

Co-Operative Metatheatre: An old and unappealing script?

The main focus of the title is for one to take a reflective stance by using Boje's (2002) framework of Metatheatre in order to evaluate the current position of the Lincoln Co-Op. Using this and other tools of analysis, I will draw conclusions and make recommendations in order for the management of the Co-Op to tackle what they perceive to be a fundamental problem in the company's public image and the way that co-operative business should be undertaken; in essence this being a mini-consultancy project.

Initially I will provide a brief description of the co-operative movement, and an overview of the current position of the Lincoln Co-Op (predominantly the retail sector). This will be followed by an introduction of Boje's (2002) framework. Using this, and underpinning with other relevant theory, I will continue by providing an analysis of two plots (refer to Appendix), which encapsulate some contemporary interpretations of the Co-Op retail shop. Finally I will draw conclusions and make recommendations.

The Co-Op: History and Context

The Lincoln Co-Op has been in existence since 1861 with the initial aim of providing quality goods at fair prices¹. Obviously the image of the modern Lincoln Co-Op shop is far removed from that of traditional Victorian England, however, their mission statement still reflects similar values and stances to those followed nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. In 1844 the co-operative movement was first recognised², and it was this that determined the birth of many different co-operative organisations locally, nationally and worldwide and intrinsically, the defining of certain yardstick principles.

It was the Rochdale Pioneers³ who are associated with the early co-operative movement, developing an innovative way of retail trading which reflected their concerns about the social affects of the harsh capitalism and industrialisation trends sweeping the UK and Europe. They

¹ From the *Application for Membership (Dividend Card)* leaflet, available from Lincoln Co-Op stores, 2003

² Reeve D, Brooke C, Henderson J, Williams S (2002?), *The Co-operative Bank Cases Foundation Module, Biography of a Bank*, material distributed in the unit Organisational Learning (unit code MAN 143), the University of Lincoln, February 2003, p 7

³ *Ibid*, p 6-10

had fundamental beliefs in the values of equality, equity and democracy, self-help, self-responsibility and solidarity⁴ and a general social awareness unusual for the time.

Proactively they built a foundation organisation that was (and to an extent, still is) distinctively different from other organisations in that it belonged to its members to meet mutual needs and had an integral social responsibility. The benchmark for the organisation was the introduction of a 'dividend' scheme for its members whereby members received shares or 'divis' according to how much was spent on purchases, and any annual profit made by the organisation was shared out equally. Because the organisation was not profit orientated, it focused its attention instead on local community needs. This is shown through their concern for product quality and fair trading, the promotion of 'education for all' and of equality of the sexes⁵. This overall novel approach to retailing was indeed groundbreaking and this is why the movement was/is (still) often regarded as being ahead of its time⁶.

From a descriptive standpoint, the Lincoln Co-Operative Society is an umbrella for various different organisations and services including petrol, funeral and most obviously, grocery retail (amongst others) within the trading area of Lincolnshire and Newark. Importantly, Lincoln Co-Op still adheres to a modernised set of co-operative values and principles, based on the original ideas of the Rochdale Pioneers. The current mission statement reads:

OUR MISSION – to be a successful co-operative business
providing the widest possible range of services for our members
maintaining quality, value and ethical principles
building for the future by generating profits to develop our services,
pay dividends to members and support our local communities
encouraging customers to become members and to be involved
in running their Society
developing the skills our staff need, to help achieve **Our mission**⁷

⁴ From Information from the Co-Operative Action site accessed from the internet site <http://www.co-operativeaction.coop/> (05/04/2003), the University of Lincoln, UK

⁵ Ibid Reeve D, Brooke C, Henderson J, Williams S (2002?), p 6-10

⁶ From notes from Brooke, C (2003), *Course Handouts for Contemporary Issues in Management (Unit Code MAN 143)*, the University of Lincoln, UK

⁷ Turner, S (2003), *Co-operation and Business*, notes for the unit MAN 143 distributed in the University of Lincoln, UK

The blue or green logos, the standardised shop windows, the co-op branding and the dividend scheme are all modern legacies of an uphill struggle for the company to remain successful in spite of vigorous market conditions, changing economies, changing politics, globalisation, the information age and importantly, shifting social trends. Despite its core beliefs and intended message it is questionable whether or not some age groups even know how the organisation is differentiating itself and the synergy of the co-operative movement. For example, a common misunderstanding is that the Lincoln Co-Op is a supermarket, competing with such giants as Tesco and Safeway. The Co-Op is in fact a convenience store, competing with other local small high street grocers⁸. This is problematic, as customers would then expect the same choice and prices of the supermarkets, impossible for the Co-Op who cannot expect to achieve the same economies of scale.

