to malign pensioners and to convince the public that drastic measures needed to be taken to reform the pension system, if such evidence existed I am certain that it would have been drawn upon in these accounts.

<sup>11</sup> Along with the switch in the evaluation procedures in 1999, as mentioned earlier, on January of 2003 there was a lowering of the reduction ratio (*skerðingarhlutfall*) for social security pensions which affected benefit levels, which was achieved after a bitter struggle between Tryggingastofnun and disability advocates. There was also an agreement between the Ministry of Health and Social Security (*heilbrigðis- og tryggingamálaráðherra*) and The Organization of Disabled in Iceland (*Öryrkjabandalag Íslands*) in March of that year to raise the disability pensions for the younger age groups which came into effect at the beginning of 2004 (Alþing 2004: 11).

<sup>12</sup> I have replicated the entire data set in Appendix E, including information culled from Mæðrastyrksnefnd's client information sheets as well as information adapted from the data available from Tryggingastofnun (2004:48).

<sup>13</sup> The years 1994 through to 2005 illustrates a steady growth in the number of disability pensioners (*örorkulífeyrisþegar*) in Iceland: 1994 (6540); 1995 (7175); 1996 (7577); 1997 (7779); 1998 (7980); 1999 (8673); 2000 (9329); 2001 (9780); 2002 (10443); 2003 (11199); 2004 (12011); and 2005 (12755). Sources: Tryggingastofnun (1998; 2000; 2004; 2005).

## Chapter Eight

### Counting ‘Foreigners’

In this chapter I will address one final ‘category’ of clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and within the charity complex in general, a category which has emerged fairly recently upon the social landscape in Iceland—that of ‘foreigners’ (*útlendingar*; *útlendingur* sg.). Since its formation in the late 1920s, Mæðrastyrksnefnd has long targeted widows, single mothers and needy mothers in general as the key demographic groups eligible for the organization’s assistance. Since this time, a number of other social categories have emerged to be counted among the expected subjects of charity, such as ‘the disabled.’ Individuals with physical, developmental or psychological impairments were assisted by organizations such as Mæðrastyrksnefnd but such individuals were rarely portrayed in these early media accounts or in the discourses of charities as members of a distinct social category. Early logbooks from Mæðrastyrksnefnd contained the records of individuals with very specific and diverse issues (see Chapter Five), in contradistinction to contemporary practices which record individuals as simply being ‘*öryrki*’ (recipient of disability pension)—a practice which may preserve a measure of privacy but which obfuscates the host of complex issues which forces disabled individuals to turn to private charities for assistance.<sup>1</sup> By the time of my research, disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) as the subjects of charity and the discourses which sustained this social category were firmly entrenched, brought into existence partly as the result of governmental social welfare evaluation and classification practices as well as the supporting role played by the charity complex and the media. But this social category and label is also complex and filled with

competing meanings, used by charities to describe their disabled clients as worthy of assistance while also used by the critics of the disability pension system as a pejorative term of reference. The issue of 'foreigners' seeking assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar charities is a fairly recent phenomenon, as is the increased pace of immigration to Iceland in general from abroad, particularly from Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Asia. So recent that it would seem I was witness to the nascent attempts by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to interpret and govern this category of clients at their organization, much as how Icelanders of late are coming to grips with the changing nature of their society in general as the result of the increased pace of immigration. As such, the discourses regarding the issue of 'foreigners' as the clients of charities or in Iceland in general would be more accurately described as emergent rather than hegemonic. However, the contestations over the interpretation and implications of immigration and immigrants as the clients of charities bear many of the hallmarks of hegemony in the making.

Due to the nature of their work, charity workers, like agents of the state such as social workers, doctors, welfare case officers and the police, are often among the first to encounter and note emerging social issues and trends. Charities, much like their counterparts in the formal governmental social welfare agencies, act in one sense as social barometers through reporting on developing issues within the larger society as they emerge. But the discourses these agencies generate are also productive rather than merely reflective in that they play a supporting role in shaping and moulding how these issues are perceived by the members of the larger society. One could argue that some social 'problems' emerge as such as the result of the work of particularly situated knowledge

producing bodies and their agents. Unlike the hegemonic views of ‘single mothers’ and ‘the disabled,’ which were already firmly entrenched when I began my research, the views of ‘foreigners,’ both as the clients of charities as well as in terms of their presence in Iceland in general, were actively being interpreted and fashioned as Iceland simply does not have a very long history as a destination for transnational migration. ‘Foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ were construed, to an extent, as ‘social problems’ to be solved, though this social category was generally interpreted in ambiguous terms. The issue of foreigners in Iceland rests on much more uncertain ground, and charities actively and subtly contributed to laying the groundwork for the debate on this issue.

In this chapter I will continue my argument, inspired by the work of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, that charities play a supporting role in creating and sustaining the categories that populate the social landscape through their practices of evaluating and classifying their clients, particularly through reporting these findings to a larger audience via spoken and textual discourses. These practices mirror some of the knowledge producing activities of governmental bureaucracies, medicine and academia. These categories of clients, such as ‘single mothers,’ ‘the elderly’ and ‘the disabled’ are spoken and written about in charitable discourses as if they referred to distinct social groups with the implication that these are neutral and objective descriptive categories which reflect an underlying reality of how society is constituted—which in the process overlooks many of the socio-economic issues these ‘groups’ share. In turn, these social categories are also linked to hegemonic cultural and political discourses which fill these categories with meaning, fashioned from historical understandings, the experiences of daily life as well as contemporary political manoeuvrings that associate particular forms



of behaviour, codes of conduct and value judgments with specific 'groups.' Material aid charities in Iceland play a complex role in these regards, sometimes challenging the dominant views regarding these social categories applied to their clientele while other times explicitly or inadvertently supporting them. The dealings with and discussions of 'foreigners' who sought help from charities are also illustrative of the role of these agencies in the creation and maintenance of hegemonic discourses.

Charitable groups such as the Icelandic Red Cross have emerged as key advocates for immigrants in Iceland, helping them in a material way as well as attempting to counter a recent hardening of attitudes towards immigrants, as will be discussed below. Here the usefulness of the charity complex is further entrenched vis-à-vis the issue of immigration, as charities provide material assistance to immigrants, such as food and clothing, for those who are labouring in the lowest paid positions in the labour market and/or not eligible for various governmental pension schemes. Yet in other respects, it could be argued that these practices contribute to preserving the status quo of certain forms of inequality through assisting the state in terms of extending material social protection schemes at the expense and labour of charities and their donors, as well as assisting certain economic interests through enabling employers to maintain low wages—leaving charities to 'pick up the slack' so to speak. As will be noted below, many of the menial and lowest-paid positions in Iceland are predominantly filled by immigrants. But charities also play an intellectual role through shaping public opinions about immigrants, explicitly in the case of the Red Cross or more subtly in the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd.

What was clear from examining the issue of immigrant clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular was that opinions about this fairly recent societal

development were much more diverse and perhaps uncertain among the staff than opinions about other 'groups' among their clientele, such as single mothers or disabled people. Simply put, many of the staff members were uncertain of what to make of this development, how to deal with the issue of 'foreigners' (or, even if it was an issue at their organization) and undecided about what it meant for Icelandic society. In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which the staff evaluated and classified their immigrant clients. As with the issues of gender, age and disability, being classed as an 'immigrant' when seeking charitable assistance was complex, as some aspects of positionality overrode others during the evaluation process. When charities commented on the presence of immigrants at their organizations, whether it was to solicit for support or to push a cause, as with the issue of single mothers and disability pensioners these 'categories' remained open to a number of other interpretations and alternative meanings. The public for whom these discourses are intended may indeed subscribe to views of 'the disabled,' for example, that may differ from their anticipated portrayal by charities as clients worthy of assistance. The presence of immigrants at charities can and has been used to promote views quite different from those advocated by charities themselves. But it must be remembered that official discourses which appear in the media emanating from specific organizations cannot be taken as representative of the views of the staff members as a whole. What was particularly intriguing from a research perspective was the opportunity to observe what appeared to be an embryonic view of immigrants in Iceland being fashioned rather than an entrenched hegemonic discourse already in place. Before discussing the role of charities in assisting immigrants, I will briefly turn to the issue of immigration in Iceland in general.

## **8.1 Immigration in Iceland**

Iceland does not have a very long history as a destination for immigrants, particularly from regions outside of Western Europe. In contrast with other Western European and North American nations, Iceland receives very few refugees and most foreign-born residents are either working under temporary work visas or did so in the past and later decided to settle in the country. The majority of work permits are issued to fill lower-paid and menial positions rejected by the younger generations of Icelanders. Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (2004a) notes that the majority of work permits issued to foreign workers were for positions in fish processing plants, as well as for cleaning and factory work. In contrast, only 2% of work permits were issued for those classed as 'skilled workers' (Skaptadóttir 2004a:139). The lack of local interest in the relatively low paid fish processing facilities, coupled with out-migration from smaller fishing villages to Reykjavík and the surrounding areas, has forced plant owners in recent years to look abroad for sources of labour.

Changes in the nature of the Icelandic fisheries in the last two decades have played a role in this regard as well. In late 1983, quotas in the fisheries were assigned to each vessel in order to preserve fish stocks and to prevent possible collapse through over-fishing. These were initially designed to be temporary actions which were linked to specific vessels and the transferability of these quotas was limited (Pálsson and Helgason 1996:64–65). The process started in the mid-1980s but culminated with the institution of individually transferable quotas (ITQ) in 1990. As such, ITQs "became fully transferable and divisible...and more akin to permanent property rights" (ibid.). As might be expected, large firms increasingly came to accumulate greater and greater shares of

quotas. These so called 'quota-kings' began to lease quotas to small-scale operators and, extending the feudal metaphors as noted by Pálsson and Helgason, these small operators became seen as quota 'tenants' or 'serfs' (ibid.:78). The transfer of quotas to other villages or regions in the country was a serious matter for villagers who depended upon local processing of the catch for their livelihoods. Skaptadóttir notes as well (2004b) that, as the result of other ongoing changes in the fisheries, the links between vessels and land-based processing have been increasingly severed as more and more processing is being done off-shore or outside of Iceland, all of which contributes to the impetus for rural Icelandic-born youth to look for opportunities elsewhere. Out-migration has been notably occurring in the heavily fisheries-based northwest region of the country (Skaptadóttir 2004b:263). As a result, foreign sources of labour were increasingly looked to in order to limit costs in the remaining processing facilities as well as to counter the lack of available Icelandic workers.

Whereas it might be expected that most immigrants coming to Iceland from other countries would most likely settle around major cities and surrounding areas, in the case of Iceland concentrations of immigrants are also noticeable in smaller coastal villages and towns with fish processing facilities. Skaptadóttir notes that the out-migration of Icelandic youth in the West Fjords (*Vestfirðir*) region is coupled with increasing numbers of foreign migrant workers coming to the area. In 2003, the number of foreign citizen residents in the northwest region was much higher than the rest of the nation, 6.4% regionally compared to 3.5% overall (ibid.). By the conclusion of 2005, foreign citizen residents numbered 13,778 or 4.6% of the national population (Hagstofa Íslands 2006c) and the West Fjords continued to see the highest rate of out migration in the country, a negative

net out-flow of –39.2% in 2005 (Hagstofa Íslands 2006a:6). In terms of national origins, the largest groups of immigrants in Iceland were from Poland, followed by Denmark, regions of the former Yugoslavia and the Philippines (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006b:10).

The predominance of immigrant workers in the most menial and lowest paid positions in Iceland has a number of material and economic implications for migrant labourers, implications which can help to explain their increasing presence as the clients of charities such as Mæðrastyrsnefnd. However, before discussing these material issues it is also important to note some of the policies of the Icelandic state as well as immigrant advocacy groups regarding the issues of culture and national identity. In the context of my research at Mæðrastyrsnefnd, there was a measure of discussion among the staff pertaining to the relationship between the labour market and the social welfare system with the situations of ‘foreigners’ in Iceland. Yet there was always a sub-text to these discussions regarding the issues of culture, language and national identity—in short, what it means to be an Icelander and the effects of immigration upon Icelandic culture and society were key themes which emerged whenever the presence of ‘foreigners’ at charities was raised.

The unofficial or de facto position of the Icelandic state, educators and some scholars has been to support the assimilation (*aðlögun*) of immigrants into the larger Icelandic society and culture. The reason why I refer to this position as ‘unofficial’ is that, as one governmental report on the matter pointed out (Félagsmálaráðuneytið 2005), the Icelandic state has no official policy on the socio-cultural status of immigrants aside from legal matters pertaining to citizenship, labour codes and social welfare entitlements. In this report on immigration, Iceland today was compared with the situations faced by other

Nordic nations at the end of the Second World War before they started to experience large-scale foreign migration to their respective countries (ibid.:8); in other words, there is a measure of uncertainty in Iceland as to how to deal with foreign immigration with respect to socio-cultural matters. The term '*aðlögun*' in governmental discourses in Iceland is often used in reference to immigrants. It may be glossed as 'assimilation,' 'adjustment,' 'adaptation' or 'acclimatization,' but in my understanding it is the immigrants rather than the host Icelandic society who are primarily assumed to undertake these processes. In comparison with some dominant models found in other parts of Europe, the approach (such as it is) by the Icelandic state could be seen as having more in common with the French model of 'Republican Assimilation,' which aims to turn immigrants into French citizens in both a legal and cultural sense, in contradistinction to the British model of 'Ethnic Integration' which leaves some room for internal cultural diversity and does not posit a fundamental one-to-one correspondence between 'culture' and 'nation' (see Stolcke 1995:9–11). Some scholars, (e.g. Keaton 2005), have described the French model as promoting 'arrogant assimilation,' "understood as the elimination of nondominant groups' cultures...assimilation as making similar to the dominant group" (Keaton 2005:405). Perhaps in light of these obvious power implications, some non-governmental agencies in Iceland that have taken an interest in these matters, such as the Icelandic Red Cross, advocate the idea of mutual adaptation or integration (*gagnkvæm aðlögun*) on the part of both migrants as well as the host Icelandic society (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006b). It seems to me, however, that this reflects more the international orientation of the larger Red Cross organization rather than overall Icelandic support for a

multicultural society. At least very few native Icelanders I spoke to during the course of this project expressed much support for radical socio-cultural change in these regards.

It is also not surprising that little support for cultural assimilationist policies is to be found within the discipline of anthropology. In one sense the supporters of such an approach assume a coherent, bounded and homogenous model of 'culture' which is in turn then mapped on to a delimited notion of the nation-state, much in common with the views of culture and nation found in 19<sup>th</sup> century forms of Romantic nationalism (which found a ready audience among early Icelandic nationalists—see Chapter Three), all of which runs counter to modern anthropological understandings of culture. But the issues at stake extend beyond mere matters of anthropological theory. Stolcke (1995), for example, argues that the view of cultural incompatibility assumed to exist between immigrants and the host society that is used to justify assimilationist policies promotes an ideology of what she refers to as 'cultural fundamentalism.' This ideology legitimates the exclusion of 'others' (immigrants, foreigners, strangers) from equal participation in many or all aspects of socio-cultural-economic life for those who do not assimilate, or justifies limiting the immigration of those deemed to be too culturally different from the host society (Stolcke 1995:4–5).

While the alternative models of 'integration' or 'multiculturalism' may seem at first glance to be preferable to the strict assimilationist model, these approaches as well have not been without critics, even within anthropology. For example, the anthropologist Unni Wikan (1999, 2002) has been critical of these notions of 'cultural integration' from her perspective in Norway. She asks some very important questions about the ways in which policies enacted to respect the culture of immigrants in the spirit of promoting a

multicultural society can have a detrimental effect upon the life chances of immigrants and their children. Wikan questions the wisdom of the efforts to promote a multicultural society if immigrants are not afforded the chance to acquire the necessary cultural and linguistic tools required in order to participate equally in terms of their new society and which can lead to segregation and isolation in the name of preserving 'culture.' Wikan contends that cultural integration is predicated on a flawed conception of culture and this lack of clarity may produce at best a confused policy. In her research she noted some very real negative consequences for migrants in terms of economic and social exclusion as well as a lack of basic legal protection enjoyed by native Norwegians as the result of state efforts to protect the 'culture' of migrants:

Norwegian policy is aimed at integration, not assimilation. It means that 'they' should abide by the laws and basic values of society – such as democracy, gender equality, and the rights of the child – whereas 'we' should respect 'their culture'. But this is a contradiction in terms, for it assumes that 'culture' is something *other than* laws and basic values; hence the two parties to integration should be able to have their cake and eat it too (Wikan 1999:61).

While reasonable arguments may be made for and against assimilation and integration, I feel that it is important to both consider the views of immigrants as well as the members of the host society—it is as unproductive to accuse immigrants of simply being unyielding and mired in 'tradition' as it is to dismiss the fears among the host society about the cultural and linguistic implications of immigration as 'racist' in all instances. Admittedly, in the context of my research 'immigrant' or 'foreigner' was to an extent synonymous with a 'social problem' which the state and non-governmental organs were expected to address, though in Iceland silence and avoidance of the issues seemed to



be safest official route to follow.<sup>2</sup> The possibility of building a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic society did not appear as a serious candidate for consideration by the state or the public at large in Iceland during the time of my research and immigrants were generally perceived as the legitimate subjects of endeavours of adaptation or assimilation. Non-governmental organizations acted as ‘agents of liaison’ (Foucault 1980b:62) in the projects aiming to assimilate or integrate migrants—relatively minor in the case of Mæðrastyrksnefnd but quite significant in terms of the Red Cross—which to varying degrees help to sustain ‘immigrants’ as a distinct ‘group’ within Icelandic society that is sometimes subjected to exclusion as well as targeted for assimilation.

What I found curious was that the discussion about integrating immigrants was framed in the discourse of culture, yet any resistance by the members of the host society to these changes was cast as ‘racist.’ Similarly, I was told numerous times by the staff at Mæðrastyrksnefnd that the varying reactions towards immigrant clients I noted had little or nothing to do with ‘skin colour’ but was primarily concerned with issues of culture, language and the economy. Yet it was clear that visible differences of the body acted at times as phenotypical markers of difference—it was difficult if not impossible to disentangle the factors of race, culture and language from the issue of immigrant clients at charities or immigration in general. Stolcke (1995) has argued that ‘cultural fundamentalism’ has by and large supplanted the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century form of biological racism in Europe. Similarly, Wikan (1999) has suggested that ‘culture’ may be the new ‘race’ and that the politics of inclusion and exclusion in Europe are now conducted primarily on the terrain of language, ethnicity and nationality (Wikan 2002). But I would argue that racism has always involved and continues to involve a complex set

of interconnected issues including classifications based on the body but also including as well such issues as religion, economic concerns, material culture and language among others, and understandings of racism need to consider this. 'Race' did serve to mark some of the clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd as 'foreign,' but its significance for the staff varied among members. For example, 'Asians' were often referred to among the staff and in popular discourses in Iceland positively as being '*duglegur*,' in other words as 'industrious' or 'hard workers.' It is also undeniable that phenotypical differences played a role in identifying 'Asians.' While the category itself is denotative of those who originated from a particular geographical region of the globe, a large and diverse region rather imprecisely referred to as 'Asia,' it is unquestionable that people described as such are visibly identified on the basis of a number of morphological features of the body which in turn are linked to a number of assumed cultural or behavioural traits. Yet in a rather interesting twist, the normally positive cultural attribute of being 'hard workers,' here associated with 'Asians,' was used to negate the eligibility of some people as clients at charities due to the fact that they were perceived as 'not needing the help' as the result of their assumed hard work ethics and financial prudence. Still, the body may not be the foundational basis on which the notion of 'foreignness' was predicated in this context. Competency in Icelandic among the clients in the context of my research appeared to play a far greater role than visible phenotypical differences of the body in denoting who was or was not a 'foreigner.'