Even with yearly increases in profit, expansion and membership levels⁹, the Lincoln Co-Op is now contemplating this new challenge; the problem of corporate image and identity. Desperate to dispute the accusation of it now acquiring an 'old and dowdy' image (in stark contrast to the pre-supposed image of the co-operative movement), the Lincoln Co-Op now finds itself having to answer the following questions; What is the current public image of the company? How does the company promote its mission through its deep-rooted values and principles? How can the company unite both its image and values in order for it to place itself in a superior and distinctive position?

Taking a different perspective

With the benefit of postmodern tools of analysis and the creative use of social theory one is in the position to take an unusually reflexive and critical view of the organisation in order to answer these questions. One contends that the main benefit of analysis in this way is that it enables one to see 'beyond the looking glass' of everyday situations in order to raise those hidden agendas, repressed individuals and discourses that intertwine with the structures of organisation and hierarchy. By taking a traditional linear and hard model of analysis, one is forced to 'make situations fit', hence possibly missing out on the complex and rich picture that is closer to reality. Realising that everything is open to interpretation is the key to making sense of it all.

⁸ From a discussion with Sam Turner, Member Services Manager for Lincoln Co-Op, 11/03/03, the University of Lincoln, UK

⁹ Lincoln Co-Operative Society (2002), *Annual Report and Financial Statements*, p 48-50

Analysing the Lincoln Co-Op in this way is particularly apt as the themes of perception, ethics and identity are all relevant to the promotion of core values and *all* of these themes are subjective, ambiguous and vague in their interpretations.

I have adopted Boje's (2002) framework of metatheatre in order to evaluate the situation. As described;

“(Metatheatre is) a multiplicity of theatres starring and supporting casts of characters who constitute the concentrated and diffuse spectacles in theatrical performances experienced by employees, investors, customers and vendors...it is the multiple and contending theatres that constitute organizations.”¹⁰

Building on his previous work, Boje (1995, 2002) recognises that storytelling with its premise on text, narrative and involving facts, fiction, interpretation, language, metaphor, culture, morals, ethics etc can be a very effective organisational analysis tool. Metatheatre builds on his 'storytelling' by adding a more dramaturgical edge, taking into account the actors as well as the props, the set and the audience. In juxtaposing both 'objective' and 'subjective' themes and at the same time, promoting Boje's theory, Currie (2000) argues that so-called fictional accounts of organisational events might actually be more 'factual' than apparently non-fictional accounts¹¹.

I have constructed two plots with characters to present some views and experiences of the Lincoln Co-Op (refer to Appendix) and through their deconstruction an analysis of the organisation can be undertaken.

¹⁰ Adapted from Boje, D (2002), *Define Metatheatre Terms*, From 'Enron Themes', accessed from internet site <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/septet/define.htm> (25/03/2003), the University of Lincoln, UK and Brooke, C (2003), *Course Handouts for Contemporary Issues in Management (Unit Code MAN 143)*, the University of Lincoln, UK

¹¹ Golding, D and Currie, D (2000), *Thinking about Management; A reflective practice approach*, 1st Edition, Routledge Publishers, p 141

The Lincoln Co-Op as theatre

L'Entrée

Encouraged by Boje's frame of metatheatre, I present my accounts of two Co-Op experiences whereby in fact, I admit I am the character Rebecca. The reason I changed my name was that initially I wished to remain anonymous and independent from the plays but realised in writing the second plot that this was impossible. This has important connotations with the unravelling script.

Effectively taking on the role of ethnographer to the Lincoln Co-Op seemed an easy task, but on reflection I could have considered the notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity describes the ability to be critical or suspicious of our own intellectual assumptions¹². Basically the assumption is that observations are not 'value-free' and the researcher cannot absent him/herself from the research situation¹³ as they subconsciously impose their own imbedded values and reasoning into any textual re-representation.

Reflexivity in juxtaposition to metatheatre holds some weight as regards analysis. Myself as Rebecca in plot one (1)¹⁴ had no previous knowledge of the corporate values and mission of the Lincoln Co-Op, but in plot two I had some idea of them. Hence, Rebecca in the first plot was not conditioned to the Co-Op ideals and presents an unbiased account of how the organisation reflects on her – demonstrating the general public perception. In plot two (2)¹⁵, I had some idea of the co-operative values and Rebecca can be seen to be actively pursuing the things that reflect them in the Moorland and Sincil Bank branches. The focus of this assignment is in considering my perspective of the Lincoln Co-Op's image and there is a significant difference between the 'knowing' of the co-operative movement and business and the 'not-knowing' in my interpretation of this image.

¹² Hassard, J and Parker, M (1999) quoting Lawson (1985), (*Reflexivity: The postmodern predicament*, London: Hutchinson Publishers) in *Postmodernism and Organizations*, 3rd Reprint, Sage Publications, p 12

¹³ Discussion with David Currie, lecturer at the University of Lincoln, 18/03/03, on the subject of Reflexivity, the University of Lincoln, UK

¹⁴ Refer to Plot One (within Appendix). (1) will be commonly used as a cross reference to this.

¹⁵ Refer to Plot Two (within Appendix). (2) will be commonly used as a cross reference to this.

La Matinée

The relevance of the Lincoln Co-Op and the co-operative movement has, arguably some bearing today. The massive problem is that somehow, the true ideals have been lost amidst a façade of consumerism and over-ruling capitalism. It is more than likely that the realisation of the Co-Op having to act ‘within capitalism yet not taking on its exploitative character’¹⁶ has projected the image of the Co-Op as being a supermarket and competitor. All three branches mentioned in the plots have been recently built or revamped in order to replace ‘inadequate stores’ and have possibly introduced improved stock ranges and pricing policies as a response to ‘unprecedented competition’ according to the Lincoln Co-Op history¹⁷. There is little wonder then, that customers such as Jane and Rebecca (1) see only the surface environment of the Collingham branch and go there merely to make small purchases and engage in some social interaction. With no idea about the history of the movement and its mission, and perhaps no inclination to finding out about it, the Co-Op might as well be a small Tesco or Morrisons competing on price, choice and loyalty points – this card scheme being no different than the dividend card in Jane’s eyes.

Scene One: The Providing Co-Op

Rebecca (2) is aware of the choice of services offered by the Co-Op before she visits the city stores, but does not inform Alex deliberately in order to gauge his reaction. He is surprised at the size of the store, and then at the many diverse operations as she anticipated (“it even sells cars?!”). His conversation is exemplified by the discussion with Suzanne later where she highlights some critical points including her unawareness of the stores existence until recently and general comments about ‘old biddies’ contrasted with the shopping centre appeal of the store. Is the store presenting a community (core value) feel though? Its location is away from large housing developments, on a major retail trading estate and next door to Sainsbury’s (perceivably a competitor). Surely in considering locations for stores, these factors must have been plainly obvious?

The provision of services is less obvious in Sincil Bank and Collingham (1). Although both have a busy community feel, the major services are food and the post office. Without advertising of its services, the customers remain unaware of them. It is almost like the

¹⁶ Ibid Reeve D, Brooke C, Henderson J, Williams S (2002?), p 18-19 in discussion of the Co-Operative Bank, but in the general context of the co-operative movement

¹⁷ Information from the Lincoln Co-Op site accessed from the internet site <http://www.lincoln.coop/> (22/03/2003), the University of Lincoln, UK

‘poorer’ or ‘older’ customer / store is excluded from the bigger picture. ‘Providing a service’ for Jane (1) is saving her a turkey at Christmas time.

Scene Two: The Maintaining Co-Op

Quality and value issues are brought out in plot one and two. Jane (1) is quite happy to shop at the co-op as opposed to other local shops as they are cheaper, but not as cheap as Morrisons. The saving of 30p may seem trivial but to Jane, living on the breadline, making ends meet has always been key. Elderly people without transport, and possibly with mobility problems, but who still wish to maintain their independence, also rely on their Co-Op. Accessibility is one of the main reasons why there is an abundance of over-50’s within the Collingham and Sincil Bank branch. Co-Ops, being primarily located in either isolated rural areas or central shopping areas make them convenient to people who don’t have the luxury of personal cars. As disposable income rises within the working population, car use increases yearly. However, rising prices of public transport equally deters those who previously relied on it¹⁸.

Of course, loyalty to the organisation is another reason for attracting older customers. This group of people have grown up with the Co-Op and lived through the politics of old labour and socialist values in contrast to the high consumerism and capitalist environment of today. Alex and Rebecca (2) are typical of a younger generation that buy into the high gloss and pretty labels of ‘trendy’ products and brands, and have the freedom to choose where and how they shop.