The ambiguities and contradictions apparent within the entire enterprise of determining what constitutes 'foreignness' came to the forefront when I was asked by the senior staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to also 'count the foreigners' in the statistical work I

was doing on behalf of the committee. Not only was I perplexed as to how to go about accomplishing a task fraught with such theoretical and ethical problems, but I was similarly puzzled as to why the committee wished to acquire such information about their clientele. As the result of attempting to fulfill this request for the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd, I was able to observe closely and at firsthand the ways in which the classificatory practices of organizations actively create the reality it is assumed they are reflecting as well the ways in which charities contribute to, as well as resist, the emergent hegemonic configurations regarding the social order. Before discussing the issue of 'counting foreigners,' I will first turn to a brief discussion regarding the factor of racism as it pertains to the issues raised in this project.

## **8.2 Considering 'race' and racism**

While the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd actively debated and took an interest in the issue of 'foreign' clients amongst themselves, there was a general reluctance to engage in these debates in public contexts. In my interpretation, this was partly the result of the concerns of possible accusations of racism or bigotry for discussing these matters publicly. This discomfort or resistance about talking openly about 'foreigners' and its implications of racism mirrors a similar discomfort within the discipline of anthropology in recent years to talking openly about race and racism (see e.g. Brodtkin 1999; Moses 2004; Mullings 2005; Shanklin 2000). In the context of my research there was also a high degree of uncertainty expressed by many of the people I spoke to over how to interpret these recent and ongoing changes in Icelandic society. Public silence appears to have been the preferable approach at the time but in private conversations and behind the scenes discussions the issue of 'foreigners,' whether pertaining to the clients of charities

or their presence in Iceland in general, was hotly debated. Even if the staff were reluctant to directly engage in public discourses regarding the issue of immigration, charities nevertheless still acted as sites through which members of the media, politicians and anyone else with an agenda and access to a public voice promoted their views in order to subtly, or not so subtly, attempt to shape public perceptions. For example, one member of the Icelandic parliament in a newspaper interview criticized charities in general, and Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular, for supporting those who ‘misuse the system’ (DV 2005a6). Included in his criticism were ‘foreigners’ who purportedly abused the charity system on a regular basis. I was also struck by another article which proclaimed in its headline: “*Rændi nýbúa sem beið eftir mat hjá Mæðrastyrksnefnd*” (immigrant robbed who was waiting for food at Mæðrastyrksnefnd) (DV 2005b:6). The factual errors contained within this article were quite staggering. I was present at Mæðrastyrksnefnd on the day this incident occurred and had a number of dealings with the client who was robbed. Essentially little happened as it was reported: the money was surreptitiously taken from her unguarded purse in the waiting room not in line outside as suggested in the story (there were rarely queues at all during my fieldwork and certainly not when the incident occurred); the photo that accompanied the story depicted a scene from the holiday assistance from 2002; and the victim was reported as ‘Colombian’ even though she is from a South Asian nation.<sup>3</sup> Initially I focused on the article as another example of the ‘long lines at Mæðrastyrksnefnd’ discourse (see Chapter Five) but began to wonder about the relevance of the victim’s nationality, even if misreported. The victim’s nationality or status as an immigrant must have had some relevance for the author of this piece as it was mentioned several times in the article. Since this particular paper is generally perceived in

Iceland as a sensationalistic tabloid, I then began to wonder if the author or the editors saw the appeal of the story as being that of a client robbed at Mæðrastyrksnefnd or that of a specifically 'foreign' client robbed at Mæðrastyrksnefnd—after a period of reflection and discussing the matter with some staff members and colleagues, I decided that it was most likely the latter.

This chapter presents some rather sensitive material and it is possible that some staff members from Mæðrastyrksnefnd would have preferred it if I had omitted the issue of 'foreigners' altogether.<sup>4</sup> However, I could not overlook the fact that the issue of foreigners was a key theme which arose during the course of my fieldwork and I feel that it is an important matter to address. My initial reservations about including a chapter on foreigners and charity began to change when, on separate occasions, two clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, one of whom is a self-described 'half-Icelander,' urged me to consider the factor of racism in my work. A handful of staff members also pointed out that the reaction to foreigners by some of the staff and the public at large was more akin to xenophobia than racism but added that there were some racist attitudes at work that I needed to acknowledge.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as my fieldwork progressed I too became convinced that I could not discuss and analyze the issue of 'foreigners' without addressing the issues of race and racism.

Within anthropology it has been argued that the separation of race from culture in the discipline as well as the larger society has been and still is problematic. Visweswaran (1998) points out, after Stocking, that the understandings of 'race' in European societies have long contained elements of what would be seen as relating to the domain of 'culture' today (Visweswaran 1998:72). The concepts of blood and heredity, common among 19<sup>th</sup>

century forms of romantic nationalism—examples of which still persist—are often intertwined with biological as well as socio-cultural themes. In the context of my own research, rarely was the issue of visible phenotypical differences of the body explicitly referred to in the context of the issue of ‘foreigners,’ yet these visible differences still served to identify individuals and groups. I was repeatedly told in numerous contexts that the issues at stake had nothing to do with ‘race,’ yet these issues, whether they were economic, political, linguistic or cultural, nevertheless were linked with particular immigrant groups associated with specific nation-states or broad geographic regions perceived to be ‘ethnic’ areas (e.g. ‘Asia’), who were often identified as such by the visual markers of distinction, whether these were phenotypical markers of the body or items of material culture such as clothing. A complex set of factors were drawn upon to varying degrees when ‘foreigners’ were identified as such and the boundaries between the concepts of race, culture, ethnicity and nationality appeared to be very vague—porous and ambiguous in one context then solidified and definite in another.

There is not adequate space for a detailed theoretical discussion of the concept of racism but I will draw upon the work of Wodak and Reisigl (1999) in order to frame some of my own basic understandings of racism. Wodak and Reisigl argue that racism is complex, contextually variable, shifting and syncretic, drawing upon a body of symbols and meaning. As such, it is difficult to disentangle understandings of race, racism, culture and ethnicity and it may not even be advisable to do so. I quote at length from their definition of racism below:

Racism is based on the hierarchical construction of groups of persons that are characterized as communities of descent and to whom are attributed specific collective, naturalized, or

biologically termed traits that are considered to be almost invariable. These traits are primarily related to biological features, appearance, cultural practices, customs, traditions, language, or socially stigmatized ancestors. These traits are – explicitly or implicitly, directly or indirectly – evaluated negatively, and this judgment is closely in accord with hegemonic views (Wodak and Reisigl 1999:181).

I agree with Wodak and Reisigl that the traits that need to be considered when analyzing racism extend far beyond that of distinctions based on readings of skin colour, facial features or other biological attributes. But the markers of ‘foreignness’ perceived in the body, dress, behaviour and language were (aside from the body) not seen in the context of my research as invariable or immutable but had the potential for change and assimilation. The predominant view among the staff of Mæðrastyksnefnd was that ‘foreigners’ who moved to Iceland for good, learned the language and adopted the general social norms were seen as ‘Icelanders’ or at the least as ‘new Icelanders’ (*nyir Íslendingar*). Some staff members were quite adamant about this. In one instance a staff member brought her hand down upon the table during an interview to emphasize that as far as she was concerned all immigrants who learned the language and made efforts to assimilate became Icelanders regardless of their nation of origin or differences of the body. Admittedly, there was less tolerance for migrants who did not appear willing to turn themselves into Icelanders nor was there much evident support for the creation of a hyphenated multi-ethnic transnational subjectivity. The immigrants who did not adapt in terms of language and local norms became construed as ‘problems’ requiring the intervention of the state through various agencies, policymakers, educators and so forth along with the efforts of non-governmental supporting organizations.

'Racism' is commonly perceived as a negative view and rejection of the 'other' based upon a set of traits or behaviours associated with certain groups which exhibit differences in the body (skin colour, hair, facial features and other morphological variants) that diverge from the dominant 'unmarked' forms. A strict racist ideology would lead individuals to reject others based on these morphological features, and the assumed innate abilities, codes of conduct and behaviours associated with these traits, and which would leave little or no room for their inclusion within the dominant society. In a context such as Iceland, to argue that attitudes towards immigrants are a response to their cultural differences and nothing to do with 'race' or 'skin colour' suggests that there is indeed room for manoeuvre for immigrants in the host society in terms of acceptance if 'they' would just change their ways. But I am not certain as to extent of the differences in effect between racist and culturalist modes of thought and if the two may be so clearly separated. Unni Wikan (1999) asks: "what *is* racism other than the degradation of persons on the basis of inborn or ethnic characteristics?" (Wikan 1999:58). The negative reaction towards 'others' is indeed complex and it is difficult to sometimes intuit whether the issue at stake pertains to 'race,' ethnicity, culture, language or citizenship, or situationally varying combinations thereof. The anthropologist Guðrún Guðmundsdóttir pointed out to me, as well as in public discourses referring to her work (e.g. Fréttablaðið 2005c:1), that discrimination towards foreigners in Iceland could also be class-based—she found there was a much higher degree of tolerance towards professional migrants, even those who conducted their work in Iceland in English, than towards migrants who performed low-skilled positions.



In the context of my research, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd overall placed more scrutiny upon migrant clients who spoke little or no Icelandic than those who displayed a measure of linguistic competency. Partly this lack of Icelandic skills acted as an indicator that these clients may be temporary migrant workers or have dubious residency status. While there was no official policy which required citizenship for assistance, only legal residence within Reykjavík, nevertheless there was a preference for assisting those who appeared to have made Iceland their home to ensure that this assistance was most likely going to help family members within the country. The still racially marked immigrants who spoke fluent Icelandic and appeared to be making a home in the country were generally treated the same as native Icelandic clients. Here ‘race’ acts as a marker of distinction but its relevance is contextual and often overridden by other factors, much as how the factor of gender operated as discussed in Chapter Six. The charge that specific attention directed towards foreigners is ‘racist’ in its common understandings is not only simplistic but obfuscates further understanding of these practices and how they relate to the complex politics of cultural and national identity in addition to the complexities of the distribution of charitable assistance. ‘Race’ certainly mattered, but mattered more in conjunction with other factors. Another insufficiency of the definition of racism noted earlier is that not all of these evaluations about these racial/national/ethnic groups were negative. ‘Asian’ clients in particular were perceived as hard workers, financially frugal, competent and with strong kinship links—almost an inverse of the stereotypes made regarding the Icelandic-born clients. Yet in a strange twist (which will be discussed further below), these normally positive attributes were what placed many of these ‘Asian’ clients under suspicion and as potentially ineligible for material assistance from this

charity. But I must be clear here—to argue that certain ‘groups’ of humans, whether defined by visible differences of the body, ethnicity, or national/regional origins, have an inherent ability or are strongly associated with particular traits, even if these traits are perceived to be ‘positive,’ is still racist in the broad sense of the term.

‘Race’ acted as a marker of distinction which identified certain categories of immigrant clients but it was also ambiguously treated as a marker of ‘foreignness.’ However, it must not be forgotten that in Iceland, as elsewhere, there are those who are unambiguously racist in their views in the traditional sense of the term. During my discussions with one client of Mæðrastyrsnefnd, she surprised me by bluntly asking if I planned to consider the factor of racism in my research. As I scrambled for a response she leaned over and quietly stated: “Icelanders are racist. Very racist.” Given that she was born of the union of a foreign soldier and an Icelandic woman during the Second World War, I could certainly understand her feelings on the matter as she described for me her ostracism by her childhood peers. She explained that adults as well had verbally abused her and made disparaging comments about her appearance. The additional irony, she explained, was that she inherited her dark hair and complexion from her Icelandic mother while her foreign father was fair-haired. Another client Stefanía (pseudonym), a self-described ‘half-Icelander,’ was even more vehement on the matter even though she is from a younger generation than the client described above. She described the category of ‘Icelanders’ to me as being like the ‘Free Masons’ in that either you are a member or you are not and joining, as an outsider, is next to impossible. I am not sure whether this analogy is entirely apt given that I do not think that membership in such societies is as exclusive as it once was and it is apparent to me that there is some room for manoeuvre

for immigrants to become Icelanders, or at least 'new Icelanders.' However, Stefanía was clear that an individual's command of Icelandic is not always enough and physical appearance or 'racial' features still matter. Her features have acted to mark her as an outsider even though Iceland is the only home she has known and she speaks the language as well as anyone else born and raised in the country. She insisted that if I plan to stay in Iceland I will experience this exclusion no matter how well I come to speak the language. Stefanía continued in her opinion that I could 'pass' for a number of ethnicities based upon my appearance but 'Icelander' was not one of them.<sup>6</sup> Stefanía also relayed a personal story to me as an example. The previous week she became engaged in a quarrel with a man over a parking space at a local shopping mall. They initially argued in Icelandic and then suddenly the man switched to English and yelled: "Move your car you fucking foreigner!" I could tell that she was hurt by this incident as she told it to me.

Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir pointed out to me that she has found in her ongoing research on immigration in Iceland (e.g. Skaptadóttir 2004a, 2004b, 2004c) that life is more difficult for immigrants who look 'less Icelandic' than others based upon physical features, and that her research participants have reported incidents of catcalls directed to them to 'go home' in public spaces. Asian women who have married Icelandic men are often assumed to have been 'purchased' as the result of commercial marriage services. However, not all of the immigrant experiences in Iceland in either Skaptadóttir's work or my own were consistent. For example, one client from Mæðrastyrksnefnd was originally from a region of West Africa and has lived in Iceland for over twenty years. When I asked her whether she was treated differently because of her appearance she looked genuinely surprised by the question and said that it has not really been an issue for her.

Another client I met later also immigrated to Iceland from a nation in Africa.<sup>7</sup> She was a fairly new migrant and has not had much time to learn Icelandic, but shook her head in the negative when I asked about racism in regards to her own experiences.

During my observations of practice at Mæðrastyrksnefnd I paid particular attention to the client-staff interactions that were characterized by an excessive scrutiny being placed upon specific clients. At times the demographic feature of the clients in question that triggered this extra attention was obvious, such as marital status with regards to certain couples who came at the same time or gender and parental status in terms of men who were cautioned that the organization was for women with children; however, as noted earlier, despite the tendency to sometimes conflate 'woman' with 'mother,' single childless women were usually assisted without question. During the holiday allocation of 2004, as is discussed in detail further below, ethnicity and citizenship status were indeed factors that triggered this scrutiny, but this was always not so clear. One day I observed two women who could be described as Asian in origin subjected to higher than normal scrutiny. When I helped them with their bags to their car I decided to ask them what the problem was without mentioning the issues of immigration or citizenship status; they had been cautioned by the staff that they would be helped 'this time but not next time' but I was not sure why. Once outside on the street I explained that I was a Canadian researcher studying charities in Iceland and ethically cautioned them regarding their rights and issues of confidentiality if they agreed to speak to me. I then asked permission to inquire about their experiences at Mæðrastyrksnefnd and specifically about the nature of the incident I just observed. After they agreed, I bluntly asked: "Do you feel that you are treated fairly in there?" Immediately one woman smirked and said,

pointing to her companion, “You better ask her.” When I turned to her companion, she rolled her eyes at the building behind us. She explained: “The lady who used to take the information before,” I nodded realizing who she meant, “I used to tell her that yes, I own my own home and that I have a man. It didn’t matter before. I don’t know why they are telling me that I don’t need help now.” No mention was made of her status as an immigrant, her limited Icelandic skills or her ethnicity as playing a role. The situation appeared to be just as how she interpreted it—her rejection as a client pertained to her marital status and home ownership which ran up against the agency’s preference for aiding single women with meagre material resources. The sorting of the clients was indeed a complex affair and it was not always immediately apparent what the relevant issue at hand was with regard to specific cases.

Larger-scale research efforts aimed at gauging the mood of the Icelandic public in general about immigration revealed a similar measure of ambiguity. The results of a Gallup poll on immigration in Iceland in 2004 were reported in the media which proclaimed that ‘prejudice’ (*fordómar*) in Iceland was increasing. One headline announced: “*Fordómar í samfélaginu að aukast*” (Prejudice in society increasing) (*Morgunblaðið* 2004j:4) while another declared “*Fordómar í garð útlendinga aukast*” (Prejudice against foreigners increasing) (*Fréttablaðið* 2004l:6). The interpretation of the results of these polls as indicators of ‘prejudice’ may have some validity but it could also be seen as an incomplete analysis. A previous poll from 1999 detailed in these articles revealed that 42% of the population were supportive of allowing foreign labour into the country. In 2004 this number had dropped to 28%. However, the unemployment rate in Iceland in 1999 was 1.9% of the total population which increased to 3.1% in 2004

(Hagstofa Íslands 2006b). As such, this shift could also reflect the concerns regarding heightened competition in the labour market that immigration could exacerbate, rather than prejudice against a specific group or prejudice towards immigrants in general. But it was also reported in 1999 that 45% of the population supported allowing refugees into the country. This figure dropped to 27.5% in 2004. This is not a number to celebrate and it may indeed show a growing negative backlash against 'foreigners' as the result of the increased pace of immigration to Iceland and events elsewhere in the world.

These findings were certainly treated with alarm by Icelandic anti-racist organizations such as Alþjóðahús (Reykjavík Intercultural Centre), operated by the Icelandic Red Cross. This agency is dedicated to immigrant advocacy and to helping immigrants adjust to life in Iceland. One research participant with some ties to the Intercultural Centre commented to me that she felt that this organization was important but unfortunately politically 'weak' in Iceland. Nevertheless, this organization, and in particular its parent agency, the Icelandic Red Cross, were vocal supporters of immigrants in Iceland. In response to these poll findings mentioned above, the Intercultural Centre published a magazine that was delivered across the country to educate people about immigration and racism entitled: "*Eins og fólk er flest*" (Like most people) (Alþjóðahús 2004a). In reference to this publication the agency stated on their website: "Because of the increasing prejudice against foreigners shown by Gallup's poll, the Intercultural Centre decided to publish a magazine on this issue. The magazine was distributed to over a 100 thousand homes all over the country" (Alþjóðahús 2004b). But the questions in this survey discussed in these newspaper articles referred specifically to refugees and labour issues rather than immigration in general. This hardening of attitudes towards refugees

and immigrants could be linked to other factors such as the general solidifying of national borders as the result of the recent increased fears of terrorism linked to militant strains of Islamic fundamentalism. To argue that these attitudes reflect increasing 'prejudice' or 'racism' may have some veracity but this might also be somewhat simplistic.

In another Gallup poll (IMG Gallup 2005) conducted in 2005 at the behest of the Icelandic Red Cross, it appears that most of those polled were ambivalent to the point of not caring either way about immigration and that it was only a slim minority who were vehemently opposed. For example, when the respondents were polled as to whether or not their quality of life had improved or worsened as the result of increasing immigration to Iceland, a significant 75.8% replied '*hvorki né*' (neither) and only a slim 5.2% felt there was a negative impact upon their lives (IMG Gallup 2005:5). Asked whether or not it was felt that immigration had a positive or negative effect upon the Icelandic economy there was less ambivalence but not an overwhelmingly negative response: 52.3% felt these effects to be positive and 16.1% felt immigration had a negative economic impact (ibid.). When examining the detailed demographic information provided about the respondents, it was clear that those with lower incomes and lower education felt more threatened by immigration to Iceland and this pattern was reflected in these numbers (ibid.:10). Given that immigrants are overwhelmingly perceived as strictly economic migrants who come to Iceland to work, and to work in lower-skilled and lower-paid positions, this finding most likely reveals that similarly situated Icelanders would be the most economically threatened by these new arrivals.

One of the more intriguing questions presented a set of hypothetical scenarios to the respondents, asking them whether or not they would be unhappy if the following lived

next-door to them: gay people, Buddhists, immigrants (*innflytjendur*), the mentally ill, and Muslims. The first three findings were quite similar: the majority, over 70%, were positive towards these groups living next-door and the minority, between 4 to 6%, were opposed or very opposed. The findings for 'Buddhists' and 'immigrants' were nearly identical, suggesting that both categories were similarly perceived as potential neighbours. However, there was a noticeable hardening of attitudes towards the mentally ill: 16.6% of respondents were unhappy or very unhappy at the prospect of living next-door to the mentally ill and there was a drop to nearly 60% who responded positively in contrast to the over 70% positive response to the three previous categories (*ibid.*:6). In other words, the respondents overall were less opposed to living next-door to gay people and immigrants than they were to the mentally ill—Icelandic-born or otherwise. This suggests that there was perhaps a measure of basic prejudice to be considered along with the suspicions about disability pensioners that I discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, over 22% of respondents expressed a level of unhappiness as well as extreme opposition towards the prospect of living next-door to Muslims. This suggests that immigrants or foreigners are not perceived as a homogeneous group and that there are distinctions of preference, at least based on religion: 5.6% unhappy at the thought of living next-door to Buddhists versus 22.2% unhappy with the idea of living next-door to Muslims (*ibid.*). Of course this is most likely related to recent geo-political events and the climate of fear about fundamentalist Islam in general in many European nations. There are a number of other questions I would have liked to have seen asked in this poll, but it suggests that there is much more at work than unqualified racism or xenophobia. If the latter was the



case, it is likely that these negative attitudes would be much more consistent toward any and all 'foreign' groups.

From the perspective of my research within the charity complex, the issue of 'foreigners' was not adequately captured with terms such as prejudice and racism, at least not as these terms are commonly understood. The key issues during the context of my research primarily revolved around language and culture rather than 'race,' though as I have argued these issues are difficult to disentangle. The issue of phenotypical markers of difference ('race') were generally set aside by the staff if the client spoke Icelandic, displayed an attempt to assimilate and had been in Iceland for a length of time. Much like the category of gender and disability, particular aspects of positionality were set aside in certain contexts and one could not say that 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' as a whole were perceived in the same way or treated differently as an over-arching category. For the majority of staff and volunteers, the issues at hand concerned the distribution of aid within their organization in conjunction with the larger anxieties about social change. Nevertheless, these phenotypical markers of difference were recognized and I contend that a notion of racism must be considered as interwoven with the distinctions of 'otherness' whether based on the factors of language, culture or other such issues—even if some of these distinctions are 'positive' attributes such as the case of certain groups of immigrants who were perceived to be 'hard workers,' as will be discussed in the following section.

### **8.3 The 'hard working' migrant**

Given that many non-native residents are in Iceland for the purposes of work, recent immigrants to Iceland are in turn widely perceived primarily as economic migrants

as well as 'hard workers.' This also has implications for how 'foreigners' are viewed as the clients of material aid charities. The references to immigrants as hard working economic migrants, in the practices and discourses of charities, in media accounts and in the discourses of everyday life, contributes to solidifying the social distinction of 'foreigner' as well as certain ethnic sub-categories within the larger 'foreigner/immigrant' category. The practice of breaking the populace down into discrete sub-categories—as is typical of charities, government bureaucracies and other knowledge producing agencies—lays the conceptual groundwork for exclusion once these categories are ranked and ordered. In Foucault's work, as discussed earlier, these social categories became the objects of specialists who are tasked to manage and discipline these sub-categories of persons so that their conduct can be normalized and brought into accordance with the dominant norms. What was striking about the attitudes towards 'foreigners' that I encountered in my research was that the grounds for exclusion of some immigrants from receiving charitable assistance was not that they were in any way 'deficient.' Quite the contrary, immigrants were often perceived to possess many of the valued behaviours that their Icelandic-born counterparts were perceived as lacking.

Certain categories of migrants to Iceland, such as those from Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, were characterized in public discourses as particularly hard workers. These migrants were usually described with the term '*duglegur*,' which may be glossed as 'hard working,' 'diligent' or 'efficient.' One graduate student in anthropology at the University of Iceland rolled her eyes at my mention of this term, commenting that it is one of the most over-used words in the Icelandic language but it is a common positive descriptor that one often hears. Given the earlier cultural emphasis upon work in Iceland,

as discussed previously, the identity of being a 'hard worker' was a distinction that many marginalized working class and poor people strove for in the past (see Magnússon 1989). The anthropologist Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir notes that this is a distinction that foreign migrants in the present value as well: "Both Icelanders and immigrants say that the foreign workers hardly ever reject extra work. Thus there is a positive image of them as hard-working, which is an image that many of the immigrants are glad to have. This is an aspect of their identity that both women and men emphasize" (Skaptadóttir 2004b:264). The category of the 'hard working immigrant' is also drawn upon in order to disparage the younger generation of Icelanders who are sometimes perceived as having lost the work ethic held to characterize the older generations. For example, I interviewed one client from Mæðrastyksnefnd in her car while she ran errands around the city. Although a native-born Icelandic she had spent some time living outside of Iceland earlier in her life. I asked her what had changed since she returned and she replied: "Immigration. It wasn't like that here before." She personally had no problem with this development and took the opportunity to praise the work ethics of Asian migrants and to disparage Icelandic youth, a distinction that I have heard on more than one occasion: "The Asian people are here to work. They are hard workers. They are doing jobs no one else wants to do. Some of these young Icelandic people [shakes her head ruefully]." She continued and said, regarding some younger Icelanders in her experience: "They don't want to work. They don't want to do anything. They are spoiled rotten."

The notion that immigrants are doing the jobs that Icelanders do not want to do acts as a form of everyday 'common sense' and is widely repeated. Its persistence is partly the result of some elements of truth contained within this discourse, though

arguably somewhat misinterpreted. The suggestion that immigrants are hard workers and Icelandic-born youth are less so is distorting and contributes to legitimating and justifying the larger socio-economic order. Many of these jobs in the fisheries or in cleaning positions, for example, are monotonous, not well paid and physically difficult. The perception that the younger generations of people in wealthy societies do not want to do these jobs is not limited to Iceland. The negative characterisation of younger people as 'lazy' or 'spoiled' hides the fact that there are some justifiable reasons for not wanting these jobs. Nandita Sharma (2001), in her analysis of Canadian immigration policy, points out that the importation of 'temporary, non-immigrant workers,' as they are classed, benefits the economic order's need for flexibility and the reliance by certain sectors of the economy upon low waged and temporary work. The Canadian state's lip-service paid to diversity, anti-racism and multiculturalism in the discourses of immigration masks and draws attention away from these labour practices which leaves many economic migrants, whose length of stay depends upon the whims of their employers, "increasingly vulnerable to all forms of market relations" (Sharma 2001:417). A similar situation holds in Iceland in regards to the labour market. Skaptadóttir (2004b) reports that work permits are issued one year at a time to non-citizen workers and are held by the employer rather than the employee. If the employer decides not to renew the work visa or wishes to reduce labour costs with layoffs, the request for renewing the visa is not made and the former employee must leave the country (Skaptadóttir 2004b:264–265). Such a situation creates the potential for exploitation. The willingness by foreign labourers to 'work hard,' not complain and take extra shifts in the lowest jobs in the class system could be interpreted as the result of the fear of displeasing employers who hold

these visas rather than some kind of intrinsic ethno-racial qualities that resides with these workers (ibid:264). Sharma notes that the reasons why young Canadian-born workers do not want these jobs should be obvious: “Because of low wages, unsafe and unacceptable working conditions, [and] the seasonal character of the work” (Sharma 2001:432).

The ways in which working class youths have a hand in their own exploitation and the reproduction of the economic order through asserting their own work abilities and deriding education, the very tools which could alleviate their plights, has been notably analyzed by scholars such as Willis (1977) and Dunk (2003). In the case of foreign workers in Iceland, it is not that they have internalized these discourses and have a hand in their own exploitation in such a way but that the dominant society has ascribed the identity of ‘hard worker’ to them, thus in turn legitimating the existence of low wages, job and visa insecurity, and poor working conditions for migrant labourers. The assumption that immigrants take these jobs because they are ‘hard working’ and hold a superior ethical and moral position because they do the jobs that local youths do not want encodes a racist ideology in which these jobs are deemed as suitable for people because of their nation or region of origin and assumed inherent aptitudes—disguised as praise for the qualities and ethics of migrant labourers. Furthermore, it sustains the status quo of the structural inequalities within the labour market. The Icelandic-born youth are criticized as ‘lazy’ because they have the ability to avoid being exploited to such a degree, forcing employers to turn elsewhere for other sources of labour who do not have the luxury of choice. The sociologist Harpa Njáls urged me to consider the racist implications underlying these discourses and ideologies regarding immigrant labour. She pointed out by way of example a comment made to her by a union official during her investigation of

poverty in Iceland. This official had remarked that the borderline poverty wages paid for maintenance positions in healthcare institutions and seniors' homes, for example, were soon not to be a 'problem' any longer because 'very few Icelanders did these jobs anymore.'

In comparison with Icelandic citizens, non-citizen residents relied to a much lesser degree on social services and financial assistance. In 2003, only 5% of those who received financial assistance from the city of Reykjavík were non-citizen residents.<sup>8</sup> Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir commented to me that as a combination of this situation and the perceived strong work ethic of 'foreigners' that one finds in Iceland there is much less of a presence of the discourse that foreigners are coming to 'leech' off the social welfare system of the country as is more common elsewhere in Europe. Indeed, one has to be careful in interpreting this low reliance on social welfare benefits by non-citizen residents as an indication of 'hard work' and a rejection of social assistance benefits. While the eligibility requirements for healthcare coverage for non-citizen residents are fairly liberal—an entitlement which begins after a six month period of legal residency in Iceland—eligibility for municipal financial assistance is stricter, three years in the case of Reykjavík though extenuating circumstances are often considered. Even though few non-citizen residents receive these benefits, there is nevertheless a quiet discourse which still criticizes the provision of municipal financial assistance for 'foreigners.' I cite below an excerpt from an interview I conducted with a case worker from the municipal social services of Reykjavík who noted these feelings among some of her colleagues. But she also offered further insights into how economic migrants often establish roots while they are working in Iceland and are sometimes forced into difficult circumstances.

People are critical of immigrants receiving assistance from us, including people from this office. They will complain that they are getting free money and free housing. But the fact is that less of a percentage of immigrants are receiving this assistance in relation to Icelanders. Most immigrants come to Iceland to work and most of them come here [to social services] because their employer has decided to lay people off because of changes in the work place, not because they were fired or are lazy or something like that. If they [migrant labourers] lose their work permit they also lose their right to unemployment, but they still have a resident permit so that's why they come to us....I hear stories from the immigrant community that you will be deported right away, either from losing your job or receiving assistance. But that is not true. Útlendingastofnun [Icelandic Directorate of Immigration] does a good job and they evaluate each case carefully. For example, they will consider if people have children here who are in school. But once children reach 18 they must show that they can support themselves.

This fear of deportation may be a factor that makes the assistance offered by the charity complex a preferable alternative for non-citizen residents to that of the formal assistance programs. My own residency permit also had to be renewed on a yearly basis. As a student I was required to provide evidence of financial means of support, proof of housing and reasons for being in Iceland. When I renewed this visa for the second year of my stay I was also required to obtain documentation from the municipal social services of Reykjavík proving that I did not receive any financial assistance during the previous year of my stay. When I mentioned this to the case worker in the interview above she was surprised but was dubious as to whether this would be a legally defensible reason for denying the renewal of such a permit. However, had I received financial assistance I could not see this being a factor that would strengthen my application and I could understand why non-citizens may prefer a non-official approach to receiving assistance such as through charities.

Many of the stereotypes of the 'hard working' immigrants were held by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and contributed to how they were viewed as potential clients of their charitable services. As mentioned above, these clients were often seen as economic migrants who came to Iceland temporarily to make money to support family back home. Certain groups of 'foreigners' were seen as hard working (*duglegur*) but they were held to possess a number of other positive traits such as financial prudence, cleverness and ingenuity. They were also perceived to be immersed within dense and mutually supporting kinship networks within Iceland, which extended back to their point of origin. Some staff members also expressed the belief that these support networks extended to other immigrants within Iceland who shared membership in particular national, ethnic or religious groups. One spring day there was a notable rush of clients towards closing time. One staff member pointed out that many of them were 'foreign women' and made a hand motion to indicate the hijab headscarf worn by some Muslim women. She continued that she believed that this particular influx of clients that day was the result of word of mouth information which had spread among the information networks of these women about the recent shipment of new shoes that the committee was beginning to distribute that day. I did see one fairly regular client that day who I knew was from Iran but I was also aware that there were Muslim clients from across North Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia. Given the potential for national, ethnic and sectarian divisions I remained dubious as to the extent of these networks among Muslim immigrants in general within Reykjavík, but it appeared that some of the staff were convinced that they existed in a comprehensive manner.



But many of these normally positive characteristics—such as mutually supportive networks, strong work ethics and financial prudence—worked against the claims of immigrants for needing assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. In many ways, this set of positive traits ascribed to ‘foreigners’ by the staff were the inverse of those ascribed to their Icelandic-born clients. Aside from the clients who suffered a personal tragedy, the elderly or visibly disabled, many of the Icelandic-born clients were perceived as lacking in ‘social’ or ‘cultural capital,’ to borrow a set of concepts from Pierre Bourdieu (1997 [1977]). The staff viewed many of these clients as having difficulties in managing their finances or their lives and lacking certain skills and knowledge in order to be successful in terms of the larger society. These views were shared as well by the officials I spoke to from other charitable organizations within the city.<sup>9</sup> This was a common theme among the clients I spoke to as well in which they would often draw a distinction between themselves and their structural difficulties with ‘those people’ (*þetta fólk*)<sup>10</sup> who were poor because they were held to be incompetent—echoing shades of the enduring distinctions between the ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ poor and the discretionary distribution of aid that has long influenced the practice of charitable assistance. Addiction issues often fell into this category and were seen as the result of personal failure and the money used for alcohol, drugs, gambling as well as cigarette smoking were often included under the rubric of ‘wasting money.’ These criticisms were not normally applied to ‘foreign’ clients and especially not to the categorical epitome of industriousness and financial prudence, ‘Asian’ migrants.

Another key suspicion placed upon the Icelandic-born clients by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd was that they lied about or hid their marital status in order to

exaggerate the precariousness of their economic situations. But the staff would routinely detect their prevarications either through consulting the online national registry, through personal gossip networks, or through the information provided by other clients. Some clients did not even have the wherewithal to visit at different times than their spouse or partner when claiming to be single. All the interviewer would often have to do to detect this in these cases was to ask the simple question to both of them: 'are you together?' But in my experience the staff generally did not think that most of their Icelandic-born clients worked fulltime, either because of old age, illness, physical or mental infirmity, or the belief that some of them lacked the skills necessary to obtain and hold steady employment, though there were some suspicions about particular individuals who were believed to be working 'in the black' (for unreported income).

The 'foreign' clients, in contrast, were often believed to be married, whether or not their spouse was with them in Iceland, and the associations between 'foreigner' and 'worker' were quite strong. Perceived as competent 'economic migrants' who were in Iceland to work, the staff were generally perplexed as to why they appeared at Mæðrastyrksnefnd looking for assistance. The staff were aware that many foreign migrants worked in jobs that paid very little compared to the normative standards of the larger society. At times intermediaries such as employers would attest to the veracity of their income and employment claims. One particular incident which re-focused my attention upon the plight of migrants among the clients was a phone call from a doctor from an area hospital who called Mæðrastyrksnefnd out of concern regarding a maintenance worker from the hospital who was from Eastern Europe, describing her situation and asking for assistance on her behalf. The belief that many 'foreign' clients

were lying about their financial situations was not usually based on the view that they were generally misreporting their often meagre income amounts to the committee, but the perception that these immigrant clients pooled their resources among immediate family and extended kinship networks and were collectively better-off than their Icelandic-born counterparts. It was pointed out to me that it was learned that some of their 'foreign' clients not only worked but held multiple jobs. There were certain cases where the staff were able to verify the incomes or marital statuses of particular immigrant clients they were suspicious of, either through official channels or through the wide-reaching and complex personal networks typical of Iceland, and what they learned proved to be contrary to the information provided by some of their clients. But these anecdotal incidents more often than not influenced the staff's perceptions of immigrant clients in general than they spoke to demonstrable patterns of behaviour. Simply, no comprehensive data existed which demonstrated the extent of the divergence between actual and reported incomes and marital statuses among their clients, Icelandic-born or otherwise. However, a small number of notable examples can have a profound impact upon the perceptions of certain 'groups' which in turn help to inform and sustain hegemonic views.

Regarding one case in particular, a staff member had learned that one such client worked both a day job and held a night cleaning position as well. Perplexed as to why someone would need to come to a charity while working two jobs this client had replied that she sent most of her money home to support her family. Working a fulltime job while asking for charitable assistance was usually seen as suspect for the clients in general, unless evidence could be provided attesting to low income levels; working multiple jobs and still asking for help was seen as simply out of the question. Furthermore, as far as this

staff member was concerned, Mæðrastyrksnefnd was an agency dedicated to assisting needy people within Reykjavík and not outside of the city, let alone outside of the country. I have seen this municipal residency rule applied to all of the clients in general, though like all the criteria used there were sometimes exceptions made. One particular case which caught my attention was that of an Icelandic-born client who was told not to return because she lived in Mosfellsbær, a nearby but separate town. I found this perplexing as one even has to drive through Mosfellsbær to reach another part of Reykjavík known as Kjalarnes. Another staff member had also quietly criticized the practice of turning away clients from the suburban town of Kópavogur, citing the facts that the branch of the committee which operates there is only open for the holidays and that some of the firms which regularly support Mæðrastyrksnefnd of Reykjavík are located there as well. Given the long history in Iceland of stringent residency rules for poor relief, forms of which appear to be firmly entrenched within the modern municipal welfare system as well, this logic appeared to govern the distribution of charitable assistance from Mæðrastyrksnefnd.<sup>11</sup> Under these requirements the staff were especially not willing to assist those who were impoverished as residents of Iceland while assisting family who were not even in the country.

The fact that some migrant workers sent remittances home did not surprise me in the least. In her study of Filipina domestic workers, Parreñas (2001) notes that the Filipino family structure is often multinational in nature with women and their adult children split up amongst various nations and all engaged in sending remittances home. These kinds of transnational processes are not limited to low or unskilled labourers from underdeveloped areas but have extended all the way through the socio-economic

hierarchy to produce what Aihwa Ong (1999) has referred to as 'flexible citizenship' in which working-class labourers but also elites manage their places of work, residency statuses and identities in a number of different transnational contexts. These kinds of processes are increasingly common as the result of geo-political shifts and the nature of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism, intruding as well into the offices of a small material aid charity located in a small city within this sub-arctic island nation of 300,000 people.