The Lincoln Co-Op is a complex interplay of societal, professional and individual ethics¹⁹ and it is through this medium that the true values of the co-operative movement are carried, and perceptions are formed. Although the Co-Op promotes its ethics within the bounds of co-operative business the message is not as strong as the Co-Operative Bank which differentiates itself by its strong ethical principles and controversial advertising campaigns²⁰. Although the Lincoln Co-Op and the Co-Operative bank are *not* the same organisation, the Lincoln Co-Op can learn from the success of the bank. By taking a radical and discontinuous change

¹⁸ From Transport Statistics, The Department for Transport UK (2002), *Transport Trends*, accessed from <http://www.transtat.dft.gov.uk/tables/2002/tt/section2/section2.htm>, March 2003

¹⁹ Ethics (and this phrase) being a theme raised in Brooke, C (2003), *Course Handouts for Contemporary Issues in Management (Unit Code MAN 143)*, the University of Lincoln, UK

²⁰ Ibid Reeve D, Brooke C, Henderson J, Williams S (2002?), p 17-19

strategy²¹, the bank has effectively targeted and captured the interests of the young working population; arguably the same group asserting that the Lincoln Co-Op is ‘old and dowdy’ in its image.

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

Scene Three: The Building and Encouraging Co-Op

The Co-Op is most proactive on its ethical stance and this can be seen through its links with the Fairtrade movement, "As the country's leading fairtrade retailer, we're committed to selling Fairtrade products wherever and whenever we can."²² Jane (1) and Alex (2) are both unaware of the commitment the Co-Op has made to fairtrading and other worldwide, national and local ventures concerned with welfare and ethics. Jane is simply ignorant to the cause. Particularly disappointing is Alex's inclination towards not shopping at the Co-Op because of its lacking organic range; a view contradicted by the following statement:

‘..the Co-Op is supporting The Organic Food & Farming Targets Bill. This argues for 30 per cent of UK land use and 20 per cent of UK consumption to be organic by 2010’²³

The organisation undisputedly supports the local community by offering a number of services and providing donations to good causes and charities, £40,000 being distributed within the last four years²⁴. This is not an issue raised by either Jane (1) or Alex (2). Rebecca (2) uses the argument for local community development merely to back up her basic knowledge of the Fairtrade practice, but in truth knows little.

²¹ ‘Discontinuous change strategy’ could be defined as change within an organisation that has happened in a sudden, revolutionary or abrupt manner, and is implemented through managerial intervention. It could be either planned (experimentation in corporate ‘turnaround’) or caused by unforeseen external pressures exerted on the organisation, forcing sudden change.

²² Terry Hudghton, Head of Co-Op Brand and Corporate Marketing for the Co-Operative Group (2002) quoted from Co-Op Online accessed from the internet site <http://www.cooponline.coop/index.html> (24/03/2003), through the University of Lincoln, UK

²³ Ibid (Co-op Campaigns)

²⁴ Information from the Lincoln Co-Op site accessed from the internet site <http://www.lincoln.coop/> (22/03/2003), the University of Lincoln, UK

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

Taking an almost obstructive attitude towards encouraging customers to become members seems commonplace: sometimes the only conversation you may have with an employee might be them asking if you have a Dividend Card and in response to 'no' continue with the transaction without the offer of one. As *I* have never been offered one, there is no inclination for *me* to join. Making the benefits clearer would be a wise move; younger people are attracted to things that are 'individual' or 'different' and as a marketing campaign, it would not be too difficult to promote the idea of 'becoming a shareholder of a business'. It is rather unfortunate that this, in itself, brings with it the implications of capitalism and profit making - which seems to me to be a clash with the original ideas espoused by the Rochdale Pioneers (the very cornerstone of the modern Co-Op mission).

Scene Four: The Developing Co-Op

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

The staff are predominantly female, and there seems to be a division between young staff and those over 45. Apparent in both plots is a lack of projection of the Co-Op mission particularly with the younger staff. Nicola (1) acts as if she'd rather be somewhere else and Suzanne (2) claims that the staff are not well inducted and are unaware of the mission statements.

My hypothesis is that older staff appeal to older customers, and similarly younger customers respond to younger staff. By making job opportunities more appealing to youngsters just out of education and teaching them about the distinctiveness of the organisation tied in with

educational and promotion incentives this will have a positive effect on customer service and image.