The apparent cleverness and competence of migrant workers, particularly those from 'Asia,' were referred to in terms of their perceived strong work ethics but also other subsistence strategies. It was fairly common to see individuals around Reykjavík carrying sacks of empty beer and pop cans and bottles collected from streets or public trash bins. Much to the chagrin of home owners, sometimes one can spot these can collectors rummaging through private rubbish bins as these cans and bottles may be returned to a recycling centre for 9 ISK each, so even 100 cans or bottles will fetch 900 ISK or roughly CA\$16. It is also often said that many of those who do so are 'Asian' in origin. Though I have not investigated the matter in any systematic way this would generally accord with my casual observations in and around Reykjavík, though I have seen all manner of people engaged in these practices from time to time. One day at Mæðrastyrksnefnd during the holiday allocation of 2004, there were a number of bags left outside of the building which I assumed were donations. Upon opening one of these bags they turned out to be a collection of cans and bottles. At the time there was a large family or extended kinship group of Asian clients inside. One woman from this group burst out from the doors to make sure that I was not going to abscond with these cans. This was repeated on another

occasion when a volunteer assumed that these bags were rubbish and attempted to remove them.

The stereotype of economic diligence by 'Asian' migrants extended as well to the belief that they visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd in order to collect goods to sell at the local flea market Kolaportið. This discourse was articulated repeatedly during my research, particularly during the holiday allocation of 2004 when large groups of Asian clients visited the committee on several occasions. But whenever I demanded proof of these allegations from the staff members the only evidence offered were second or third hand assertions that it happened. I just did not see the economic return that could be gained from the time and expenses of setting up a table at Kolaportið to sell used clothes or assorted bric-a-brac collected from Mæðrastyrksnefnd. One day a young man who was fulfilling his community service sentence at Mæðrastyrksnefnd told me that his girlfriend had mentioned to him that "women from Asia" go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for the explicit purpose of selling the clothes they receive at this flea market. Not having worked at Mæðrastyrksnefnd herself, I expressed my scepticism about his girlfriend's knowledge. I asked this young man if he could ask his girlfriend how she knew this, as I complained that whenever I heard this discourse it was always a 'friend of a friend' or a 'cousin's son' or some other distant node on the chain of information who purportedly possessed the first hand information. He agreed but added that he too felt that it was probably "just a rumour." On a following week I asked him about this and he replied with a smirk that it was just as I thought: "a friend told her." This discourse had annoyed me so much that I resolved to visit the flea market myself in order to see if there were any sellers or goods that I recognized. After spending about an hour one day walking up and down the aisles

and studying the sellers and goods I saw no one and no things that I recognized. Aside from antiques, books and assorted junk the rest of the goods were either handicrafts or new and probably third-party sold discontinued consumer goods. I discussed this with the sociologist Harpa Njáls and she grinned wryly when I told her about my experiences. She explained that, when she worked at the charity Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar in the late 1990s, she had heard exactly the same discourse: the clients were selling their goods at Kolaportið. What differed at the time, however, was that it was applied to native-born Icelanders rather than ‘foreigners.’ It would seem that these discourses speak to the concerns about the abuse of charities and that they discursively shift to whichever social group or category is stigmatized or a source of anxiety at a particular point in time. I continued to hear this discourse regarding the selling of goods at the flea market sporadically throughout my research, sometimes applied as well to Icelandic-born clients who ‘took too much,’ but I never encountered any first-hand evidence that these goods were taken explicitly for the purposes of re-sale.

However there was one discourse that I was ultimately not able to dismiss so easily. I was told early in my research by some staff members that ‘Asian’ clients were known to act aggressively and ‘greedily’ when coming to Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I made my scepticism known, as after several months of observation the vast majority of clients, Asian or otherwise, did what was requested of them by the staff. Those who ‘talked back,’ acted ‘rudely’ to the staff or attempted to ‘take too much’ did not appear to fit into any particular ethnic, age or gender category. But after observing and taking part in the Christmas allocation of 2004, I had to concede that there were some elements of veracity to this discourse. The holiday allocation offered additional and higher quality food goods

to the clients. In addition to new toys collected during toy drives at a local mall and some generous donations of consumer goods from firms, included with the holiday assistance were one or two 5,000 ISK (at the time 5,000 ISK was roughly CA\$100) coupons from the grocery chain Bónus, depending upon the size of the family. The staff agreed that these coupons were likely the most important incentive for the clients at this time. The dramatic upsurge in clients during Christmas was partially explained as the result of those who managed to exist most of the year without the help of charity but were unable to cope due to the excessive demands placed upon low income people during the holidays. It was also believed that this offering of goods would appeal to the 'greed' of some who only want to obtain goods for free (see Chapter Five) as well as those such as 'Asians' who would not pass up the opportunity to acquire free or cheap goods as per their reputation for economic prudence. This view was not limited to charity workers. One particularly controversial member of Alþingi insisted to a reporter that "foreigners who go to Mæðrastyrksnefnd for the holidays consider it to be a source of income" (DV 2005a:6).

On the first day of the holiday assistance of 2004 I noticed that roughly a third of the clients could be described as 'Asian' in origin, which was highly unusual compared with the norms of an average day based upon my previous observations of practice. Unlike their Icelandic-born counterparts, these clients often appeared at this time in large family or extended kinship groups, sometimes a dozen in number and multiple generations in depth. This was highly unusual as well, as the clients in general came alone or sometimes with a child or two or a friend but never in such a large group. The combination of the size of these groups, identified as well in terms of their visible



'difference' and general lack of Icelandic, put the staff on alert. I also noticed that the men often waited outside which indicated that the size of these groups were even larger than what was visible inside. Based on my observations I would argue that most 'foreign' clients during the course of the year spoke at least some Icelandic and those who had been in the country for some time were conversant and much more fluent than I. In contrast, for the members of these large groups during the holiday allocation the opposite seemed to hold and many did not even seem to speak one word of Icelandic. Some were turned away for lacking even the most basic identification. All of these factors combined with the general crowding and the staff's frustrations at not being able to communicate with these clients increased the level of anxiety in the room far beyond what I was used up until this time.

I noticed as well a level of what could be described as aggressive behaviour among these clients. Most client-staff confrontations were little more than occasional bickering, with the clients finally backing down and muttering under their breath, sometimes complaining vociferously to me outside or by their cars. In contrast, with these large groups some of these clients simply would not take no for an answer. I was tasked with ensuring that each client received no more than three new toys but many of these clients continued to haggle with me, sometimes returning to bang on the door to insist that they had not received their toys when I knew that they had. At one point I had to lock the door as several clients returned and actually forced their way into the building. One woman began stuffing her coat with cartons of fabric softener while others grabbed more toys before leaving, forcing the staff to momentarily suspend their operations. Despite my growing frustration coupled with the fatigue from working several hours at a stretch, I

found the sight of one normally reserved and dignified staff member shooing away the woman with cartons of fabric softener bulging from every coat pocket to be quite amusing.

I had never seen any kind of behaviour like this before this time and I continue to remain uncertain as to how to interpret it. It is possible that some clients new to the country were not aware of what kind of organization Mæðrastyrsnefnd was and simply heard that they gave away free goods and thus misinterpreted and resisted the staff's attempts to limit distribution. The attempts to haggle and other behaviours interpreted by the staff as brazen could have cultural and social roots of which I am unaware. One retired staff member felt that some 'foreign' clients displayed behaviour and body language that did not match that of the Icelandic-born clients and was thereby misinterpreted by the staff as 'greed' or 'aggression.' She pointed out that many clients of Mæðrastyrsnefnd are somewhat beaten down by years of social and economic hardship and appear somewhat humble by the time they arrive at a place like Mæðrastyrsnefnd. She felt that even crossing the threshold of asking for charitable help is akin to an admission of failure and that asking for help from Mæðrastyrsnefnd is like a "spot of shame on their self-respect." She mused that for migrants from parts of the world where unemployment is rampant and poverty extreme they may not possess the knowledge or the social cues of 'proper' supplicant behaviour when asking for assistance from a charity in Iceland. I also believe that regular clients become aware of what kind of behaviour maximizes their chances of success at this organization, and they often strategically alter their conduct within the context of Mæðrastyrsnefnd in accordance with the staff's expectations of 'proper' behaviour from subjects of charity. At times, some of the clients'

offerings of thanks to the staff bordered on the sycophantic or servile which amused me at times but also made me uncomfortable, particularly when the clients' demeanours would quickly change once outside of the building. But direct challenges to the staff's authority, particularly in the form of the strident refusal to accept their decisions and the forceful taking of goods, was something they were unused to and behaviour that I had not witnessed until this time.

After witnessing this behaviour by these groups of 'Asian' clients repeat itself on other occasions during the holiday assistance, I had to admit that I was troubled by this development. During these chaotic episodes some staff members would make eye contact with me with a look that I interpreted as saying 'I told you so,' in reference to my earlier refusal to accept generalizations of client behaviour based on factors such as ethnicity. I noticed as well that some of these clients attempted to return on repeat occasions but professed not to have come before, sometimes resorting to hostile words when confronted by the staff with evidence to the contrary. At one point one staff member sought me out in the back while I was breaking down cartons for the garbage. She exclaimed: "Now I don't want to be a racist but you saw what happened with these people, they were even telling us off." She shook her head and walked away, "You can't please some people," and for the first time I had neither the energy nor ability to mount a counter-argument. During another holiday allocation day I noticed a large group of Asian clients whom I recognized from the previous week. I heard one staff member mutter, "Here we go again." There was no question that some of them had received their assistance already and I was disappointed to see them profess that they had not. I always maintained the dangers of making such generalizations but these particular groups of clients were not helping my

argument. I made eye contact with one client I had personally helped on a previous day. I saw the glint of recognition in her eyes but I did not feel that it was my place to alert the staff. I had simply not seen such behaviour before and wondered if these clients assumed the staff would not recognise them. One staff member diligently checked the log books with the clients' identification to ensure that no one received double amounts, but she was unable to keep up with the pace of the distribution by herself. At one point a client continued to argue even when this staff member had documented proof that she received her assistance the previous day. I heard this staff member repeat several times in a mantra-like fashion while holding up her forefinger, "*einu sinni, einu sinni*" (one time, one time) and then switched into English and said "you can only come here once for the *jólaaðstoð* (holiday assistance)." She then held up the signed form from this woman's visit the previous week, but the client continued to argue with her. The staff member finally waved the information sheet at her and said in exasperated English, "Oh just get out of here."

The events of the holiday assistance had left me tired and somewhat cynical. However, once the normal routine was re-established in the New Year I did not see this kind of behaviour repeated, particularly not on this scale. The 'foreign' clients were often those whom I normally recognized and who, aside from isolated incidents, performed their role as subjects of charity much like their counterparts born and raised in Iceland. I was at a loss to understand what I had witnessed during the holidays and never did find out who these large groups were and why I did not see them again. But these exaggerated and at times almost surreal events of the holiday assistance served to explain the negative opinions some of the staff had formed regarding certain demographic groups among their

clients. Whereas the more routine behaviour among the clients during the course of 2005 restored the equilibrium of my views on the matter, many of the staff members continued to exhibit anxieties about 'foreigners' in general which extended beyond their appraisal of the behaviour by a few groups of clients during some isolated incidents. These anxieties spoke to a much deeper concern about the implications of social and cultural change in Iceland and worries about where these changes were headed. At one point during my research, the senior staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd became actively involved in trying to understand the extent of the demographic changes among their clientele as it pertained to immigration and I was asked to expand the statistical research I was conducting on their behalf to 'count the foreigners.' This reflected an extension of the general classificatory practices by this organization but was also linked to a larger attempt by charitable organizations in Iceland to become involved in the ongoing debate regarding the cultural politics of immigration. One of the key issues which revolved around the distinction as to who was or was not an Icelandic pertained to language, and another to that of material culture. And again, as with the other factors with which the staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd 'filtered' their clients, issues such as linguistic competency overrode other distinctions when it came to determining who was and was not an 'Icelandic' as well as who was and who was not eligible for charitable assistance.

#### **8.4 Counting 'foreigners'**

As discussed earlier, I was asked by the senior staff of Mæðrastyrsnefnd to analyze the client information sheets for a period of one month in order to see what patterns might emerge as well as to address the question of whether or not it was 'all the same people every week' in regards to the visiting patterns of their clientele. I presented

my findings at a general meeting of the full committee of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in September of 2004. They were pleased about the “good numbers,” as one staff member referred to them, which illustrated the fact that only a slim minority of their clients visited each week. This was seen as useful information in order to counter the charges of dependency or the abuse of charities on the part of their clients. The meeting went well until a question was asked about whether or not my data included anything on ‘foreigners.’ The question perplexed me for a number of reasons, one of which was the fact that the client sheet asked no question regarding immigration status so I did not understand how I could have acquired this information. Another issue was that I had no idea what exactly was meant by ‘foreigner.’ As all of the eyes in the room turned towards me for an answer I explained some of these logistical problems as well as my own personal discomfort at collecting this information, even if it was possible to do so. I also had no idea at the time why the committee would be interested in collecting this information and what it could tell them. The chair of the committee turned to me and asked bluntly if I would analyze the data from the coming month of October and if I would include the category of ‘foreigner’ as well. I paused for a moment and then replied that I would do so on their behalf even though I had no intention of using this information in my own research, hoping that I would be able to talk the chair out of this later in private. I remained confounded as how to construct the category of ‘foreigners’ as per a statistical analysis and was horrified with the thought of the staff confronting each client during the course of October regarding their immigration status. I was not even certain as to who the staff would decide to ask this question and foresaw a plethora of logistical and ethical dilemmas.

I began to pose questions to the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd as to what constituted a 'foreigner' as I attempted to work out the logistics of how to collect this information on their behalf. The staff members generally treated my questions with a measure of mirth, as what a 'foreigner' (*útlendingur*) was for them was obvious, self-explanatory and informed by everyday 'common sense' understandings. Yet as I pressed further with my questions, it was also clear that some doubts began to form among the staff with regards to what they had assumed to be a simple and straightforward category. As I attempted to create with their assistance a statistical category that was ostensibly intended to address the extent to which their clients were 'foreigners,' 'new Icelanders,' or 'immigrants,' this exercise became for me perhaps one of the clearest examples of not only the arbitrariness of such statistical categorizations but the ways in which such practices help to produce the very reality they purport to objectively reflect.

Ian Hacking (1991), drawing upon Michel Foucault's notions of 'bio-politics' (Foucault 1980a) and 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991), has argued that statistics by their nature are not merely objective tools for the purposes of counting. He contends that not only do they have the power to define social problems but statistics have "helped determine the form of laws about society and the character of social facts" (Hacking 1991:181). Further, such methods do not merely provide 'information' but the practice of statistical enumeration "is itself part of the technology of power in a modern state" (ibid.). Hacking is quick to note that not all applications of the emergent reliance upon the gathering of statistical knowledge in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe were inherently 'evil,' pointing out important advances in medicine, public health and the exposition of certain forms of socio-economic inequality that would not be possible without such forms of knowledge

acquisition and analyses (ibid.:183–184). However, Hacking wishes to remind us, after Foucault, of the productive nature of statistics, such as with the modern census, and the ever increasing number and complexity of social categories these censuses produce. Furthermore, statistics also produce ‘norms’ and the violation of these norms provides the justification for a wide range of corrective measures to be taken against the ‘offenders.’ He writes of the modern census: “New kinds of people came to be counted...In addition to new kinds of people, there are also statistical meta-concepts of which the most notable is ‘normalcy’” (ibid.:183).

The notion of an ‘*útlendingur*’ (foreigner) in Iceland is not a recent product of modern forms of bureaucratic knowledge production. Statistics Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands) does not count ‘foreigners,’ as their operative categories in their statistical discourses are of ‘*fæðingarland*’ (country of birth) and ‘*ríkisfangsland*’ (country of citizenship) in order to count the population of the country. The category of ‘foreigner’ (*útlendingur*) in official discourses refers only to those who are not legally entitled to reside within Iceland. But the category of *útlendingur* is also historically emergent and cultural in nature and does not necessarily follow governmental decrees. The label encompasses a range of meanings as well as attitudes such as suspicion. I was told time and time again, particularly by older Icelanders, that I had to put the Icelandic suspicions towards ‘foreigners’ or ‘outsiders’ into context. Iceland was long a rural, intimate and insular society and people were likely to be suspicious about people from other farms, towns or regions of the country. I was also told of the historic suspicion of rural Icelanders towards those who lived in villages or towns, which is also supported by the ethno-historical literature (see e.g. Hastrup 1990). In other words, until Iceland’s development into a



modern and urban society, 'outsiders' were more likely to be other Icelanders than people from abroad. The category of 'foreigner' is also relative and to an extent gradated in that some immigrants may be 'more foreign' than others depending upon which part of the world they originated from or visual appearances.

The label of 'foreigner' can also be seen to form part of the everyday 'common sense' as theorized by Antonio Gramsci, formed out of the folklore of daily experience in conjunction with the knowledge of the specialists (see Chapter Five). The category of 'foreigner' is produced and re-fashioned as the result of the long-standing (though evolving) understandings of 'foreignness,' bureaucratic regulations pertaining to citizenship and entitlements, as well as media discourses which discuss the issue of immigration. The recent discourses regarding immigration in Iceland are notably based on statistics, not only in terms of discussions about the increasing trend of foreign migration to Iceland but also more detailed summations about the ongoing societal changes in these regards, such as a recent report by the Icelandic Red Cross which detailed the national origins of recent migrants (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006b) as well as a variety of newspaper articles which appeared from time to time. One recent example of such that caught my eye proclaimed on the front page of one of the daily papers that increasing numbers of 'foreign' (*erlendar*) women were seeking help at a local women's shelter in Reykjavík (Fréttablaðið 2007:1). It is critical to note in this example that these kinds of discourses often used terms such as 'foreigners' (*útlandingar*), 'immigrants' (*innflytjendur*) or adjectives such as '*erlendur*' (foreign) interchangeably despite the fact that some of the people in question may indeed be Icelandic citizens. Regardless of what the official arbitrators of who or what a foreigner is have to say on the matter, the term 'foreigner' is

complex, emergent and shifting in meaning and pertains to more than legal matters of citizenship or residency. While I was able to note patterns or common themes on which evaluations of 'foreignness' were based, there was never total agreement among the research participants I spoke to as to what constituted a foreigner, whether this designation was malleable or immutable and what were the critical factors. The distinction between 'foreigner' and 'Icelander' was perhaps more apparent in the context of discussions regarding non-citizen labour migrants or very recent immigrants, but this distinction became much more ambiguous when discussing the issue of foreign-born Icelandic citizens and their children born in Iceland. In the discourses of everyday life the notion of an 'Icelander' or 'native Icelander' was very much an emic category, the meaning of which is left to be assumed, unstated or obvious among 'insiders.' Yet when this category was given careful and focused attention, such as with the questions I posed to Icelandic-born research participants, the term appeared to become very unstable under scrutiny and exhibited a range of views on the matter, though certain themes were consistently raised.

Who or what a foreigner is depends greatly upon a number of factors such as length of time in Iceland, ability to speak Icelandic, depth of social ties to the country and so forth. My impression was that for certain immigrants, such as those from Western Europe and parts of Eastern Europe, it was generally perceived that there was less of a cultural divide between 'foreigner' and 'Icelander' than there was for people from other parts of the world. For some people I spoke with, the label of 'foreigner' was something that could be negotiated and overcome; for others it was not. Despite this range of opinion, when I encountered Icelandic-born Icelanders speaking about foreigners or

reading media accounts I very much got the sense that the meaning of the term was obvious and self-evident for them. In contrast, I was never entirely sure if 'foreigner' applied to people visiting Iceland, people who have only lived there for a short time, or even people who have resided in Iceland for a majority or all of their lives but who were nevertheless 'marked' by ethnicity in some way. This confusion was even more evident when I began to discuss with the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd what they meant by 'foreigner' in terms of the information they planned to collect.

After the meeting in 2004, discussed above, I hoped that the request to help the committee 'count the foreigners' in a statistically-based project would be forgotten. Admittedly, I was quite curious to see where this would lead but I also saw the exercise as fraught with ethical and logistical dilemmas which I hoped to avoid. Shortly after this meeting the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd resigned and, in the wake of the ensuing re-organization of the committee which followed, I assumed the issue of 'counting foreigners' would be dropped. Unfortunately the rest of the senior staff members were also keenly interested in this issue and asked again that I produce analyses relating to 'foreign' clients. It was apparent that the category of 'foreigner' was self-evident to the staff but I complained that it was not obvious to me. I objected that the term 'foreigner' was much too vague and asked whether they wanted to know the statistical differences between the ratio of their clients who were Icelandic-born citizens, citizens born outside of Iceland, or non-citizen residents. One staff member explained that they wanted to know how many of their clients were, for example, from Poland, Thailand, the Philippines and so forth and rattled off a number of other nationalities or places of origins known among their clients. I conceded that the operative category would then be 'nation

of birth' rather than 'foreigner,' adding that this would be possible aside from one glaring difficulty: how would the staff obtain this information apart from directly asking the clients and, even more importantly, *who* would be asked this question and on *what basis*? Another staff member nodded gravely during a discussion of this matter and agreed with me that the question would be insulting to those who have lived in Iceland for some time and become citizens. My suggestion of asking all clients this question in a blanket matter in order not to discriminate was met with a measure of mirth intertwined with scorn, as in their view it would be absurd to ask native Icelanders as to their nation of birth, even though some clients whom the staff perceived unambiguously as 'Icelandic' may indeed have been born outside of the country and have one non-Icelandic parent.<sup>12</sup> I suggested that we were then at an impasse until one senior staff member decided that the staff will ask those who "do not speak Icelandic well." This suggestion was generally accepted and it was decided that the staff would annotate 'nation of birth' at the top of each client information sheet, the omission of which was to be treated by me as 'Iceland' when I recorded the data. I still remained dubious about this both from an ethical as well as an academic perspective. Yet this senior staff member's decision to base 'foreignness' upon the issue of language was not surprising to me and it was a logical choice in this context.

During the entire course of my fieldwork there was an on-going and low-level effort by the staff to remind each other that they needed to speak to me in Icelandic. While my routine and mundane task-related interactions with the staff were largely in Icelandic, we often shifted into English when discussions turned to more complex issues. The staff were aware that my wife is Icelandic, that I wanted to and was interested in learning the language and that I might be planning to settle in the country. The staff

regularly chided one another when they spoke English to me—gentle criticisms that were also voiced to my wife for speaking English to me at home on the occasions when she accompanied me to Mæðrastyrsnefnd. The admonition to speak to me in Icelandic was partly to assist me in building my language skills. But with a few staff members I felt that there were some issues which nevertheless pertained to concerns about preserving the linguistic and cultural integrity of the larger society as the result of immigration. The factor of language was indeed intertwined with a number of issues of cultural politics.

Icelandic is hardly a world language and the vast majority of its speakers are confined to Iceland. Such a restricted language with such a limited number of speakers unsurprisingly results in efforts to preserve the language and to guard against perceived threats to its existence. The concerns regarding the preservation of the language are not without some merit, but the desire to preserve it is clearly done for more reasons than the utilitarian purposes of communication. The Icelandic language and literature have long played key roles in Icelandic cultural politics, nationalism and identity. Concerns about the purity and preservation of Icelandic have been documented in texts as early as 1609 (Karlsson 2000:157). Closely related to the issue of language is the importance of Icelandic literature, particularly the sagas. Most of the major sagas were written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the events they referred to took place during the settlement period between 870 and 930 and up to the conversion to Christianity around the year 1000, or focused on the end of the Commonwealth period (Pálsson 1992a:1). Denmark possessed many of the original saga manuscripts since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, partly the result of the efforts by the Icelandic scholar Árni Magnússon who was fearful of the storage conditions in Iceland at the time and moved some of the documents to Copenhagen

(Pálsson 1995:13). Icelandic nationalists lobbied for their return which was challenged by Danish as well as Norwegian and Swedish scholars who argued that the sagas were not 'Icelandic' but represented the work of a common Nordic heritage. The original saga manuscripts were eventually returned over a period of 25 years beginning in 1971 and concluding in 1996 (ibid.:14). The sagas are of symbolic importance as objects themselves beyond the narratives contained within their pages. In my experience it was far more common to see copies of the sagas displayed prominently on bookshelves in Icelandic homes than to actually see people reading them. Sizemore and Walker describe the books as "a kind of 'required' interior decorating scheme for Icelandic homes" (Sizemore and Walker 1996:208). But reading the sagas is a required part of any Icelandic child's education for some rather obvious reasons, which is I why I found the Icelandic Red Cross's criticism of the Icelandic education system's emphasis upon their national literary canon somewhat perplexing (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006b:21). Even as an outside observer of Icelandic society, I would expect nothing less given what I have learned about the importance of the Icelandic language and literature for nationalist interests.

Karlsson (2000) points out that the language spoken by the original settlers in Iceland and the Norse<sup>13</sup> spoken in their former home regions did not exist as separate languages and were in fact indistinguishable from the period of the settlement up to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Karlsson 2000:62). The linguistic changes that occurred after this time were generally more phonetic than orthographic, but significant enough so that Icelandic could no longer be considered to be Norse, and even less so Danish, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century when the term Icelandic (*islenska*) emerged (ibid.:105). Karlsson argues that the linguistic

divergence between Icelandic, Norwegian and Danish signalled a growing cultural rift between Iceland and the other Nordic ethno-political regions and served as an important socio-linguistic boundary marker. He writes, "Instead of being predominantly connected through a common language, as in the Viking Age and high Middle Ages, Icelandic society was now, together with its geographical remoteness, distinguished mainly by its language" (ibid.). Historically, competence in Icelandic was one basic criterion for foreigners to be able to settle in Iceland. Language here operated as a socio-linguistic marker between outsider and insider as well as offering a method for inclusion in the larger society. In the past, as also seems to be the case today, this barrier of identity seemed to have been crossable, at least in terms of tolerance if not acceptance, if foreigners (*útlendingar*) achieved a certain level of competency in Icelandic.<sup>14</sup>

Given that the language came to play such a significant role in the construction of Icelandic identity it is not surprising that a movement emerged, at least among the educated elite, to preserve the language and to defend it from foreign incursions. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century the Bishop Guðbrandur hired an Icelandic scholar, Arngrímur Jónsson, to write and publish works to correct continental European misconceptions of Iceland. Jónsson produced what Karlsson calls the "manifesto of Icelandic patriotism" (Karlsson 2000:157), the *Crymogæa*, in 1609 which dealt with material from the sagas in an arguably proto-nationalistic light. Jónsson also dealt explicitly with the issue of language. In the *Crymogæa*, "the idea that Iceland has preserved the pure common Nordic language, which should therefore be kept free of foreign words, is expressed here for the first time" (ibid.). This notion of the uniqueness and historical significance of Icelandic had a considerable bearing on the construction of Icelandic identity and nationalist politics. In

the *Crymogæa*, Jónsson was concerned most specifically with the influence of the Danish language, and to a lesser extent German, on Icelandic (Pálsson 1989:122). The purity of Icelandic later became an “ideological weapon” in the push for independence from Denmark. “Purism sought to revive ‘uncorrupt’ Icelandic, to modernize the Icelandic vocabulary, and to uproot Danish influence” (ibid.). Once Iceland achieved independence from Denmark, the task placed before nationalists was to guard against any future incursions to the language and culture. The increasing dominance of English, particularly through technology and mass media, came to replace Danish as the key linguistic intrusion upon the language. When Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was elected as the president of Iceland in 1980 she took up a campaign in the spirit of the Icelandic trinity of identity “*landið, tungan og þjóðin*” (the land, language and nation) (Pálsson 1995:177), to rid Icelandic of foreign influences and her efforts focused specifically on children. Vigdís urged children to avoid foreign greetings such as ‘*halló*,’ for example, and to use the traditional Icelandic forms (Björnsdóttir 1996:120). The Icelandic Language Institute (Íslensk Málstöð) formed in January 1985 and, acting as the secretariat of the Icelandic Language Council (1964) and working with the Ministry of Education, proclaimed itself as the “official body for language planning and preservation” (Íslensk Málstöð 2003). One of the roles of this body is to conceive of Icelandic neologisms for new terms and ideas which enter into the lexicon and to promote their usage. Sometimes these efforts are successful such as with the neologism for ‘computer’ (*tölva*), but other times they are not. The official Icelandic word for ‘pizza,’ for example, is ‘*flatbaka*’ (literally ‘flat pie’). The word did not prove to be popular so the Icelandicized ‘*pítsa*’ became dominant despite



these efforts. Similarly, the Icelandicized ‘*halló*’ and ‘*hæ*’ as greetings have proven to be resilient and are now widespread.

Gísli Pálsson contends that Icelanders often conceive of their language more as an ‘artefact’ than as a tool for the explicit purposes of communication. He writes, “Icelanders tend to regard their language not as an extension of their person or a culturally fashioned tool, but rather as an artifact independent of themselves analogous to their equally celebrated landscape” (Pálsson 1989:123). Echoes of this kind of thinking can be found in the 19<sup>th</sup> romantic nationalism which swept up much of Europe, associated in particular with the thought of Johann Herder. Herder argued that all languages possess a ‘national character’ which has to be preserved and kept free from foreign influences: “To deprive such a nation of its language,” he wrote, “is to deprive it of its sole immortal possession transmitted from parents to children” (Herder, in Wilson 1989:29). The notion of language as an object and transmitted in stasis is not a position that modern linguists would subscribe to, but this form of nationalism which objectifies and conflates land, language and nation is by no means unique to Iceland but appears to be relatively common in nationalist rhetoric in general. Jacqueline Urla (1993), in her research on the construction of Basque nationalist identity, noted much like the case of Iceland that “language was the essence and barometer of Basque identity and the authenticity of the Basque nation” (ibid.:822). In addition to efforts to promote the Basque language through education and cultural events, there was a keen desire to statistically record the numbers of Basque speakers based upon levels of linguistic proficiency. Partly this was done to chart the decline of Basque and to stir nationalist sentiment to defend the language but it was also an exercise in identity construction. The basic ability to speak Basque was

further sub-categorized in later censuses which measured different levels of competencies as well as the extent to which the language was spoken in the home. Urla contends that new demographic categories emerged as the result of this which began to denote “degrees of Basqueness” (ibid.:830).

There are parallels with Iceland here as well, as ungrammatical and mispronounced forms of Icelandic may be seen by some as evidence of the lack of the ‘Icelandicness’ of the speaker: “A person is Icelandic to the extent that he or she speaks *pure* Icelandic, and some are more Icelandic than others” (Pálsson and Durrenberger 1992:303–304). Language plays a key role in these regards as the integrity of many modern nations is constructed around the notion of a homogenous cultural singularity which seeks to maintain a unilingual community of speakers. Herzfeld writes: “A common, if not universal, characteristic of nationalism is the insistence that one people – ‘our people’ – should speak one language” (Herzfeld 1992 :111).

As discussed earlier, many of the ‘foreign’ clients of Mæðrastyrsnefnd were identified as such based upon physical appearances. The issue, however, became even more complex and ambiguous with the case of clients who did not ‘look’ Icelandic but spoke Icelandic and spoke it well. Immigrant clients who spoke Icelandic fairly well tended to be treated more or less as any Icelandic-born clients and subject to the usual suspicions applied to the clients in general as I have discussed earlier. The main issue with ‘foreigners,’ as I was told time and time again, was limited to those who did not speak the language or only had a rudimentary knowledge of it. During a coffee break in the kitchen one day, the topic turned to the issue of immigration. One staff member explained that her greatest difficulty with immigrants was with those who “take no effort

to learn Icelandic.” Another staff member, who has travelled extensively as has most of the staff in general, joked that Icelanders “act like the French sometimes,” as it pertains to concerns about language preservation.

However, I began to wonder about how much first-hand information the staff had as to the experiences of immigrants in Iceland. I can personally attest to the fact that Icelandic is not an easy language to learn; in my experience I found it to be far more difficult than the other languages I have dabbled in, in terms of grammar as well as the rather unforgiving nature of Icelanders when it comes to pronunciation. Unlike English speakers, Icelanders are perhaps not used to hearing their language spoken with various accents and I found that I was frequently misunderstood if I substituted an incorrect vowel or, as a native speaker of English, made the common mistake of placing the primary stress on the second or third syllable of a poly-syllabic word rather than the first as is the norm in Icelandic.<sup>15</sup> The common perception that foreigners are not willing to learn the language as a generalization is also somewhat dubious in other regards. As Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (2004a) points out, many immigrants live and work in small diasporas with fellow migrants, particularly in fishing villages if they are working in processing facilities. This lack of immersion in Icelandic is further exacerbated by the availability of the internet, telephone and foreign language newspapers. Furthermore, many migrants in these kinds of jobs simply do not have either the time or energy to attend night classes, even if they are available and reasonably priced. The lack of state investment in comprehensive Icelandic language instruction for immigrants rather than migrant unwillingness to learn was one key criticism in a report by the Red Cross which examined these issues (Rauði Kross Íslands 2006b:15). Another issue, which Skaptadóttir

notes, is that Icelanders who have married foreign spouses often continue to speak to them in English, which is exactly what has happened in my own case. The irony of the conversation I had with the staff about foreigners speaking English in Iceland noted above is that this particular conversation was itself conducted in English. Perhaps the lack of social distance between the staff and myself combined with the knowledge that I was married to an Icelandic, was interested in Icelandic culture and history and attempted to speak the language as best I could absolved me from most of the criticisms levelled against their migrant clients.

Many migrants do indeed attempt to learn the language. I routinely observed the children of immigrant clients at Mæðrastyrsnefnd, most likely born or at least raised in Iceland, translate on behalf of their parents. I noticed that the language institute where I took Icelandic instruction offered courses taught in a number of languages such as Tagalog, Thai and Polish. However, as Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir relayed to me, what many Icelanders do not seem to understand is that this is often done for utilitarian reasons. She explained to me that her immigrant research participants often noted that they wanted to learn Icelandic so they could communicate with doctors, bosses, teachers and government agents. In contrast, Icelanders appear to assume that immigrants want to learn Icelandic to become 'Icelanders' and to appreciate the sagas and history and so forth. Unnur continued that Icelanders often see the bestowal of the identity of Icelandic as some kind of 'gift' upon migrants and are perplexed with the idea that migrants want to live peacefully and have decent lives for their children in Iceland but do not desire the replacement of their ethnic identity with another, indeed even if such is possible. It seems from my experiences that the retention of non-Icelandic ethnic identities was viewed negatively as

either an unwillingness to assimilate or a rejection of Icelandicness. There was a distinct lack of appreciation for the complex ways in which ethnic identity is constructed, ascribed and negotiated. The demonstration of proficiency in Icelandic served to lessen the staff's anxieties about certain migrant clients to an extent, but I seriously question the assumption that linguistic competence in Icelandic by immigrants is itself equitable with or an indication of ethnic assimilation. The ambiguous relationship between Icelandic proficiency, identity, ethnicity and citizenship as well as 'racial' issues was something that I had to directly confront when I was asked by the staff in early September of 2004 to 'count the foreigners.'

In October of 2004, the staff began to collect information on their clients in terms of their national origins by appending this information to the top of the client information sheets. The agreement was that I would collect these sheets and produce a statistical report on their clientele for that month which, this time, included the category of 'national origin.' As mentioned earlier, I remained anxious about this exercise as well as dubious about the results. I remained concerned both from an ethical as well as an academic perspective on what bases the clients would be asked as to their original national origins. Regarding the integrity of the information, it was apparent to me that the clients who 'passed' for Icelandic would not be asked this question and therefore the results would be flawed as they would not include a number of clients who may indeed have been born outside of Iceland. More importantly, I was concerned about how some clients might react if they were asked as to their national origins if they perceived themselves to be Icelandic.

As per the staff's operative category, roughly 10% of their clients appeared to have been born outside of Iceland, though for the reasons stated above this number may be a little higher in actuality. Out of the 85 clients the first week of October, for example, nine were recorded as born outside of Iceland but another three had names that were clearly not Icelandic. In these cases the staff did not annotate the nation of birth of the clients. I surmised that it may have been due to an oversight but it was also possible that these clients were born in Iceland or else spoke the language so fluently that they were not asked this question.

Despite the fact that it rendered these findings flawed and of dubious value in terms of accurately recording the number of their clients who were born outside of Iceland, I was nevertheless intrigued to observe how the category of 'foreigner' was applied by the staff in practice. During the period of the recording of these data, I would present various hypothetical scenarios to the staff to see whether or not they would class the person in question as 'Icelander' or 'foreigner.' I presented these questions as relating to the statistics I was collecting on their behalf but in intention it was also an exercise which probed their understandings of what it means to be an Icelander. As a result of responses to these questions, I devised a rough ethnographic model with which I attempted to anticipate whether the hypothetical person in question would be perceived by the staff as an 'Icelander' or a 'foreigner.' Clearly the category of 'foreigner' was not related only to citizenship or legal residency. This model or rough equation primarily considered the factors of proficiency in Icelandic (itself a subjective and not clearly defined estimation), length of time in the country (the longer the time the stronger the claim), and the establishment of 'roots' (such as a permanent job, citizenship, children

born in Iceland or attending school in Iceland); all of these criteria seemed to approximate the estimation of 'Icelandicness' from the point of view of the staff. Once I achieved a rough approximation of how the staff decided who was a 'foreigner,' though there were of course a range of views in practice, I then turned to the question of 'why' it was important to know how many 'foreigners' asked for help as well as the further implications of screening the clients in terms of 'foreignness.' One factor to consider is that these measures paralleled the efforts by modern states to count, measure and 'know' their citizens through statistical methods as a central way through which the populaces of modern nation are governed, problems are managed, and subject positions are produced and enforced.

One way Mæðrastyrksnefnd attempted to bring the plight of widows and single mothers to the attention of the Icelandic public in the late 1920s was through survey work which collected information as to the reason why these women were badly situated as well as how many of them there were. As Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other similar charities began to keep track of their clients, they also began to bracket their clients into various demographic categories. One effect of this, as discussed earlier, is that the ways in which certain categories are targeted for assistance often, by intent or effect, act to exclude individuals or categories of people. But there are further social and political implications as charities, as well as state agencies, may draw attention to certain categories at the expense of others, in turn defining some as 'problems' that need addressing as well as suggesting the range of options available for dealing with these issues. The collection of statistical information by states as well as non-governmental agencies does not reflect

some underlying demographic reality waiting to be counted but depends largely upon how these categories are defined, how they are counted and for what purposes.