Fin

Boje's (2002) framework of metatheatre has provided plots which have been processed through deconstruction. In discussing plot analysis (Boje, 2001) he likens his approach to Ricoeur's (1984) theories of emplotment. From this, Boje suggests "our pre-understandings (competencies and prejudices) are a precursor to our ability to follow the plot of a story, and finally our ability to fill in all the gaps and discontinuities with our understanding of layers of context"²⁵.

The question 'Co-operative metatheatre: An old and unappealing script?' posed to undergraduate students, perhaps subconsciously suggests that the 'old and dowdy' image is the perception of a predominantly young / professional group of people and seeks recommendations that will entice such a group into the stores and promote a co-operative way of doing business.

Having pre-determined ideas about the history and context of the Lincoln Co-Op is problematic but paradoxically beneficial when writing plots as the plots move away from being simply 'stories' to narratives of reality. An interesting point to note is that I, too, appear to have the preconception that the Co-Op has an 'old and dowdy' image and that this perception is prevalent in both of my plots of which the first was written prior to research into the co-operative movement.

The script of the Co-Op: unappealing? Not necessarily.

The key issue for the Lincoln Co-Op is the direction it now decides to take. Continuing as it is means attracting the more mature person who is loyal or the family shopper who is concerned with location, price and convenience. The other direction is towards targeting the younger market, and the recommendations supporting this are threaded into the former deconstruction (specifically found within each scene's concluding paragraph). The Co-Op may find itself in a no-win situation, particularly when acting within today's problematic 'blame culture' society

²⁵ Boje, D (2001), *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*, 1st Edition, Sage Publications, p 121

where we find the term ‘capitalist’ is liberally applied in communicable context to *all* organisations that appear to be doing well. For the Co-Op, it will be a difficult challenge indeed - appealing to all without tangibly marginalizing the few, and even more difficult continuing to espouse the true mission of the organisation when it is being increasingly viewed through this malevolent eye of capitalism.

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- LINCOLN CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, available from: URL <http://www.lincolncoop.co.uk/HOME.HTM> (05/03/2003), University of Lincoln, England

Discussion Material

- Discussion with Sam Turner, Member Services Manager for Lincoln Co-op, 11/03/03, the University of Lincoln, England
- Discussion with David Currie, lecturer at the University of Lincoln, 18/03/03, on the subject of Reflexivity, the University of Lincoln, England

Appendix

Plot one: The Village Co-Op; new building, old values?

Characters:

Jane (51) *She plays one of the lead roles in this script. She is Rebecca's mum, and has been shopping at the local Co-Op on a daily basis since 1985 when she moved to the village of Collingham, near Newark.*

Rebecca (21), *in the role as Jane's daughter. She does not live in the village anymore.*

Emma (20) and **Vicky** (13) *Jane's other daughters. They accompany Jane on trips to the shop.*

James (thirties) *Manager of five years. Very quiet and polite person – seems nervous when approached, but runs the shop well.*

Christine (60's) *Assistant manager (of ten years). She is very bossy, harsh, and a gossip. Rarely smiles. Follows customers round the store to make sure they're not shop lifting – especially the teenagers.*

Pauline (60's) *Christine's 'partner in crime'. Works as a shop assistant and has worked there for over twenty years. More approachable than Christine.*

Cathy (50's) *Friendly assistant. Has worked for the company for three years. Is a good friend of Jane, and knows the other customers well.*

Nicola (17) *New shop assistant. She didn't finish her education, and has filled a part-time role to earn some money.*

Other customers in the shop

Story 1:

It is Thursday. Jane is at the Co-Op having decided to buy some food and milk just before the store closes. The shop is only just a short walk across the football field, a route taken hundreds of times before. There isn't a car in the family, so the shop has provided the growing family with food for many years and it's now all part of Jane's daily routine. Of course, recently, the village bus fleet has been upgraded, and Jane has changed her routine by visiting Morrisons supermarket in nearby Newark on a weekly basis. There's a lot of choice there, and Jane believes some things are cheaper.

The local village store is even pricier, and Jane completely boycotted it a few years ago when the new Co-Op was built, and had longer opening hours. Of course, a recent addition to food retail in the village is the 'One-Stop' chain, and that's open till really late every day. It's at the other end of the High Street so Jane rarely goes there. Emma and Vicky go because there's a cashpoint and they don't like the queues at the Co-Op. It's also the village video hire place, as the old video store closed down.

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

Today Rebecca (who is a student and doesn't live in the village anymore) has driven her mum around to the shop to save her time. It's difficult getting a parking space – the Co-Op is in a small retail area with an established library, doctor's surgery and pharmacy, and the staff take up most of the spaces!