Leibler and Breslau (2005) present a somewhat extreme example of the Israeli census of 1948. During the conducting of a blitz census by the emerging nation-state of Israel, all of those who were not counted and registered as citizens, acts which took place simultaneously within a seven hour period, were not classed as Israeli citizens and lost certain political and property rights. Of course the majority of those who were not counted were Palestinians who had fled Israeli occupied areas during the fighting. This is perhaps an extreme example but offered to suggest that counting people in terms of 'us' and 'other,' whatever the operative categories in question are, is never an apolitical activity; these activities are 'productive' in the sense described by Foucault and expanded upon by other scholars. Jacqueline Urla (1993) argues that statistics are "technologies of truth production" (Urla 1993:819). Not only do the acts of counting, sorting and classifying help to bring certain categories into social existence, "Who or what gets counted, by whom, and for what purposes are questions of immediate consequence to the distribution of economic and political power and to the experience of everyday life in modern civil society" (ibid.). The work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to 'count foreigners' is similarly a process through which both the categories of 'foreigners' as well as 'Icelanders' are both negotiated and defined, and it thereby plays a role in how resources are allocated. As such, the collection of demographic data is itself not a neutral activity but an act of bio-power on the part of the state and its agents of liaison through which to know and subsequently govern the population.



Statistics Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands) draws upon the operative categories in their statistical discourses of '*fæðingarland*' (country of birth) and '*ríkisfangsland*' (country of citizenship) in order to count the population of the country. As far as the state is concerned, those who are legally entitled to reside within Iceland are either non-citizen residents or else citizens. The category of 'foreigner' (*útlendingur*) in official discourses refers only to those who are not legally entitled to reside within Iceland. The legal distinction itself primarily has value in terms of the rights which this designation confers to some and which are withheld from others. As Leibler and Breslau (2005) note: "there can be no inclusion without exclusion; the rights of citizenship acquire their value only because they are denied to non-citizens" (Leibler and Breslau 2005:884). However, 'foreigner' is also a category of everyday life and as such is often used to describe those who may indeed have a legal residency status within the country. Even the granting of citizenship, normally possible after seven continuous years of residency in the country coupled with 150 hours of Icelandic instruction or passing a language test, does not necessarily absolve one of being a 'foreigner' in the eyes of some members of the public. The overall emphasis upon migrants learning the language and assimilating is undertaken partly for utilitarian purposes, partly for the purposes of preserving the culture and language, but partly in regards to the overall nationalist project. Many modern states, not only Iceland, are preoccupied about citizens who may hold allegiances elsewhere. As Rodanthi Tzanelli (2006) writes of Greece but with applicability elsewhere: "Even when the state grants citizenship to non-indigenous individuals it aspires to turn them into 'naturalized' citizens" (Tzanelli 2006:31).

Unlike the official position of nations such as Canada, the creation of a multi-ethnic or multi-cultural society does not appear to be a goal of the Icelandic state. The de facto position seems to be that of the assimilation of migrants, though this is also subject to interpretation. The lack of providing comprehensive or even free Icelandic language instruction to migrants sends ambivalent messages about the state's commitment in this regard. The staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd did play their supporting roles in assisting with assimilative goals, albeit in some informal and sporadic ways. One staff member in particular, Hrefna (pseudonym), was known to be rather firm in dealing with clients. I was somewhat anxious at one point in the late winter of 2005 when Hrefna was tasked to assist with the tables which were normally my responsibility. Given her reputation for not tolerating clients who 'took too much,' I was worried that she would interfere with my attempts at building rapport with certain clients by allowing them access to additional goods which I sometimes set aside or hid in drawers for them. Aside from a few minor disagreements, and one specific confrontation, things went rather well between us. Despite Hrefna's reputation for being gruff and abrupt with the clients I also noticed that she applied this treatment fairly and evenly. Regardless of age, gender, 'foreignness' or any other category used for clients, in my observations this staff member treated all clients equally and ensured they had fair access to the goods. In retrospect she was even more fair than I was, given that I set aside certain goods for my 'favourite' clients though I made all attempts to meet client requests. However, one incident in particular regarding Hrefna's behaviour towards one such 'foreign' client surprised me.

One day a fairly regular client visited Mæðrastyrksnefnd. She was from a South Asian country but spoke little Icelandic. She interacted with her grade school daughter in

their native language but her daughter would translate on her behalf into Icelandic to communicate with the staff. In my impression this young girl was quite fluent in Icelandic. I had encountered her on the street one day while walking my dog. She was with a group of her native Icelandic friends and they all appeared amicable and spoke together in rapid Icelandic. Aside from the feature of skin colour, there was nothing I could see which would mark her as 'non-Icelandic' in the views of the larger society. While her friends petted my dog and asked questions about him in Icelandic to which I replied in kind, this young girl addressed me in fluent English as she had quickly intuited that I did not speak the language as a native or else had overheard me speaking English at Mæðrastyrksnefnd on a previous occasion. It appeared that, linguistically and culturally, this girl was adroitly managing her various subject positions quite well. Her mother, however, struggled to interact with the staff as she spoke neither English nor Icelandic very well. One day she was dealing with Hrefna about some goods on the table and quickly said something to her daughter in her native language. Hrefna looked at this woman and smiled and said in English: "You should be speaking Icelandic with your children." The woman nodded and gave no visible indication as to how she felt about this but I was taken aback. In my opinion I do not think it to be appropriate to admonish others as to how they should raise or interact with their children and consider it intrusive to do so, especially in the disempowering situation of being a client at a charity where there is little recourse but to accept this criticism. I was also surprised as I have known Hrefna for about a year at this point, and I had never heard her speak English before and had always assumed that she was not fluent. I realized at that point that her not speaking English with me was intentional and designed to improve my Icelandic skills; I was

treated no differently by her from any other 'foreigner' living in Iceland, whether the person in question is a client of a charity or a doctoral student. But I was initially perplexed about her comment because this woman's young daughter appeared to me to be fluent in Icelandic. I later realized that this comment was directed towards the woman and not her daughter; she was suggesting that this woman speak to her daughter in Icelandic in order that she, not her daughter, could practice. Again, there was no official policy regarding the treatment of 'foreign' clients at this agency and this represented the actions of one staff member who seemed to feel strongly about the matter of assimilating immigrants. However, this agency still represents one more point of access for the state and its agents of liaison in order to manage and govern social 'problems.'

Echoing the point made by Leibler and Breslau (2005:884) that in the politics of citizenship there is no inclusion without exclusion, it became apparent to me as well that the efforts by the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd to 'count foreigners' and to treat certain immigrant groups differently under the perception that they are 'hard working' may run counter to the very project of assimilation or integration that they, the state and other agencies work towards. The very practice of denoting some legal residents as 'foreigners' and others as 'Icelanders' shores up and strengthens the boundaries between both of these categories even though the desired long-term effect by many of these agents is the transformation of the former into the latter or to merge the two in a project of mutual integration. The practices by some of the staff members that I observed seemed to suggest that these boundaries are firm and their efforts in some contexts reinforced the division between Icelandic and 'other.' One key example of such was based on the differential distribution of food.

The food offered during the Christmas allocations by charities within Reykjavík reflected the dominant view of what constituted a ‘proper’ Icelandic Christmas dinner. However, the offering of specific food goods could also be seen as symbolically denoting who Icelanders are in contradistinction to those ‘others’ who may not take part in these traditions when at one point a decision was made to offer other goods to ‘foreigners’ during the 2004 Christmas allocation when supplies were running low. The use of food here has definite parallels with the use of language in the nationalist project of Iceland but elsewhere as well. Bell and Valentine note, “Like language, food articulates notions of inclusion and exclusion, of national pride and xenophobia” (Bell and Valentine 1997: 168). Foodstuffs in Iceland have distinctive nationalistic overtones during the mid-winter feast and festival of *þorrablót* when the ‘old food’ or *þorramatur* is consumed and during which ties to Iceland’s distant past, imagined or otherwise (Pálsson 1995:15–16) are re-created and re-forged through the medium of food. But the exceedingly codified nature of Icelandic holiday foodstuffs in general that I encountered suggests that cultural politics underlay many of the holiday feasts.

I found the Icelandic Christmas to be much more structured than I was used to in Canada. Certain foods are to be eaten on the eve of the 24<sup>th</sup> and the dinner must commence at 6 o’clock sharp. In our home there was some rushing to ensure that all the food was ready and everyone was in their holiday finest clothes and ready by 6, at which point church bells could be heard ringing throughout the city as the television began broadcasting church services. This was lampooned on one television skit I later watched in which a harried couple were on the verge of a nervous breakdown trying to ensure that the food and their children were ready for the Christmas dinner at exactly 6 o’clock. The

holiday food assistance offered by Mæðrastyrksnefnd reflected these traditions. Included in the offerings were *rauðkál* (pickled red cabbage); *grænar baunir* (green peas – usually canned and the brand Ora for some reason); a mixture of *malt* (a non-alcoholic malt drink) together with *appelsín* (an orange soft drink—usually the brand Egils); the obligatory potatoes; and meat such as *hangikjöt* (smoked and salted lamb). One day during the allocation we were running low on meat products. I made the suggestion that we should use up the ample supply of frozen chicken to which a staff member shot me a horrified look, as ‘everyone knows you do not eat chicken for Christmas.’ A staff member suggested as a way of conserving the meat products that they will “give the Thais the chicken.”<sup>16</sup> This comment took me off guard. It was not uttered with malice but mentioned as a mere and seemingly innocent logistical point. But the assumption was clear: ‘Asians’ or foreigners either do not celebrate Christmas or, if they do, do not take part in Icelandic traditions and therefore would not object to eating chicken at this time as ‘Icelanders’ would. It struck me as curious that, despite all of these efforts to encourage immigrants to learn the language and assimilate in other matters, these cultural borders in terms of the consumption of food were seen as firm and definite. It was a matter of ‘common sense’ to give immigrant clients chicken and made logical sense in terms of the logistic predicament in which the staff found themselves, but in doing so it did not allow these clients the opportunity to participate as any other Icelandic in these traditions even if they wanted to.

A few months afterwards I presented some of my findings as a work in progress at an informal colloquium with Icelandic scholars at the University of Iceland. During the discussion period it was mentioned that, aside from assuming that immigrants do not want

to participate in these Icelandic holiday customs, they are not given much of a choice to do so. Another participant added that there are Icelanders married to immigrants and that it is quite possible that there were 'foreign' clients planning to prepare Icelandic holiday meals on behalf of their spouses. Another added as well that not all native Icelanders participate in these holiday feasts or in the same manner, either those who are not Christians or those who simply do not eat meat. There was a contradictory tension at work throughout the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's treatment of 'foreigners'; some efforts were made to include but others served to exclude. The rejection by some Muslim clients of the pork products Mæðrastyrksnefnd offered from time to time was viewed with mild annoyance or exasperation by some of the staff members. Yet, as with the case of the chicken discussed above, at other times acts that distanced 'foreigners' from 'Icelanders' through the medium of food were not seen as problematic or unusual. The factors of 'race,' ethnicity, religion, nationality and language were complexly brought to the forefront in some contexts, only to recede in others, much as how the complex subject positions based upon gender or disability were fraught with contradiction.

The last issue I wish to discuss in this regard is some insights I arrived at as to why Mæðrastyrksnefnd wanted to collect data on their 'foreign' clients in the first place. I had cautiously asked one staff member while we were having a coffee at a café one day why she supported the efforts to 'count the foreigners' as well as why she felt that the committee had anxieties about these clients seeking assistance. She explained that she felt that any report I might produce on the matter would reflect her observational insights that only a minority of their clients are not Icelandic-born and that she wanted to be able to cite a quantified figure 'against them.' Confused, I asked "against who?" She replied "the

women at Mæðró” [short for Mæðrastyrksnefnd]. Seeing I was still confused she explained further that some staff members were under the impression that the committee was being assailed by an ever increasing number of ‘foreigners’ and she wanted to dispel this myth. I replied that even if there were significant and increasing numbers of immigrant clients at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, which is likely to be the case if current levels of immigration continue in the future, I still did not understand why this was a problem in terms of the distribution of charitable aid. She replied with a shrug and said simply: “*Fordómar*” (prejudice). She continued that this did not reflect the committee in general but that while there were certain individuals who were opposed to economic migrants seeking help at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, some did not approve of immigration to Iceland at all. Again, there was a measure of irony here as this staff member supported the effort to ‘count the foreigners’ as a way to respond to particular political positions regarding not only the distribution of aid but immigration in general. But at the same time, the very act of counting served to strengthen the distinctions between those who are Icelanders and those who are not in the eyes of the staff. Such an attempt is therefore counter-productive in an effort to fight racism or anti-immigrant sentiments, as the deeper issue is not the amount of foreigners who seek help at Mæðrastyrksnefnd or seek entrance to the country but the fact that ‘foreigner’ or ‘immigrant’ is synonymous with ‘problem’ whether at a charity or in terms of the larger society; efforts to classify the populace into such discrete categories merely serve to strengthen and give credence to these categories and reinforce these distinctions.

The chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd apparently had another agenda with regard to quantifying the number of ‘foreigners’ who sought assistance at the committee. In late



December of 2004, a staff member called me at home to comment on a newspaper article. Aware that I had conducted a measure of statistical work for the committee she called seemingly to find out if I had temporarily lost my mind. I asked what was bothering her and she explained that there were some dubious figures reported in the newspapers of late regarding the number of clients who sought help at Mæðrastyrksnefnd. I explained that I had not had anything to do with some of these specific figures and that I agreed with her that they were distorted. She then asked me if I had seen that day's newspapers. I replied that I had not. She gravely noted that one story claimed that a third of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's clients were 'Asian.' This staff member complained that there was no way this figure was accurate and demanded to know if I was behind it. Shocked, I denied this profusely and added that it had nothing to do with me. When I found the story she referred to my heart sank as it was just as she said: "*Skjólstæðingar Mæðrastyrksnefndar: Nær þriðjungur af asískum uppruna*" (Mæðrastyrksnefnd's clients: almost a third are of Asian origin) (Fréttablaðið 2004j:6). Included was a quote from the chair who reported: "In the four years that I have been here they [Asian clients] have been increasing steadily and now it is so that they are nearly a third of those who come here" (ibid.).

I was amazed. To begin with, according to the data they collected (even taking into account the problems with accuracy I note above), no more than approximately 10% to 12% of their clients on a given month were born outside of Iceland, matching my observations throughout the year. Re-checking these figures for October of 2004, barely 7% of their clients came from a nation located within Asia as broadly constituted—a far cry from 33%. I knew as well that the claim that these 'Asian' clients were increasing

steadily was not predicated on any demonstrable evidence, either statistical research or patterned observation. As I thought about this I realized that the one exception was the holiday allocation of 2004 when it was possible that on certain days as much as a third of their clients could be classed as 'Asian,' but this did not hold throughout the entire holiday period let alone throughout the year.

I diplomatically confronted a senior staff member about this article in the New Year as I did not want to directly accuse the chair of fabricating numbers. I made a similar criticism about this article as I outlined above, to which this staff member replied: "I know that it's not true," and admitted that there are some dangers in publishing unsubstantiated figures. This staff member pointed out that it may have been the case during the holidays but admitted: "it is not like that all of the time." It became apparent to me that there was a strategy to this discourse but this staff member did not want to discuss the matter further so I did not press. Another staff member clarified this for me in her usual blunt way. She felt that reporting these exaggerated figures in the press about Asian clients was "purely political." She explained that the chair is from a political party in opposition to the governing state coalition and was using her position as the head of a noted charity in order to criticize state policies. She continued that exaggerating the number of foreigners who come to Mæðrastyrksnefnd suggests that the government is allowing economic migrants into the country to serve local labour needs but seemingly has no interest in helping them if they need further social support. The last sentence of the article seems to prove her point as the chair of Mæðrastyrksnefnd commented: "I worry about what kind of a life is offered for these people here. I think the government needs to keep a closer eye on it and on what situation they live in. We must have an aspiration

[*metnað*] to make people feel well when they move here” (Fréttablaðið 2004j:6). This was an oblique criticism of the state, probably not apparent to those who are not looking for it but plain for observers of these issues: the state allows economic migration for the purposes of filling low-paid positions but has little interest in supporting these people if they establish roots here but fall on hard times, leaving it to charities to pick up the proverbial pieces.

Perhaps naively, I was surprised at how my efforts towards objective scholarship at times were derailed by these political strategies. This staff member also poignantly commented that the chair’s comments would appease the hawkish members of the committee who would be pleased to equate ‘poverty’ in the minds of the public with ‘immigrants.’ In other words, once poverty becomes seen as an ‘immigrant problem’ it would detract from the attempts to make poverty in Iceland a political issue by linking poverty to anti-immigrant sentiments. She felt that this was a dangerous strategy because if public opinions towards immigrants were to harden it could also dampen support for Mæðrastyrsnefnd from the public if their clients were largely perceived as ‘foreign.’ I felt that this explains why it was the case that material aid charities overall were relatively silent on the issue of immigrant clients yet so vocal about single mothers, the elderly and other demographic categories. The only non-governmental agency which consistently and strongly drew attention to the issue of immigration in Iceland during the time of my research was the Icelandic Red Cross; it is part of a powerful international agency which has the clout as well as the resources to take stands on certain issues that smaller organizations may shy away from.

## Endnotes for Chapter Eight

<sup>1</sup> As noted in Chapter Seven, while many clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were content at having themselves merely recorded as ‘öryrki’ by the staff, other clients rejected this label by appending additional information on the client information sheets which described their specifics, and their subsequent reasons for needing assistance, in greater detail.

<sup>2</sup> Mats Trondman (2006) makes an identical point in contemporary Sweden where he writes: “*to be an ‘immigrant’ is to be a representation of social problems*” (Trondman 2006:433).

<sup>3</sup> The imprecision as to her national origins is intentional for the purposes of confidentiality.

<sup>4</sup> All staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd were aware that I was conducting fieldwork at their organization and I repeatedly discussed issues of ethics with them and prefaced each formal interview with formal statement of their rights as research participants. I have honoured all requests to omit specific material from published findings, which includes both formal interviews and informal conversations.

<sup>5</sup> See Stolcke (1995) on a discussion regarding xenophobia as a more politically palatable alternative to talking about racism though often having the same effect as racism in practice.

<sup>6</sup> My ‘non-Icelandicness’ in terms of visual appearance is something that I have heard commented on more than once. Even though I pressed people to explain, I was never given a list of morphological features that defined me as ‘non-Icelandic’; rather I was simply told that there was ‘something about me’ which marked me as ‘foreign.’ After living in Iceland for nearly three years, I was still spoken to on occasion in English by store clerks even if I greeted them in Icelandic.

<sup>7</sup> The vagueness is intentional for reasons of confidentiality.

<sup>8</sup> Sigríður Jónsdóttir, office manager [*skrifstofustjóri*] for the municipal social services of the city of Reykjavík [Velferðarsvið Reykjavíkurborgar] 2005. E-mail correspondence.