Jane's got her shopping list and is in full 'Co-Op' mode – stopping to chat to everyone she knows – there a lot of elderly people here that have known Jane for years. Rebecca decides to stop and browse the magazines whilst Jane slowly makes her way down the aisles. Pauline and Christine are having a hushed conversation whilst flattening boxes, and both Cathy and Nicola are on the tills. It's quite busy in the shop – there are mostly elderly woman and mums with kids in tow who have just finished school. There are maybe 15 customers altogether.

Bored, Rebecca goes to hurry her mum up. Glancing through the staff door, she spots James who is filling in some form; "Hi Rebecca!" James says, smiling. "Yeah, hi!" Rebecca is surprised James remembers who she is - she hasn't been in the shop for over a year. Still smiling, she goes down the next aisle after being glowered at by Christine who still sees her as being a little child. They both stop talking as she passes.

"Come on mum"

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

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

Cathy, on the other hand, seems happy, and pauses to stop to chat to Jane. "How are you Jane? I was wondering when you would pop in!! The weather's nice today, isn't it? Soon be spring! Oh, and Rebecca! Haven't you changed? So how's it going at university then? Oh, Jane, your kids aren't half growing up fast! Have you got your dividend card love?" There are some people waiting who seem annoyed about the slowed process, so Rebecca hurriedly packs the shopping. Dragging Jane out of the door, Jane falters to make a promise of meeting up for a coffee sometime soon and leaves chuckling.

"I like the Co-Op. It's nice seeing your friends!"

"It's not a social visit mum, you came to get the tea!"

"Well it's always nice to stop and have a chat."

"Gossip, more like! That's villages for you..."

Plot Two: Anonymity in Lincoln's flagship stores**Characters:**

Rebecca (21) *She played a lesser role in the first plot, but a lead role in this script. She is a student and has recently moved to Lincoln*

Alex (32) *Rebecca's partner. He works in environmental protection for the local government, and does not shop at the Co-Op*

Suzanne (late 20's) *A supervisor who has only been working at the shop for 5 weeks (Moorland Centre)*

Stephanie (35) *The manager of the Moorlands Centre Co-Op*

Other customers in the shops**Story 2:**

Rebecca has been studying the Lincoln Co-Op organisation as part of her management degree course. She has decided to visit the main stores in Lincoln and her partner goes with her. The Moorland Centre, Tritton Road, Lincoln is a big new development for the Co-Op. It is more of a shopping centre, selling holidays, furniture, food and drink, gardening equipment etc. On entering the car park, Alex observes the size of the shop – it is a lot bigger than it looks from the road. The car park is empty.

“I have never been here before. I never expected it to be quite so vast – look, it sells everything! Still, I would never shop at the Co-Op”.

Rebecca “Why not? Are you a bit of a food snob?!”

Alex “No, but you're right, I do prefer Sainsburys [next door]. Their fruit and vegetables are much better quality than you get in the Co-Op. Last time I went the quality was appalling.”

Rebecca “What about ethical reasons? The Co-Op is all for Fair Trade, and they help out in the local community and charity organisations”.

Alex “I don't know enough about Fair Trade. What I do know is that they have no organic food range, or it is very limited. That's what I like to buy”.

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

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

The manager has overheard, and intervenes:

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

Later in the week, Rebecca visits the revamped Co-Op Central store, Sincil Bank, Lincoln to make a comparison with the Moorland Centre. This place boasts a coffee shop, an electrical store (new) and also the main Post-Office, which has recently moved here. The building is large though the actual food store now seems a lot smaller in comparison to before the revamp, and has been pushed to the back of the store. The place is teeming with people, characteristically elderly and mothers. Noticeably, everyone seems in a rush, and there is no-one smiling other than the old couples who are taking a rest on the park benches.

There is a feeling of anonymity in the shop as the customers pursue buying last minute or forgotten items before they catch the bus. The employees seem to work independently of each other and seem to be in a continual battle to stay on top of their jobs. What is most obvious is that even though the store is bright, this is subdued by the dark oppressive and dirty bus station that is adjacent to the shop and empty retail units next door that ‘lower the tone’. Rebecca thinks the atmosphere is far from relaxed, and the long queues in the Post-Office at the entrance to the store only seem to exaggerate this feeling.

In summary, Rebecca feels that she has observed many differences between the village store and these two larger city stores although all three have been recently modernised.