<sup>9</sup> The lack of life skills, particularly at managing money, was often mentioned as a reason why people sought help at charities. But subtly encoded within these assertions was often a sense that, as such, these people shared a measure of blame for their plights. The officials I spoke to from other organizations which dealt closely with those who suffered from mental illness and substance abuse issues, such as Samhjálp and the Icelandic Salvation Army, broke from these views. They agreed that many of their clients lacked certain coping skills but this was a key reason they needed help; in other words rather than as an excuse for their plights or drawn upon as an issue of criticism, the very lack of social capital by their clients was something these organizations sought to address.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase in Icelandic ‘*þetta folk*’ (‘those people’), when delivered in a certain condescending manner, can be used to refer to any marked or marginalized group, such as social assistance recipients, substance abusers or disability pensioners among others. This phrase, of course, is often applied to immigrants as well. I was given a pin by a colleague which reads: “*Ég er ‘þetta folk’*” (“I am [one of] ‘those people’”) that was produced as part of a campaign in order to show solidarity with ‘those people.’

<sup>11</sup> Some charities, such as Fjölskylduhjálpi Íslands and Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar, have publicly distanced themselves from these kinds of residency requirements. In certain cases I have interpreted references in media discourses to these practices as an intentional slight against Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s policy of only assisting those who reside within Reykjavík proper.

<sup>12</sup> I was aware of some clients who themselves or one or more of their children were born outside of but raised within Iceland. These clients regarded themselves and their children unambiguously as Icelandic and I am certain that the staff would concur. In such cases these clients would not be asked as to their nation of birth and I suspect that asking all clients this question would have raised some uncomfortable issues among the staff and for select clients.

<sup>13</sup> Karlsson notes that according to Icelandic texts of the middle ages, Icelanders used the terms 'Norse' (*norraena*) or 'Danish' (*dönsk tunga*) interchangeably to refer to the common language spoken at the time in the Nordic area in general (Karlsson 2000: 62).

<sup>14</sup> See Hastrup (1990b:111–113) for a historical note on this point.

<sup>15</sup> Early in my research, for example, when asked where I was conducting my research I would reply "Mæðrastyrksnefnd," which would elicit blank stares or confusion even though I gained a measure of competency pronouncing Icelandic vowels and consonants in isolation. The problem, I finally discovered, was that I was unconsciously distributing stress as per English norms. The word 'Mæðrastyrksnefnd' contains four syllables: Mæ • ðra • styrks • nefnd. As a native English speaker I mistakenly placed the primary stress on the third syllable. Once I learned to place the primary stress on the initial syllable I found that I was more easily understood.

<sup>16</sup> It must be pointed out that the term 'Thais' was widely used in Iceland to refer to anyone from South-East Asia, as Thais were among the first large-scale group of Asian migrants to Iceland. Ironically over the course of the two years I spent at Mæðrastyrksnefnd I met people from the Philippines, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Indonesia but I never did meet anyone from Thailand.

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

I began this dissertation with some comments from Lára Björnsdóttir, who at the time was the *félagsmálastjóri* (director of social affairs) for the city of Reykjavík. Lára had commented in a newspaper interview on the nature of socio-economic inequality in contemporary Iceland whereby she held that poverty (*fátækt*) was typically inherited as the result of a number of structural issues (DV 2004a:9). What caught my attention in particular were her concluding comments regarding the role of charities in ending this cycle of poverty, or ‘poverty trap’ (*fátæktargildra*) as one often hears it referred to in Iceland. Lára argued: “It does not solve anything to have charitable aid agencies and charity” (ibid.). Upon initially reading this article, I reacted negatively. At the time of its publication I had already spent a few months as a volunteer at the charity Mæðrastyrsnefnd. I was aware of the hard work of the staff of volunteers who spent their own free time in order to help those who were struggling with a number of social and economic issues. I was also aware that a weekly allotment of a few bags of groceries and access to some free clothes and various household goods was not going to eliminate structural inequality within Iceland, but I appreciated the short-term differences this assistance made for its clients. Yet by the time I interviewed Lára a year after this article was published, I found that my views on charity had grown much closer to hers, albeit for some different reasons.

As my research progressed I found that a number of doubts about charity, specifically the private provision of material assistance, began to gnaw away at my initial

enthusiasm. These doubts were fed by my regular observations of the practices of charity, in conjunction with a series of interviews and discussions with the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and their clients, as well as key members from similar organizations, governmental agents and some senior officials. Throughout this dissertation I have stressed that this work is not intended to be an ethno-historic and ethnographic portrayal of Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular, nor is it intended as a criticism directly focused on Mæðrastyrksnefnd, its staff or its practices. Rather, I have framed my analysis of this specific organization as an analytical window upon the work of the charity complex in Reykjavík in general and, linking this up with the broader literature, to critique the practice of domestic private material aid charities within wealthy societies. I also wish to make it clear that the assistance these organizations provide is a needed and, in some cases, even a critical resource and I do not want to diminish the efforts of the staff or to detract from the importance this assistance has for its clients. Additionally, one cannot deny the magnanimous intent of some donors and I do not want to diminish these efforts either.

However, the purposes that charities serve and the effects they produce extend beyond the obvious intent of helping those in need. There are some serious issues regarding the provision of private material assistance that need to be acknowledged and explored, particularly so when it has been increasingly common in recent years in North America and parts of Europe (though not so much Iceland as of yet) to hear calls for a greater investment in the charitable 'independent' or 'third sector' as an enhancement of and even an alternative to governmental social welfare programs (see Chapters One and Three). My initial findings on the logistical shortcomings and the uneven distribution of

charitable assistance mirrored some of those of other scholars who have worked on these issues outside of Iceland (e.g. Behrman et al. 2003; Poppendieck 1998; Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Wagner 2000). But as my research progressed, I began to consider issues beyond that of the material logistics of charity. I found this to be an area that was not often explored in the critical charity literature.

My analysis of Mæðrastyrksnefnd's role as an aid organization in this dissertation has focused on four key interconnected arguments through which to speak to the contemporary practices of charity. My first contention was to argue that charities should not be viewed and analyzed in isolation but that they exist within what I am calling a larger, interconnected charity complex. While it may be popular of late in certain political and academic discourses to refer to charities as forming an 'independent' or 'third sector' in contradistinction to the state and the business 'sectors,' as discussed earlier, I have found through my observations that such terms are misleading and entirely inappropriate ways to refer to charities and how they function. Using Mæðrastyrksnefnd as an illustrative case study, and taking into account that it has parallels with how some other Icelandic charities function and also with how charities operate elsewhere (e.g. Allahyari 2000; Poppendieck 1998; Wagner 2000), the deficiency of the 'third sector' model of charitable assistance became glaringly apparent. Simply, few if any charities exist as independent entities in terms of material, financial and logistical support either as specific organizations or as an entire 'sector.' The very notion of charities existing and operating independently of the state, business concerns and the general public is a contradiction in terms. As I illustrated in detail in Chapter Four, Mæðrastyrksnefnd received financial support from the government of Iceland, the city of Reykjavík, as well as periodic



significant donations of cash for operating expenses from companies, financial institutions, retailers, social development agencies and of course individual donors, even including a little girl who appeared one day at Mæðrastyrksnefnd with her father to donate a handful of coins she had collected. Without this regular influx of cash from a wide range of sources for operating expenses Mæðrastyrksnefnd simply would not be able to function, nor would most other similar kinds of organizations.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd also operated as one node within a complex network through which flowed a wide range of material goods. This organization purchased some of the food goods which they donated to their clients but they regularly received donations of fresh goods from local producers, distributors and retailers, as well as individual citizens who sometimes purchased fresh goods to donate during the holidays. Mæðrastyrksnefnd also received on a fairly regular basis donations of food goods that were not so fresh and close to or sometimes over the expiration date, donated as goods unfit for sale, overstock or surplus from retailers and distributors, failed businesses, leftovers from events and, in one case, the food goods from the galley of a fishing vessel that was in the process of being sold. This situation generally held as well for similar organizations which used a mixture of purchased and donated food goods, often out of simple necessity. There was also a constant stream of donated clothing and household goods such as kitchenware, toys and general bric-a-brac as the result of overstock, discontinued or damaged goods from distributors and retailers. Individuals routinely donated second-hand goods from their households as the result of moving, goods outgrown by children, deaths in the family or the simple desire to clear excess clutter. These donations ranged from a small bag or two

or a trunk load, to a few dozen cartons, to literally a dozen skid-loads or more that were often in excess of what this organization could make use of alone.

As a result of the excess donations they receive, charities often share their own surplus goods. Mæðrastyrksnefnd routinely donated their excess clothing goods to the Icelandic Red Cross and excess food goods to, among others, Samhjálp and Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar. These organizations would often reciprocate at a later date with their own excess goods, which in turn further sustains these reciprocal arrangements. Some of the clients of Mæðrastyrksnefnd also reciprocated for the assistance they received by collecting goods to donate to this organization so that they may be redistributed to fellow clients. I was also aware of numerous instances where the goods that some of the clients collected from Mæðrastyrksnefnd were in turn shared with others in their social networks who were unable or unwilling to seek this assistance themselves. In the process of this complex flow and circulation of goods, numerous organizational and personal links are built and reinforced and the charity complex as a whole is sustained. As such, from a financial as well as a logistical perspective I have found the very notion of an independent 'third sector' to bear little resemblance to the practices which I observed and participated in: charities are structurally imbricated with the state and business concerns, as well as other charities and the general public, and it could not be otherwise. This interconnectedness of charity is one key factor in comprehending the longevity and entrenchment of the private charity system within wealthy societies, despite the fact that such societies often have developed extensive social welfare programs.

My second contention was that individual charitable organizations and the entire charity complex in general becomes entrenched and institutionalized through their

multifaceted functionality and ‘usefulness’ for a wide range of purposes. The most obvious beneficiaries of the work of the charity complex would be the clients who receive this material assistance. One function of charity is that of acting as a ‘second line of defence,’ so to speak, in providing immediate relief in terms of disasters or personal catastrophes where state assistance is lacking. As noted in Chapter Three, Mæðrastyrksnefnd was originally brought into being in 1928 in order to aid the widows and their children as the result of the loss of a fishing vessel and its crew. However, as I have also discussed, the women who were to form Mæðrastyrksnefnd were already undertaking research on the situations faced by widows and single mothers in Iceland and these were concerns that pre-dated this particular crisis. Charities not only deal with temporary emergencies but they routinely deal with the recurring inequalities produced by non-existent or insufficient state redistributive or assistance programs; labour market issues such as unemployment, low wages and low benefits; as well as a number of other issues relating to poverty and social exclusion.

Mæðrastyrksnefnd was formed at a time when social welfare programs in the modern sense were quite meagre and practically non-existent in Iceland. By the time of Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s formation in 1928, a number of charitable organizations were already in operation to meet these needs, some for a number of years such as Thorvaldsensfélagið (Thorvaldsen’s Society), Hjálpræðisherinn á Íslandi (the Salvation Army in Iceland), and Hvítabandið (the White Ribbon), as well as a number of smaller organizations which arose during times of high or seasonal unemployment. It would seem intuitive to posit that the need for such organizations would diminish as Iceland began to develop its state and municipal social welfare infrastructure, but this has not been the

case. There is no question that the governmental social welfare system that exists in the present is a dramatic improvement on the past, yet over the last couple of decades the number of charitable aid agencies has also continued to grow to include such organizations as Hjálparstarf kirkjunnar (Icelandic Church Aid) and Samhjálp and, more recently, Fjölskylduhjálp Íslands (Iceland's Family Help) — all located within a small city within a country which has only recently reached the 300,000 mark in terms of population.

It has been widely noted in the social science literature that Iceland differs from other Nordic nations in lagging behind in its development of comprehensive social welfare programs and for providing comparatively meagre benefits in a restrictive manner, to such an extent that the term 'Icelandic exceptionalism' has been invoked to describe the situation (see Chapters One and Three). It has also been argued that Iceland still falls behind the other Nordic nations and some Western European nations in the provision of social welfare spending and that many low income earners and people who subsist on fixed benefits and pensions have to contend with high rates of taxation as well as high costs of living expenses—all of which act to produce poverty and exclusion (see e.g. Njáls 2003; Ólafsson 1999, 2005a; Ólafsson and Sigurðsson 2000). These cracks within the system, so to speak, continue to produce many of the clients who seek help at charities on a regular basis and demonstrate that not all of the wealth and prosperity of which the Icelandic authorities often boast are enjoyed by all. But I contend that the existence of socio-economic inequality is only one factor that helps to explain the entrenchment of the charity complex within a relatively prosperous society such as Iceland. In order to explain why charities continue to exist and even thrive within wealthy

societies, embedded within global capitalism, we must consider the multiplex functions and interests they serve beyond directly helping those in need.

Organizations tend to perpetuate themselves once established. Charities, like many organizations or institutions, once in place and operating for a number of years begin to include self-preservation among their goals, in practice if not in officially stated policy. As mentioned regarding Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular, the committee is of historical significance for the women's rights movement in Iceland and this fact was mentioned to me, among others, as a key justification for continuing its existence when the organization underwent a difficult transition in 2003. But many of the interests in preserving the committee's existence extended beyond the confines of the organization itself. As discussed in detail in Chapter Four, Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself acted as the nexus for the interests of a wide range of individual volunteers, clients and organizations. During the time of my research Mæðrastyrksnefnd itself was comprised of eight women's organizations ranging in interests from charity, to social justice, to the women's organizations for various political parties, all of which contributed members to act as the executive board of the committee as well as to provide a source of volunteer labour. The members' reasons for doing so varied, ranging from the aforementioned issue of historical preservation, to the continuance of inter-organizational relationships between Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other women's groups that has persisted for decades, to the personal interests of individual staff members and volunteers.

The work of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and other charities also served the interests of a number of other organizations as well as those of the state. Despite official protestations to the contrary, the charity complex in Reykjavík and Mæðrastyrksnefnd in particular are

unofficially drawn upon by some workers within the municipal social services as a resource for their own clients who need additional assistance or do not meet certain eligibility requirements. The ongoing municipal and state funding for this organization attests to the fact that it has its practical uses for the various levels of government but, as I have also argued, this funding and support sometimes speaks as well to the complex political and social relationships that exist between some of the staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd with governmental and business concerns. As I have detailed, Mæðrastyrksnefnd also served as a vehicle for furthering the programs of a number of other governmental and private social aid agencies. I have also viewed some corporate donations, whether in the form of cash or goods, as public relations exercises, particularly when these acts were undertaken with photographers in tow to record the event. All of these activities, among the others I detailed in Chapter Four, contributed to the usefulness of the charity complex for a wide range of interests and cemented its place within the larger society.

While there was a certain measure of generosity regarding some of the donations which flowed into Mæðrastyrksnefnd, I have also interpreted some of the donations that Mæðrastyrksnefnd received as a glorified form of recycling or even waste management. It is no doubt useful for firms to be able to dispose of over-stock, discontinued or damaged goods in a 'socially positive' manner. Individuals also found Mæðrastyrksnefnd to be a useful way to dispose of unwanted goods short of discarding them in a landfill. Poppendieck (1998) has described the practice of the charitable donation and redistribution of 'salvage' goods as a "moral relief bargain" (ibid.:9) in reference to the cultural abhorrence to wasting food typical of many societies. These practices are

commonly viewed as a 'win-win' situation, so to speak, in which food as well as other goods are not wasted; this in turn has the added benefit in that these goods go to help the less fortunate, all of which adds to the appeal of charity and the continued involvement of donors and volunteers.

But from a logistical point of view, it was not apparent to me that the donation of goods through charity was always the most efficient way in which to render aid to the needy. This was most apparent during the Christmas allocation of 2004 which I described in detail in Chapter Four, but it was also apparent on a regular basis considering the extent of the labour involved in receiving, sorting, repackaging and sometimes disposing of excess or unusable goods, in addition to the efforts of the staff to redistribute them and that of the clients to collect them. The staff could not be sure what they would receive from week to week in donations and this creates its own logistical difficulties. A significant portion of the goods the clients received was unpredictable and uneven, in both quantity and quality. I mused that state initiated benefit or wage increases, tax concessions or even some form of monthly cost of living adjustment could render these involved efforts redundant. But the elimination of private aid agencies would run counter to the varied interests at stake and the multiple functions that charity serves. The temporal depth and the logistical extent of the charity complex in Iceland testifies to the importance it has for a wide range of interests and it is an arrangement that does not show many signs of abating.

The idea of charity also shares certain similarities with the concept of 'community,' which I had earlier critiqued (Rice 2002), as something viewed as inherently positive, unproblematic and above all seldom questioned. One of the often

unstated appeals of charity lies in the way in which the direct participation in charity, either as donors or volunteers, helps to assuage the discomfort about the fact that certain sectors of the society have to struggle to make ends meet and are socially or economically excluded from participation in mainstream society. I have argued that certain items are donated to charity for less than noble reasons, but I could not ignore some of the generous expressions of magnanimity and goodwill I observed during the course of my research. These acts ranged, for example, from hand-knitted children's clothes made specifically for redistribution at Mæðrastyrksnefnd, groceries purchased by individuals that were enough for a number of holiday meals, to a collection of refurbished baby carriages which the donor had taken her own time to collect, repair and donate. The outpouring I witnessed of purchased and wrapped gifts for children that are collected each year at Christmas for local charities also indicates at least an implicit recognition of, and dissatisfaction with, the inequalities found within Icelandic society.

But such charitable acts seldom translate into widespread pointed critiques of state policies or economic practices nor do they usually produce results that would affect the redistribution of resources required to dramatically reduce structural inequality. These, acts, as I have argued, are often 'donor oriented' in terms of the praise and attention which are bestowed upon those who give, rather than client oriented, in terms of directing attention to the factors which produce social and economic exclusion. The role of traditional material aid charities and that of anti-poverty organizations must not be conflated or confused. One of the key functions that charities have historically served is that of contributing to the preservation of the status quo through maintaining the poor at the levels of subsistence in order to reduce social conflict and to help to maintain a pool



of inexpensive labour. Charity, by intent as well as effect, principally serves to maintain the status quo regarding structural inequality.

However, with a closer inspection of the historical and contemporary practices of such charities, using Mæðrastyrksnefnd as an example, I have also argued that this functionalist approach to the provision of charitable assistance is somewhat simplistic. The staff of these kinds of charities have at times acted as advocates on behalf of their clients through lobbying legislators, creating public awareness of certain issues and even assisting clients with legal battles, as the early history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd particularly exemplifies. But these charities are heavily imbricated with governmental and business concerns, including through the political allegiances of some staff members themselves, and these ties often inject a conservative tone to the practice of charity. Any challenges to the status quo they produce tend to be muted in light of these allegiances in order to avoid alienating certain donors as well as political and economic allies. I have noted, at least in the case of Iceland, that the most vocal charitable organizations about the issues of social justice tend to be those which are politically and financially strong and are part of larger umbrella organizations, such as the Icelandic Red Cross. The history of Mæðrastyrksnefnd, in contrast, reveals the transition from an organization founded on the basis of the dramatic transformation of the political rights and material circumstances of Icelandic women and children to that of a more traditional charitable organization in recent decades.

Traditional charity mitigates some of the more obvious inequalities produced by the ways in which resources are redistributed by playing a supporting role which lessens, to an extent, the visible material inequities produced by these political and economic

arrangements. But charities are involved in a number of ways in sustaining hegemonic views regarding inequality in Iceland. I maintain that charities play a key role in contributing to the status quo through involving the attention and diverting the energies of their donors towards charitable activities that are not well suited to foment structural change. My third contention was that the involvement of members of the public in the collection of gifts for the needy, donating goods or even volunteering their time teaches moral lessons, especially to children, about goodwill and charity. But this participation also appears to help to render charity, and by extension inequality, as accepted parts of the social landscape and as inevitable and recurring as the passing of the seasons—the charity complex becomes a hegemonic framework through which inequality is explained, justified, as well as normalized in complex ways.

As I noted in Chapter Three, my archival research of the period which coincided with Mæðrastyrksnefnd's formation revealed that stories and media interest about charitable giving routinely appeared during the holidays, particularly Christmas, but then subsided once the holiday season was over. This pattern held during the time of my research as well, in addition to the ways in which the public and media interest in the issues relating to poverty and inequality seemed to be linked to political election periods. Not only were there increases in the television and print media coverage of Mæðrastyrksnefnd and the work of other similar charities during the holidays, but there was a parallel increase in donors and volunteers. But the problems of the clients I knew were not seasonal in nature and there appeared to be little media or public interest in the more mundane, grinding reality of daily poverty and social exclusion. When public interest in charity ran high I found that I was particularly troubled by the extensive

involvement of children with these activities. I observed children as young as pre-school age collecting goods intended for Mæðrastyrksnefnd as part of a school project and these children were in turn rewarded and praised for their actions. I noticed as well students ranging from primary school age through to university contributing their time and energies to help and receiving accolades from the staff for doing so. At first glance there would appear to be little to critique with these actions. But, as I have argued, the repeated involvement of the public with charities teaches lessons about morality and caring but is also an activity which often focuses on the donors and much less on the structural reasons which propel people to seek this assistance. The activities of donating one's time and goods to charity take on a positive spin via the praise bestowed upon the donors rather than stirring resentment against governmental policy or economic practices. The vast majority of the instances of donation I observed were conducted and perceived in terms of general goodwill, caring and in certain cases related to religious imperatives, rather than being an overt response to or commentary on the structural issues of inequality. The charitable relationship between donor and recipient is and remains inherently unequal and one of dependence. These charitable acts, however intentioned, reinforce the superior position of the donors and contribute to maintaining the status quo regarding inequality.

Donating one's time or goods to charity is rendered as a praiseworthy activity which helps people feel that they have made a difference. In one sense they have. But in practice I have found that the vast majority of the donors remain distanced from the clients they assist. At Mæðrastyrksnefnd, most donated their goods during off-hours when the clients were not present and only a very few donated their time as volunteers on the distribution days which would put them into direct contact with the clients; these times

were also generally restricted to the holiday allocations. As such, the 'average' citizen has little direct knowledge of the work of charities and the situations of their clients. The generally limited and often seasonal nature of the public attention on charity appears to have little potential to render the problems which the clients of charity contend with into the form of a sustained political debate about these matters. Another key deficiency of charity in terms of its potential for contributing to a sustained counter-hegemonic attack on the status quo of inequality is that when the attention does turn to the clients at times, they are inevitably discursively construed as either individuals with specific (and seemingly unconnected) problems, or in terms of 'groups' whose reasons for seeking assistance are either left unstated or assumed.

I have found that one of the key questions reporters, students or curious individuals posed to me was that of 'who' goes to Mæðrastyrksnefnd, rather than the more important question, as I saw it, of 'why' people sought this assistance. A common variant of this question was what 'kinds' of people went to Mæðrastyrksnefnd. As discussed, a common practice that coincides with the act of providing charitable assistance is to evaluate and classify the potential clientele as per 'need,' but determinations of such in practice often rely upon a number of factors which may or may not have to do with the underlying lack of material resources, such as residency, gender, age or evaluations which considered behaviour or mores. Charities usually have to contend with limited resources, so rule of thumb guidelines are a useful way in which to limit client demands if the need arises. As discussed in Chapter Six, the staff of Mæðrastyrksnefnd sometimes invoked their history of assisting women and their children to exclude or limit the assistance offered to childless males. But in consideration of public

relations, it is also important for charities to justify their existence and their requests for donations by presenting images of their clients that resonate with the donating public in positive ways.

My fourth and final contention was that charities need to maintain the image that their clients are deserving and worthy of this assistance. In the context of my research it was quite common to encounter doubts expressed as to whether or not many of the clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd or similar organizations ‘really need the help.’ These doubts came from some charity workers themselves, were raised in the print and visual media by people affiliated with certain political parties or by social critics, articulated in online forums, and mentioned to me personally by individuals I encountered in numerous social contexts. These doubts formed part of the hegemonic views regarding the nature of inequality (or the lack thereof) in Iceland and circulated widely. Charities had to address these views and concerns, especially the challenge that they enabled the dependency of those who were perceived to manipulate both the state and private assistance systems to their benefit. One way these views were taken into consideration is through the act of screening and evaluating their clientele before assistance is rendered. I have argued that this is done partly for logistical reasons in order to restrict the demands on their limited supply of goods. But I maintain as well that charities in general have often done so in order to communicate the implicit message that theirs is a responsible charity that does not offer assistance indiscriminately. Certain categories or ‘types’ of people have long been drawn upon by charities as the exemplars of the people who deserve this assistance. Some of the classic historical examples include widows, single mothers, orphans, the elderly, sick and disabled people. These categories of people are often seen as

‘legitimately’ needing assistance and often stir sentiments and evoke the ‘romance of charity’ (Wagner 2000:178)—an understanding which is not lost upon contemporary charities. But as I have argued there are also a number of far reaching implications for these practices.

I detailed in Chapter Six Mæðrastyrksnefnd’s gendered focus which existed from its inception—that of assisting widows, needy mothers and by extension their children both in terms of providing material assistance as well as campaigning for their political and economic rights. This has produced an historic gendered bias to the practices of this organization which, as I have documented, sometimes resulted in the exclusion of single, childless males or their differential treatment. But as Mæðrastyrksnefnd had to confront the complex reality of the need before them in the past as well as in the present, these categories often proved to be fluid, negotiable and were not always adhered to strictly. The demographic range of the clients this organization targets for assistance has also expanded over the years. Disability pensioners (*öryrkjar*) have come to form another key category of clients (see Chapter Seven) and that of ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreigners’ (see Chapter Eight) has increasingly come occupy the attentions of the staff of late, as has a sometimes begrudging recognition that there are increasing numbers of males caring for children on their own or in joint custody arrangements.

These acts of classifying the populace into discrete categories are, following the work of Michel Foucault, ‘productive’ in the sense that they help to bring these social categories into existence rather than reflecting an underlying reality. Charities play a supporting or parallel role as ‘agents of liaison,’ to borrow a term from Foucault (1980b:62), working alongside or in conjunction with state authorities in order to govern

the populace in general or segments of the population in particular. Such activities that Foucault analyzed as acts of 'bio-power' (Foucault 1980a) sought to extend the ability of the state into evaluating, managing and regulating the population in intimate ways, such as through medical examinations, the gathering of statistical data regarding the population and other activities of knowledge production undertaken in order to divide and classify the population into discrete categories for the micro-management of behaviour. This helps make populations amenable to the work of governmental agents, social workers, doctors and a wide range of other specialists. As 'agents of liaison,' charities represent another point of access in these endeavours. While such activities were perhaps more overt and intrusive with regards to charities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the context of my research the charity complex assisted these efforts of evaluation and regulation in a number of ways, such as through directly or indirectly assisting the state and other social aid agencies with their programs and goals as well as through contributing to the activities of knowledge production which fragments the population into social typologies. The routine assessment and portrayal of their clients as the usual litany of the subjects of charity—single mothers, elderly and disabled people being among the predominant subject positions—helps to sustain these 'types of beings' in the public imagination while encoding often unstated explanations for their plights as well as justifications of their need for assistance.

The reliance by charities upon these categories, whether for strategic purposes or as the result of traditional practice, contributes to maintaining a hegemonic framework in which inequality in Iceland is justified, explained and normalized. The association between single mothers, senior pensioners and disabled people with inequality in general

is particularly strong, reinforced each time the litany of client typologies is discursively invoked despite the fact that being a single parent, reaching a certain age or being challenged in some way does not in and of itself produce material need. But these social categories are not only the result of governmental bureaucratic practices or that of efforts of the charity complex. These categories have historical roots and are filled with cultural meaning. They are 'common sense' categories in the Gramscian understanding which exists in the tension-filled position between the knowledge of the specialists and the folklore of everyday life (Gramsci 1999:326).

The presence of certain 'types' of people turning to charities to meet their basic needs is commented on by critical scholars, social activists, charity workers, reporters and some politicians in order to draw attention to socio-economic issues within Icelandic society and to mount a counter-hegemonic challenge to the status quo of inequality. However, such attempts must also confront the historically and culturally situated prejudices and stigmas in Iceland towards those who depend upon public relief for assistance (see Chapter Three)—views which even some of the defenders of the clients of charities share to an extent. While these 'groups' are often portrayed in charitable discourses as worthy of this assistance (and the donations of the public), this tactic has also been inverted by the defenders of the state and its allies to attack charities as contributing to dependency and their clients as unworthy of this assistance. 'Single mothers' (see Chapter Six) or 'the disabled' (see Chapter Seven), for example, are social categories which can evoke the 'romance of charity' (Wagner 2000:178); yet these are categories which also contain a measure of stigma and which can be drawn upon in order to challenge the existence or extent of inequality in the larger society as well as to cast



suspicion upon the clients of these organizations. When invoked in isolation and without reference to specific policies or economic conditions, the routine calls for the charitable assistance for 'single mothers' or 'the disabled,' for example, can produce sympathy and the desire to help but it also produces a measure of suspicion and resentment—particularly so in the context of Iceland where the existence of poverty or even significant inequality tends to be trivialized or dismissed. Finally, the routine invocation of these particular subject positions, even if for a shorthand way in which to describe their clientele, provides the sustenance for a hegemonic configuration through which the subjects of charity become perceived as the *expected* and *normal* clients of private material aid agencies which in turn normalizes the political and economic arrangements that produce structural inequality.

An ethnographic exploration of the practice of charity, not charity presented as an ideal or a romantic vision, reveals that the assistance many of these organizations offer is limited and distribution uneven and at times restrictive. Private assistance is not a right of residency or citizenship, as are state benefits, and the distribution of this assistance is at times discretionary and unpredictable. It has been suggested to me on more than one occasion that it appears that I am arguing that state redistribution via public welfare programs is preferable and inherently superior to private assistance. I would counter that the state assistance infrastructure is not without its serious shortcomings and that it, as Piven and Cloward's (1993) classic work has shown, performs a governing and regulating function which maintains the status quo of inequality as well. The state and allied economic system in advanced capitalist societies are of course based on inequality at home and abroad and the formal social welfare infrastructure as such is rarely if ever

geared towards equality. But in consideration of the logistics of charitable and state forms of assistance, both are systems in which the resources of the citizenry are pooled and redistributed but in the case of the state system this is at least done in recognition of rights and entitlements and usually through the mediums of cash and services. Furthermore, the state already has a social welfare infrastructure in place and possesses the power and resources to make dramatic inroads in addressing inequality and exclusion; what is often lacking is the political will rather than the logistical capabilities as in the case of charity. Unlike the cash benefits provided by the state, a significant proportion of the goods donated to charity are second-hand, damaged and to varying degrees represent the surplus from businesses and households. In the process, certain segments of the larger society are also rendered as 'surplus' by the expectation that they will have to make do with goods that others have discarded. It is not for nothing that the staff members of Mæðrastyrksnefnd I have spoken to have mentioned at one time or another their perception that there is a sting of shame or stigma contained within the receipt of charitable assistance. When a citizen seeks assistance from the municipality or the state via a social welfare program, I would not argue that this is an action that is entirely free of stigma. However, this person is also demanding his or her rights encoded in law as a citizen or legal resident. As the client of a charity, the same person enters into the often ambiguous position as a subject of charity dependent upon goodwill and resources which can do little more than provide limited and temporary sustenance. Simply put, the subject of charity is rendered a supplicant who asks rather than a full rights bearing citizen and/or resident who claims an entitlement. As such, the charity complex is an arrangement that must be recognized and critiqued.

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## Appendix A

Góðan dag,

Ég heiti James Rice og er doktorsnemi í mannfræði við Memorial Háskólann á Nýfundnalandi í Kanada. Ég hef verið að vinna sem sjálfboðaliði hjá Mæðrastyrsnefnd Reykjavíkur í tæpt ár núna sem hluta af rannsókn minni á hjálparstofnunum í Reykjavík. Ég myndi gjarnan vilja fá að taka viðtal við þig um reynslu þína af, álit og skoðanir á hjálparstofnunum í borginni. Farið verður með öll persónuleg gögn sem trúnaðarmál og raunveruleg nöfn þátttakenda munu hvergi koma fram. Þetta er sjálfstæð rannsókn sem hefur þann tilgang að uppfylla kröfur sem gerðar eru til doktorsnema og er á engan hátt tengd stjórn Mæðrastyrsnefndar. Ef þú vilt taka þátt í þessari rannsókn þá vinsamlegast ræddu við mig næst þegar þú kemur auga á mig hjá Mæðrastyrsnefnd eða hafðu samband í síma eða tölvupósti. Ég biðst afsökunar á því að viðtöl verða að vera að mestu á ensku þó ég kunni smá íslensku. Þakka þér fyrir að taka þér tíma til þess að lesa þetta.

My name is James Rice. I am a doctoral student in anthropology from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. I have been volunteering at Mæðrastyrsnefnd for almost a year now as part of my research project on private aid agencies and charity in Reykjavík. I would like to conduct an interview with you about some of your experiences, views and opinions of social aid agencies in the city. Your privacy will be respected and no real names will be used in my research. This is an independent project for my degree requirement and not affiliated with Mæðrastyrsnefnd. If you would like to take part in this research project you can speak with me the next time you see me at Mæðrastyrsnefnd or through the contact information below. I apologize that interviews would have to be mainly in English, though I know some Icelandic. Thank you for your time,

Jim Rice

Email:

Phone:

## Appendix B

**Figure 1.0**  
**Client education level achieved**

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Complete or partial <i>grunnskóli</i> (basic) education level, ages 16–20:	82–83%
Complete or partial <i>framhaldsskólastig</i> (upper secondary education level):	10–14%
Complete or partial <i>háskólastig</i> (post-secondary education):	3–7%

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*Sources:* Analysis of client information sheets: March and October, 2004; April 2005. Mæðrastyksnefnd Reykjavíkur. Note: I was assured by the staff as well as Icelandic scholars that all of the Icelandic-born clients would have received at least some basic (*grunnskóli*) education. The figures above pertain to the highest level of education achieved.

**Figure 1.1**  
**Median client incomes per month**

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Single with no children	74,300 ISK
Single with one child	86,000 ISK
Single with two children	107,300 ISK
Median income greater Reykjavik area (2003)	232,833 ISK

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*Sources:* Regarding Mæðrastyksnefnd: Analysis of client information sheets, March 2004; regarding the city of Reykjavík: Hagstofa Íslands (Statistics Iceland).

**Figure 1.2**  
**Client housing status**

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Rented housing on open market ( <i>leiguhúsnæði</i> ):	42%
Municipal social housing ( <i>félagslegri íbúð</i> ):	36%
Owned housing ( <i>eigin húsnæði</i> ):	15%

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*Sources:* Analysis of client information sheets: March and October, 2004; April 2005. Mæðrastyksnefnd Reykjavíkur. Note: The remaining percentage of the clients (7%) did not provide this information on the client sheets. However, based on my knowledge and that of the staff it is most likely that these clients rented on the open market, lived in social housing, or had temporary, ad-hoc or otherwise precarious housing accommodations. In comparison, in the years 2001–2004 approximately 80% of the nation owned their own housing; further, approximately 20% lived in rented accommodations (Hagstofa Íslands 2006d:5) whereas a combined total of over three-quarters of the clients of Mæðrastyksnefnd lived in rented accommodations.

## Appendix C

### Contents of Christmas Food Allocation, 2004 Mæðrastyrksnefnd Reykjavíkur\*

- First bag:
- 1 can of red cabbage
  - 1 can of carrots
  - 1 can of green peas
  - 1 can of peaches
  - 1 package of coffee
  - 1 package of biscuits
  - 1 kg of potatoes
  - 1 small bag of candies
  - 1 litre carton of juice
  - 1 piece of meat (lamb *hangikjöt*, later switching to either pork *hamborarrhryggur* or *svinahnakki* which were frozen from last week)
  - 1 package of flatbread
- Second bag:
- 1 litre carton of milk
  - 1 bag of assorted milk products (yogurt, *skyr* etc)
  - 1 package of body care products
  - 1 large piece of frozen salmon
  - 1 carton of ice cream (*jólais* – a type of ice cream for the holidays)
- Third bag:
- 2 two-litre plastic bottles of Coke
  - 1 two-litre bottle of either Fanta Orange or Appelsín

\* This list illustrates the typical holiday assistance that Mæðrastyrksnefnd provided to their clients in 2004. While there was some minor variation due to supply and demand issues, the assistance offered during the holidays was fairly consistent. This list in particular was taken from my fieldnotes from December 14, 2004.

**Appendix D**  
**Client Information Sheet**

**MÆÐRASTYRKSNEFND REYKJAVÍKUR**

<b>Nafn</b>	<b>Kennitala</b>
<b>Heimili</b>	
<b>Menntun</b>	
<b>Atvinna</b>	
<b>Ertu í eigin húsnæði, leiguhúsnæði eða félagslegri íbúð?</b> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <span>Leiga kr.</span> <span>Leiga kr.</span> </div>	
<b>Ertu einstæð/ur, öryrki, eldri borgari?</b>	
<b>Börn heima og aldur þeirra?</b>	
<b>Tekjur á mánuði?      Ráðstöfunartekjur á mánuði?</b>	
<b>Hversu lengi hefur þú verið í fjárhagslegum erfiðleikum?</b>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <span><b>Dags. Umsækjanda</b></span> <span><b>Aðstoð móttékin</b></span> </div>	

## Appendix E

### Number of Disability Pensioners (*Örorkulífeyrisþegar*) at at Mæðrastyrksnefnd Reykjavíkur

	<i>March 2004</i>		<i>October 2004</i>		<i>April 2005</i>	
<i>Age</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
16 – 19	0	0	0	0	0	0
20 – 24	0	4	1	2	0	1
25 – 29	1	4	0	5	1	8
30 – 34	1	17	2	11	1	11
35 – 39	4	18	1	17	4	16
40 – 44	3	20	2	20	3	19
45 – 49	6	28	4	20	7	22
50 – 54	8	8	2	14	6	15
55 – 59	0	13	4	11	3	13
60 – 64	7	6	4	6	3	3
65 – 66	1	1	2	1	1	2

### Örorkulífeyris- og örorkustyrkþegar eftir aldri 2003

*Recipients of disability pensions/allowances by age 2003*

<i>Aldur Age</i>	<i>Fjöldi Number</i>		<i>Hlutföll, % Percentage</i>	
	<i>Konur Women</i>	<i>Karlar Men</i>	<i>Konur Women</i>	<i>Karlar Men</i>
<b>16–66 ára years</b>	<b>7,382</b>	<b>4,917</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>
16–24	316	372	2	2
25–34	785	601	4	3
35–44	1,603	1,001	8	5
45–54	1,894	1,275	10	7
55–66	2,784	1,668	19	11

Source: Hagstofa Íslands [Statistics Iceland]. 2004. "Konur og karlar 2004"

[Women and men 2004]. *Hagtíðindi* [Statistical Series]: *Heilbrigðis- félags- og dómsmál* [Health, social affairs, justice]. <http://www.hagstofa.is> accessed February 21, 2005.









